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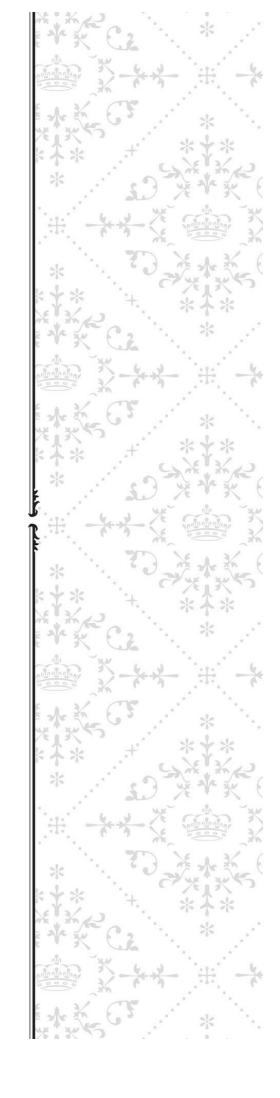




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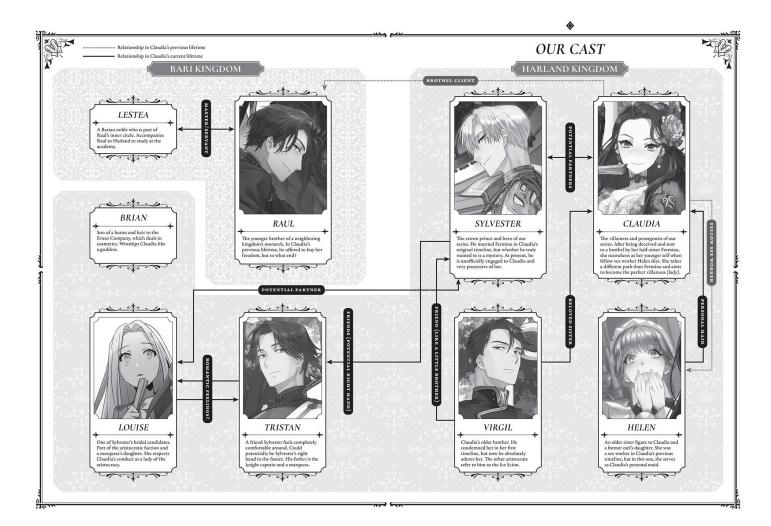
WRITTEN BY

Bakufu Narayama

illustrated by **Ebisushi**



Seven Seas Entertainment



The Condemned Villainess Goes Back in Time and Aims to Become the Ultimate Villain (Light Novel) VOL. 2
Written by Bakufu Narayama
Illustrations by Ebisushi
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This edition originally published in Japan in 2022 by TO BOOKS., Tokyo.
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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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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: Jack Hamm

EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

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

ISBN: 979-8-88843-668-4

Printed in Canada

First Printing: June 2024 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1:

The Villainess Dreams

A SHADOW FELL ACROSS the carpet as a man knelt on the ground. Warm rays of sunlight poured through a nearby window, giving the room's dust motes a shimmer. Claudia recoiled as the man's feverish gaze heated her skin. Strangely enough, though she was looking down on him, she couldn't make out his face.

He was so very close; she should have been able to hear even the faint rustle of his garments. It was as though a dark, impenetrable mist shrouded his identity. Her heart swelled—not with excitement but with heartrending anguish.

"I refuse," she said. Her lips hardened into a thin, taut line. Tears welled in her eyes, blurring her vision as a wave of indistinguishable emotion hit her.

I'm sorry.

The apology sat on the tip of her tongue but never found a voice. Shadows melted away just enough that she could distinguish his earthy skin before she was abruptly thrust from her dream.

Claudia shot up in bed with a gasp. Her heart thundered in her ears.

"A dream...?"

Her pulse refused to slow, and she was drenched in sweat.

"What could it have meant?"

Her brain struggled to assimilate the dream's fragmented remnants, leaving her dazed and confused. She could still freshly recall how she'd refused Sylvester's initial proposal. Perhaps it was a divine revelation, a warning not to forget her previous mistake. But that didn't quite make sense. The brown skin tone she glimpsed at the end most definitely didn't belong to Sylvester. In fact,

the more she thought about it, the man's build had been different too. There was one man who closely resembled the one in her dreams—a man who'd offered to pay her debts to the brothel and free her in her previous lifetime.

Still, he never took a knee before me, she thought.

They were close enough that Claudia found her dream odd. He was always cheerful and lighthearted, far from the reverent phantom in her dreams. Maybe it was silly of her to expect dreams to conform to reality, though.

She lightly shook her head, trying to drive the thoughts from her mind.

"Lady Claudia," Helen called softly. "Are you awake?"

"Yes, I am." Claudia peeled a damp lock of hair from her cheek.

"Pardon the intrusion," Helen said dutifully as she let herself into her mistress's quarters. She started toward the bed. "Your preparations for this morning are—" She stopped and stared. "Is something the matter?"

Claudia smiled, not wanting to cause her maid undue concern. "Nothing at all."

Just a bit of an unpleasant dream is all."

"You will feel better once you get your face washed up. Here." Belatedly, Claudia realized Helen had brought a cart along. It had a small pitcher of warm water and a towel on top.

Glad to hear Helen's proposal, she let the woman dip the towel and lightly dab away the night's sweat. It was rare for Claudia to enter the bath in the mornings. Instead, her morning routine was a brief one carried out in her personal quarters.

"Lady Claudia, your skin is as clear as freshly fallen snow." Helen let out a heated sigh as she delicately rubbed down Claudia's back. The freshly applied mixture made her alabaster skin glisten in the light. Claudia's hair was draped over her shoulder, exposing the nape of her neck. The contrast of the black strands against the paleness of her skin gave her even more allure. Seeing how delicate her skin was—soft and supple as silk—Helen worked even more

carefully to clean her.

"That's because you and the others work so diligently to keep it this way," Claudia said.

She put in her own efforts to maintain her beauty, of course, but her maids often assisted by giving her aromatherapy massages. Yet all that was only just enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with Sylvester. Her beloved's beauty was almost unnerving. As Harland's crown prince, he was of course attended by professionals—but that didn't make his God-given looks any less impressive.

"I don't believe for a moment that our cosmetics are inferior," she muttered, more to herself than Helen. With her beautifying skills from the brothel, Claudia was equal to any other pro in the royal family's employment.



Helen nodded. "I was hoping I could prove useful to you by gathering some information, but according to the palace maids, the prince doesn't seem to be doing anything particularly notable to maintain his appearance."

No, far from her efforts or methods being inferior, Claudia was probably putting in significantly more effort by virtue of her daily exercise routines—the secret to maintaining her beguiling figure. Besides, Sylvester didn't strike her as the type to be preoccupied with a skincare routine or the like.

"So with no effort at all, he has that perfect porcelain skin?" Claudia sighed wistfully. "Just how much natural beauty was Syl gifted with?" She vividly recalled his silken silver hair and golden eyes the color of vibrant sunlight.

Sylvester had looked like an adorable porcelain doll as a child, but as an adolescent, he had become more sensual, enough to bewitch any who interacted with him. He was like a living, breathing piece of art, even more so than the rest of his attractive family. His portraits fetched jaw-dropping prices, but even they paled in comparison to the real thing. That was a rare gift; for most, portraits were altered to enhance their appearance. It wasn't often that someone's natural looks surpassed their painted likeness.

"You have no less potential than he does, my lady! Once you have that moisturizer, you will achieve even more impressive beauty," Helen enthused.

Claudia smiled. "Thank you, Helen. I expect Brian to bring me something promising."

Brian's family ran the Evans Company, which produced Claudia's most beloved cosmetics in her brothel days. The effectiveness of cosmetics inevitably came down to their compatibility with a person's skin. Some complexions were drier, some oilier; thus, a product's popularity didn't necessarily mean it would work well for every person.

"Based on his report a few days ago, it seems like they'll have the logistics sorted out soon, at least," Helen said.

Ever since Claudia and Brian became acquainted, he'd faithfully given her status reports on their products. He endeared himself to her all the more for never trying to lean on her or her family for assistance. Partly because they could monopolize the profits if they took care of all the development themselves.

"I am also looking forward to seeing what sort of product you've been so intent on, my lady." Helen paused for a moment, then changed the subject. "To confirm, are you still planning on going to the gentlemen's clothing boutique today?"

"Yes, but it won't take long. I am only going to pick up something."

"We could request delivery services," the maid offered.

Claudia shook her head. "If we did that, it might spoil the surprise."

The merchandise in question was a gift for Virgil—a graduation present. She'd had it prepared in advance due to the approach of the graduation party at the palace. Had she summoned someone from a gentlemen's boutique to the house, the timing would have made her plans all too apparent.

"Yes, of course, you are right," said Helen. "It was thoughtless of me to suggest that. Lord Virgil is particularly vigilant when it comes to you and anything you do."

Helen was right about that, though Claudia couldn't say whether that was because of the whole Fermina debacle or because of Claudia's unofficial engagement to the crown prince. Either way, he'd been more watchful of late.

"For today's outfit, I think—" Helen stopped short when a different maid hurried into the room. She waited for Claudia's permission before whispering something into Helen's ear. Helen was visibly shaken. She quickly lowered her head. "My deepest apologies, but would you mind if I stepped out?"

"Is something the matter?" Claudia asked.

"Nothing so important that you need to be concerned, just...something

personal," she answered vaguely.

"The other maids can take care of things here, so no need to worry about that. Go and do what you need to do."

"Thank you," Helen said before darting out of the room.

It was unusual for her to ask for time away, given her propensity to prioritize Claudia over everything else. Claudia wondered what could be going on, but it would be disrespectful of her to pry.

Helen returned before Claudia left the estate, smiling as if nothing at all were amiss.

"Welcome to our humble establishment. I regret that you had to make the long trek here, my lady."

"This worked best for me. Please, don't trouble yourself over it."

The winter season was upon them, and yet despite the chill, the boutique's owner waited outside as Claudia disembarked from her carriage. He was an elderly man with white hair and a monocle. He had a calm, soothing air about him, which drained any tension Claudia might have otherwise felt.

"Were you waiting outside this entire time? In the cold?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I got a little too excited when I heard you would be coming, Lady Claudia. Coming outside was just what I needed to cool my head."

She pressed a hand over her mouth. "Goodness! Still, cold seeps into the body like poison. Please wait inside for me next time."

"So I shall. I appreciate your concern."

The owner was such a polite and good-natured character. Claudia adored him enough that she considered it a shame she had so few occasions to engage his services.

The elderly man led her toward his reception room. She followed,

appreciating the interior of the boutique as they went. A ladies' dress boutique normally had vivid furnishings, but a gentlemen's boutique had a different sort of charm to it. Walnut wood was used for the floor panels, the pillars, and the shelving, its dark tones giving the shop a calmer and more refined atmosphere. Such a dark palette might have seemed dreary if not for the superb design sense that conveyed professionalism and quality.

Being a duke's daughter, Claudia normally summoned merchants directly to their estate. It was an enjoyable change of pace, being able to appreciate a shop's interior herself. The wood floors tempted her to wander off the plush carpet so that she could hear the crisp clack of her heels.

"I bet walking across such polished floors would produce music to my ears," she said.

"My lady?" Helen quirked a brow.

"Oh, don't worry. I wouldn't do something that unbecoming."

"I understand exactly how you feel, though." Helen nodded emphatically. She and Claudia traded looks and giggled.

The impressive carpet beneath their feet, which muffled their footsteps, spurred on their shared urge. If they had been back home at the estate, nothing would have stopped either of them from wandering onto the wood directly, but that would be too indiscreet here.

Hm?

As Claudia scanned her surroundings, her gaze landed on a male customer who was speaking to one of the boutique's staff. She didn't recognize this man, but his aura and appearance were familiar enough. He reminded her of the man who'd offered to pay her way out of the brothel—the same one she'd dreamed about this morning.

I never did learn his real name.

At the brothel, they always referred to each other by pet names, which was a

common custom in that line of work. Claudia had died before she could give the man an answer to his offer. Still, she remembered that he was an aristocrat from the neighboring kingdom of Bari.

This customer, who so reminded her of that man from her past, was a well-dressed fellow whose very body language radiated elegance. She knew it wasn't the same man from her past, though. This customer's face was different, and he was much older.

I haven't heard about any notable nobility from Bari staying in the capital, and even if there were such a person here, I would have met them at a party before. The only Barian she had heard anything about was the king's younger brother, who was currently staying in a port city located in the royal family's personal territory. This couldn't be him; his official arrival would demand Claudia's attendance. It would have taken her away from this leisurely shopping trip to a boutique.

If I'm not acquainted with him, I assume that means he's a diplomat. After eliminating a list of other possibilities, Claudia settled on the only one left.

In the past, military personnel and aristocrats were the ones most often assigned roles as diplomats, but given the required specialization in negotiation, it was becoming increasingly customary for skilled common-born men to be appointed instead. Though they weren't of noble blood, the unique privileges afforded to them by their position made their ranking in society somewhat - nebulous—and it made them more difficult to deal with. For instance, because of their lower status, they weren't invited to the sorts of parties frequented by a duke's daughter.

Claudia's eyes next wandered to the man's sleeve, where she noticed something gleaming in the light. Chain cuff links, and by the look of them, not the type with a family crest.

Cuff links were a common accessory for men, but they were a particular favorite in high society. Chain cuff links were more challenging for one to clip on

themselves and required assistance. It was an indirect way of indicating one was of high enough status to have their own chamberlain to do it for them. Noblemen also had theirs custom-made with their family crest. One could tell with a glance exactly which house such men hailed from. Diplomats endeavored to dress in their finest since their work often involved negotiations with nobles, but their cuff links didn't advertise their house crest.

Having managed to deduce the man's identity, Claudia asked the owner to wait for her a moment and made her way over to greet him. The only customers in the store were men. Her colorful attire and feminine figure drew the diplomat's immediate attention.

"Pardon me for interrupting your conversation," Claudia said by way of greeting. "My name is Claudia Lindsay. Would I be correct in assuming you are from Bari Kingdom?"

"Oh my! What an unexpected delight to have the woman hailed as the perfect lady greet me! Embarrassing as it is to admit, I thought for a moment a fairy had wandered into our midst. You are absolutely correct in your assessment, my lady. I am a diplomat from Bari. Is there anything I can do for you?"

As effusive as his praise was, the way he flushed and smiled assured Claudia he wasn't trying to mock her. Whether it was a natural talent or a trick he'd developed, the diplomat had a way of putting her at ease with the way he spoke. She was impressed.

She caught a whiff of the fragrance clinging to his clothes, and its familiarity brought on sad memories. *Is he on his way back from visiting a brothel?*

Claudia knew of one sex worker during her brothel days who religiously used this perfume. Her thoughts flashed back to an early afternoon. Fingers of sunlight reached in through the window, warm enough to make her drowsy. Claudia, Helen, and the senior workers were all in the entertainment room, chatting merrily. It was right in the middle of this that the sex worker with that

familiar fragrance took her own life.

The memory came from a time when death hovered as close as a shadow. Claudia drove the remembrance from her mind, lest the bitterness seep through her smiling facade. "I have no particular business with you. I merely wanted to introduce myself and offer you my greetings. I would also like to extend my congratulations on the birth of your new crown prince."

Shortly after the New Year, Bari had welcomed the king's firstborn, future heir to the throne. It was an auspicious event for their monarch, who had long awaited a child. As Claudia understood it, their kingdom was still eagerly celebrating the prince's birth. His arrival heralded new problems for their nation, though.

"Thank you," the diplomat said with a smile. "I cannot overstate what an honor it is for a lowly diplomat such as myself to receive such congratulations from Your Ladyship directly. Was that the main reason you decided to speak with me?"

Claudia lightly shook her head. "No," she admitted, "seeing you reminded me of someone. And it's customary in Bari Kingdom to greet someone when they meet them, no?"

"I am impressed you're familiar with our customs! When you next meet someone from Bari privately, please feel free to casually greet them with a 'hola.' I guarantee you, the person blessed to hear it worded in your beautiful voice will feel as though they've risen to the heavens."

In truth, Claudia already knew about this way of greeting. She and the man she'd seen in her dreams before had often greeted each other in this way during her brothel days.

"Actually, I must correct myself," the man said suddenly. "A lady as fine as you must surely steal a person's heart from the moment you speak to them, regardless of the words on your lips."

"You are certainly a mastery of flattery. But a man as mature as yourself must

see me as no more than a little chick."

At that, he vigorously shook his head. "Of course not! You may be young yet, my lady, but before your charm and beauty, I feel like a teenage boy all over again. I am accompanied by one with whom I wish I could have shared the honor of your company, but alas, it seems my companion has wandered off. Such a shame."

"A shame indeed," Claudia agreed. "It would have been the perfect opportunity to practice the greeting you taught me."

As a duke's daughter and not a sex worker, her only opportunity to meet with a Barian citizen would be at a public event. "Hola" was a greeting used in daily conversation, not for parties.

After parting ways with the diplomat, Claudia safely retrieved the present she had prepared for her brother. The owner then saw her off to her carriage. As she climbed into it, however, she felt someone's gaze on her. Thinking it might be the diplomat from earlier, she glanced back, but there was no one there. She furrowed her brow.

"Is something the matter, Lady Claudia?" Helen asked.

"No," she murmured. "It must be my imagination." Claudia took her seat inside. Still discomfited, she glanced through the window to double-check, but the only person outside was the owner, who remained in a reverent bow as he waited for her carriage to pull away.

When Claudia returned to their estate, Virgil was waiting at the entrance for her. Helen immediately helped her shrug off her overcoat, tucking the present inside its folds to keep it hidden from Virgil.

"Is something the matter, Elder Brother?" Claudia asked.

"I want to speak to you about something urgent. It's freezing outside, isn't it? I'll have something warm prepared for you immediately."

He walked with her to their sitting room. Claudia was stunned to find her father already there. If he had wrapped up his work to meet with his children while it was still light outside, this matter was most urgent indeed. Claudia took her seat on a sofa, and one of the maids brought her a piping-hot cup of tea before quickly excusing herself from the room. Helen sensed the tension in the air and slipped out as well, leaving only Claudia, Virgil, and the duke inside.

Virgil waited a few moments for Claudia to relax and have a sip to warm herself before he launched into his explanation. "Dee, I assume you're aware that the king of Bari's younger brother is staying in the region directly controlled by the royal family, correct? We received a missive today informing us that they have already left and are making their way to the capital. Once here, the king's younger brother will be studying at our academy."

"You and the king's younger brother are of the same age, Claudia," their father added. "It's not unusual for a foreign prince to study abroad, but unfortunately, this was a rather sudden arrangement. His attendance will be officially announced during the academy's graduation party."

"That is sudden." It was all Claudia could manage to say with her thoughts ajumble. She couldn't decide whether this was cause for celebration or not.

Virgil nodded. "I understand what you must be thinking. I thought the same thing—that Bari's king sees his younger brother as a nuisance now and is using this opportunity to drive him away."

"Virgil," their father admonished. "Hold your tongue."

With a shrug, Virgil went on, "We decided to conduct this conversation here in the sitting room so we could speak frankly, no? Do you have a different viewpoint about the matter, Father?"

"I agree with you," the duke said tentatively, "but there are better ways to word it."

Virgil sniffed. "What point is there in tiptoeing the issue when we're among family?"

Their father was a different matter, but Virgil and Claudia trusted one another implicitly. There was no need to beat around the bush.

"For many years, His Royal Highness Prince Raul was first in line to the throne," Claudia remarked thoughtfully.

Raul was the king's significantly younger brother. Since the king had no children for the longest time, Raul was saddled with inheriting the crown once his older brother passed. With the birth of the crown prince, he'd suddenly been demoted to second in line. However, that didn't stop the voices of his supporters. Though the crown prince's birth was a joyous occasion for the king, it had nevertheless created a power struggle.

Again, Virgil nodded. "Publicly, Prince Raul has made no political move to suggest he intends to fight for the crown, but the king doesn't want to give him any further opportunity to garner support."

"And that's why he sent him away," Claudia surmised.

It was a questionable choice at best for the king to toss his younger brother aside as if he'd been an expendable pawn this entire time. Raul couldn't be terribly happy about that either.

"It's important for a king to make his position clear as soon as possible, but this was the wrong call. Cries of displeasure now drown out of the cheers of celebration in Bari," said Virgil.

Familial relations were of even stronger importance in Bari than in Harland. Bari valued blood so highly that their kingdom was even considered nepotistic by its neighbors. They would have forgiven the king's hardline decision if Raul had attempted an open coup, but since he had done absolutely nothing to demonstrate any hostility, the people were incredibly critical of the king's decision to send Raul away.

Having collected her thoughts, Claudia said, "It seems pretty inevitable the people would be displeased when you think about it."

"Perhaps the crown prince's birth clouded the king's judgment. Regardless, we need to keep tabs on how things play out." Virgil's gaze focused on her. "To that end, I'd also like you to keep an eye out, Dee."

"Very well."

If Raul was transferring to her academy, they would inevitably be in the same class. That would give her more opportunities to interact with him. All she had to do was casually probe him for information.

"Syl will be there too, so there's no need for you to push yourself. But..." Virgil's voice turned grim.

Claudia tilted her head at her brother. What could be bothering him?

Since Virgil's graduation was close at hand, he had been accompanying their father to his duties more often. This afforded him access to much more information than before. Claudia had become well connected since making her societal debut, but as a mere student, her reach was much more limited than Virgil's.

"Dee," Virgil said softly. "There's a possibility you won't be able to see Syl for a while."

Claudia swallowed. "What do you mean by that?"

Her brother's face darkened. A tension filled the air.

Claudia glanced at her father, but his expression gave nothing away. Her stomach twisted with an ill premonition of what was to come. She did her best to maintain an unaffected mask, but her voice betrayed her. "Did something happen to Syl?!"

"Sorry. Framing it that way would make you anxious, I guess." Virgil quickly shook his head. "There's nothing wrong with him. He's in no direct danger."

"What does that mean?" Claudia demanded, suspicious. Her brother's wording felt too purposeful.

"Exactly what it sounds like. You know Prince Raul was staying at a port town

in the royal family's territory, right?"

"Yes, and I know that port town is considered a gateway to the entire kingdom."

Harland Kingdom and Bari Kingdom were next-door neighbors, with Harland in the north and Bari to the south. Though they weren't separated by river or sea, the mountain range that ran along their border made land travel between their kingdoms incredibly time-consuming. Maritime travel was more commonplace since both nations were on the eastern coast. The port city in the royal family's region served as a gateway for their eastern neighbors across the ocean, making it a prime trading hub as well.

"There was an issue," Virgil said.

Her eyes widened. "While His Royal Highness was there?"

"No, this issue cropped up after he had already left for the capital." Virgil hesitated before continuing, "Sorry, we still don't have the precise details about what happened, but the issue will require Syl's attention. He'll still attend the graduation party. Once it's over, he plans to use our long holiday to attend to the matter."

Claudia felt it a shame that she wouldn't be able to see Sylvester during their long break. She didn't even notice she had dropped her gaze to the floor until she felt the tickle of her long black hair against her cheeks. Long periods between private rendezvous with the Prince had never bothered her before, but hearing that she wouldn't be able to see him at all for a while left her devastated.

The crackle of flames in the fireplace was a gentle reminder that time marched on regardless of anyone's will.

"Ouch!"

"My lady, are you all right?!" Helen cried.

"Yes, perfectly fine," Claudia insisted. "No need to worry. I just pricked my finger on my needle."

As soon as Virgil gave her the depressing news, her father recommended she embroider something to send along with the prince for his departure. He must've remembered her splendid workmanship in the past. Claudia immediately retreated to her room and began embroidering a handkerchief for Sylvester—but it wasn't quite going as planned. Her thoughts were so preoccupied, her hands fumbled with the needle. That was partly because she was second-guessing her decision to use a black flower and blue bird—designs she'd originally decided upon in hopes Sylvester might think of her while he was away.

"Is a pansy too obvious?" she wondered aloud.

In the language of flowers, the pansy communicated deep thought and a wish to be remembered. Claudia had no way of knowing if Sylvester knew that or not, but she had a feeling he did, given how he would send a flower with every correspondence back when they traded letters.

"Being a little too direct is perfect when it comes to men," Helen assured her with a knowing smile. "Besides, the blue bird also means happiness."

"Are you certain? I worry he'll laugh at how cocky it seems." Claudia's needle stopped moving. She was starting to think she would've been better off sticking with something more cliché, like the royal family's crest. Or perhaps her own family's crest, at the very least. When it came to Sylvester, all the confidence she'd built up in her time as a sex worker disappeared in a puff of smoke.

A shadow fell over her as she hemmed and hawed. Startled, she raised her head and found Helen staring back solemnly. "Lady Claudia, please listen to me." She leaned forward and clasped her mistress by the shoulders. "There isn't a soul alive who wouldn't be over the moon to receive a handkerchief from you. And if such a soul exists, they aren't even human in my book!"

[&]quot;H-Helen, what are you...?"

"Even if your gift was somehow offensive to the other person, they would still be delighted merely to have occupied a spot in your mind," Helen continued passionately.

"But this is Syl we're talking about!"

"I will admit, His Highness is as beautiful as a statue, but he is still a human being. And a still-maturing adolescent at that. Status doesn't even come into play here! I promise you with my whole heart that he will be delighted! If he dares to laugh, he will find the whole of House Lindsay against him!" She thumped a fist against her chest. "I would be the first to take up arms against him then, this I promise you!"

Claudia panicked. Such a statement could be construed as treasonous toward the crown. "A-all right! I understand! I'll continue with my current design!"

"My lady, I know you will put your whole heart into your embroidery, so please have faith in yourself."

"You're right. I think I've probably just been out of sorts since I heard Syl is leaving."

Helen nodded sympathetically. "I know the port town is some distance from the capital, but he will return before the next term begins, won't he? You need only be a little patient."

She was absolutely right. It wasn't as if they would be parted for eternity. Sylvester would probably think less of it than her, since it wasn't much different from a regular inspection of his family's territory. When she really thought about it, her family often spent their holidays in their own territory, so it wasn't something to be distraught over. Granted, with the coming of Raul, her family would have to stay in the capital this time around. He was royalty in his kingdom, after all. It wasn't just the Lindsays either; all the high-ranking nobility would have to stay in case they were called to entertain the prince.

"It feels so much lonelier this time," Claudia confided.

"That's called love."

"You've experienced it before?"

Helen nodded. "I have. Not lately, though."

"Oh? Do I need to give you more time off, then?"

"In my case, being apart from you, my lady, is the loneliest thing I could imagine." She threw her arms around Claudia and squeezed her tight.

"Then when will you have time to fall in love?"

They both laughed.

As long as Helen was around, Claudia could manage.

That night, as she lay in bed, Claudia felt as though she were wrapped in complete silence. It should have been impossible, what with the crackle of the fireplace and the wind beating against the windows, but she couldn't hear any of it. The warmth in her room made her forget the bitter cold outside. It was so comfortable that her thoughts went back to her time in the brothel's entertainment room. Perhaps her nostalgia was a consequence of her encounter with that diplomat earlier.

Aromas were sometimes inextricably linked with memories. Smelling them again could sometimes call those memories back. That scent she'd caught from the Bari diplomat reminded her of a fellow sex worker.

"I could have saved her," Claudia muttered to herself.

It was a fact she knew only in hindsight. The woman in question had taken her own life by drinking poison. Only later did Claudia and the others learn it was a poison brought from abroad, one for which they could have easily created an antidote. The man who'd offered to buy her freedom told her so. His face popped into her mind for a moment, followed immediately by the diplomat she'd encountered in the gentlemen's boutique.

"I wonder if she was involved in reconnaissance or something."

There were some sex workers who lured unsuspecting clients in for information or performed secret missions for the government. Perhaps that woman had been one of them. It was possible she collected intel and reported it to their national administration. Regardless, there was no proof that the diplomat had gone specifically to see her. Considering her age when she passed away, it was doubtful whether she was even working at the brothel in this timeline.

Besides...

"Even if I could save her life, would that be the right thing to do?"

Life inside a brothel wasn't easy. Even Claudia—who had risen through the ranks, charged her clientele exorbitant fees, and lived luxuriously off her cut—had experienced times when her depression and despair hung heavy like a cloud. The only reason she'd survived until the epidemic claimed her was because Helen and the other senior sex workers supported her—as well as the guilt over the horrible things she'd done to Fermina.

No matter what, Claudia was responsible for her own actions. She had been a complete fool, in every sense of the word, until she arrived at the brothel and learned about life the hard way. The brothel then became a place where she could atone for what she'd done. That, plus the camaraderie she cultivated with her colleagues, kept her going. She needed them and her guilt to drive her forward.

Not all the women who came to the brothel had sin heaped on their shoulders. Most were weak or destitute with nowhere else to turn. If someone were to ask Claudia whether it was just or fair to force someone to live in such a miserable environment when they were desperate for the release of death, she would tell them no. It wasn't. Death didn't seem like the right answer either, though.

"I'm probably being selfish, not wanting to hang back and allow her to make

that choice, aren't I?" Claudia groaned and flipped over restlessly in bed.

Saving someone who didn't want to be saved was nothing short of self-righteous. No matter how much she racked her brain over the matter, she was coming no closer to a satisfying answer to this conundrum. It plagued her so relentlessly that she didn't sleep much that night.

Chapter 2:

The Villainess Returns to the Scene of Her Condemnation

LOUISE SMILED BEHIND her folding fan. She swept closer toward Claudia to pay her greetings. "Good evening. I always thought black hair to be uninspiringly bland, but my perspective has been transformed seeing the loveliness of yours, Lady Claudia. Those silver hairpieces suit you perfectly."

Claudia was flattered; since this was Virgil's graduation party, she'd taken great care in her appearance for this evening. Compared to the first timeline, she'd significantly toned down the number of jewels adorning her person. Yet her hair was carefully gathered behind her head, held in place by a comb tucked into the sea of raven black. Her dress was a bluish white, which contrasted beautifully with her dark hair.

"And a good evening to you as well, Lady Louise. Your dress looks stunning on you. This aqua shade reminds me of the sparkling waves lapping at the seashore and soaking up the warm rays of the sun."

Louise was sporting a popular design: a dress with short, puffy sleeves that complimented her regal figure and highlighted her femininity. Her goldenblonde hair cascaded around her shoulders, resembling rays of dancing sunlight against her aqua gown. Claudia meant every word of praise. She was a sight to behold.

The lady's cheeks flushed. She averted her gaze, too embarrassed to meet Claudia's. "Th-thank you," Louise stammered. "Y-you look splendid as well, of course." She stressed the latter part of her sentence for emphasis, which brought a smile to Claudia's lips.

"Surely you're accustomed to people praising you by now," said Claudia.

"I am used to empty flattery, yes, but it's much more difficult to respond to your praise because I know you mean it."

At that, Claudia's lips parted in surprise. "Is it wrong of me to give my sincere thoughts?"

"Well, um..." Louise hedged. "Oh, forget it." Deciding it was pointless to argue the matter, she gave up.

The two continued to have a pleasant chat thereafter, and Claudia found herself filled with an emotion she couldn't quite place.

This is where I was condemned before.

Glancing up, she found herself nearly blinded by the brilliance of the chandelier. Everywhere she looked, people were dressed in resplendent gowns or suits—much like her.

Claudia and Virgil had parted ways soon after entering. She knew he was nowhere nearby, but still, her mind flitted back to the moment of her condemnation with vivid clarity. Except this time, there was someone else standing there in front of her previous self as she haughtily aired her displeasure: her current self. She was still foolish. Even so, she was trying her utmost to choose the righteous path this time. The two images overlapped, becoming one.

She wondered if she was caught in a lucid dream. Claudia knew this was reality—it had to be—but standing here, she felt as if she were in a different world altogether.

While Claudia was caught in this reverie, some part of her realized Louise was giving her a meaningful look. She snapped out of it and followed Louise's gaze. Her eyes locked with a girl a head shorter than herself. Etiquette lessons were so finely drilled into Claudia that her mouth moved before her mind could even recall the name of the newcomer.

"Good evening, Lady Charlotte," she said.

"L-Lady Claudia," the girl stuttered back. "Good evening."

Charlotte had vibrant pink hair and amber eyes, making her look like candy

incarnate. Problem was, one *particular* asset of hers stood out so much that it overshadowed everything else.

Charlotte's nerves seemed to get the better of her as she offered a fumbling, clumsy curtsy. Her awkward motions made her already enormous breasts jiggle. The skintight design of her dress stretched awkwardly as it tried to contain them.

Surely there's a design out there that would flatter her more, Claudia thought.

As far as Claudia was concerned, a woman's body was one of the weapons in an arsenal needed to survive high society. The boatneck was an elegant design for a dress intended to hide the collarbone, but it completely diminished the one weapon Charlotte had at her disposal. One could stylistically choose a tight-fitting dress to enhance the natural size of their voluptuous bosom, but in Charlotte's case, it fit her so poorly that it distorted the otherwise attractive curve of her chest.

It was unfortunate, to say the least.

"So you were invited as well today, hmm?" said Claudia.

"Y-yes, I was told there would be an important announcement tonight."

Since Charlotte was a year younger, she hadn't yet entered the academy. The royal family had probably made an exception for her because she was one of Sylvester's bridal candidates. Claudia already knew that this "special announcement" was about Prince Raul enrolling in their academy as an exchange student. Although he and Charlotte wouldn't be in the same year, they would be attending the academy at the same time once the new term began. It made sense why she was invited.

"Well then, Lady Charlotte, I hope you have a lovely time at the party."

"Yes. If you'll excuse me, then." Charlotte greeted Louise briefly as well before taking her leave.

Right after entering the venue, Claudia had immediately greeted the other

bridal candidate, who was a year older than her. Charlotte was the last one to whom she was obligated to pay her respects. Now that it was done, however, she found that Charlotte's attitude weighed on her. The girl had acted like a poor defenseless frog in the sights of a voracious viper.

"Have I done anything to terrify her?" Claudia wondered aloud.

"I think it's less to do with you and more so that all those associated with the aristocratic faction feel apologetic over everything that's happened at the academy."

"Yes, but while Lord Roger may be part of the aristocratic faction, he's one of the moderates as I understand it."

Lord Roger was Charlotte's father. The noble lady with whom Claudia's half-sister Fermina had conspired was part of the radicals rather than the moderates. Even within the same faction, people were split. That was part of what paved the way for Charlotte's selection as a bridal candidate.

"I would guess Lady Charlotte isn't aware you feel that way," said Louise.

Claudia nodded. "I'm sure you're right."

At parties, Claudia found herself surrounded by fellow members of the royal faction. She had opportunities to speak with those of the opposing aristocratic faction at the academy, but Charlotte hadn't begun attending yet. It made sense Charlotte wouldn't understand Claudia's feelings—they'd had no chance to discuss them.

"Still, with her acting so deferential, I doubt she'll cause any problems. Best to ignore it," Louise advised gently.

Claudia shook her head. "Perhaps, but it makes my heart ache to see such an adorable girl terrified of me. I think she will continue to feel that way."

"Personally, I dislike her. She seems far too calculating for my tastes."

Louise's qualms apparently stemmed from Charlotte's fumbling way of speaking. Claudia didn't sense anything calculating about the girl. In fact, from

her stiff and nervous way of greeting to her unflattering attire, Charlotte struck Claudia as awkward more than anything else.

"I take it you prefer people who are more animated and energetic?" said Claudia.

"I prefer those who have a proper backbone," Louise amended. "Anyway, it should be about time for the announcement."

All the attendees turned their attention to the podium, where the host had appeared. The buzz of the party quieted as more and more people focused on him. Even in the relative silence, murmurs flitted through the crowd as people fretted over what this announcement might be.

As soon as Sylvester showed up, the guests lowered their heads in a show of respect. Claudia was no exception, even though her unofficial engagement to Sylvester had already been decided.

After the people raised their heads, they spotted a silhouette beside their prince. Claudia assumed the man was Raul. When she met his gaze, her mouth fell open.

"It can't be!" she gasped. Fortunately, her voice was quiet enough that not even Louise seemed to overhear despite their proximity.

The man standing beside Sylvester was the same one she remembered from her brothel days—the one who had offered to buy her freedom. He looked younger than the version she remembered, of course, but the sable hair, dark-brown skin, and sensuous eyes were unmistakable. Raw sexuality radiated from him, giving one the impression he was a ladies' man. But those chocolate-brown eyes betrayed his carefully cultivated image with their intelligent and rational shine. His younger self was no different than the older one in her memories.

"Take this and let everyone think I spent the night here with you," were his words to her. It was his first night as her client, and he'd offered a stack of cash before plopping down on her sofa to sleep. The next visit and the one after had





It was through these encounters she came to understand that his playboy appearance was a facade concealing the truth—that he found women difficult to deal with. The only reason he'd paid a tidy sum to visit a top-class sex worker like Claudia was to keep up appearances.

Naturally, the more time they spent together, the more he began to confide in her.

"Dee, you're an adorable, beautiful woman. I can't find a single flaw in you. It vexes me."

"I could say the same to you, Roo. You're masculine but adorable all the same. When we're together, time seems to pass in the blink of an eye. That vexes me."

"…"

"Oh, come on, don't act all embarrassed."

The two had come to call each other by pet names at some point. He'd begun staying up at night to talk to her instead of sleeping on the couch.

"Hola. Hey, why not go with me to Bari?"

"Hola. That's an odd thing to spring on a person the moment you see them."

He'd offered to buy her freedom as casually as a person saying hello. It warmed her heart. Claudia knew they were compatible, but she still couldn't offer him an immediate answer. Staying at the brothel was part of her atonement. She didn't feel like it would be appropriate for her to leave while she was still capable of earning her keep there.

Is this man really Roo? He never mentioned he was the younger brother of the king of Bari!

Sex workers were prohibited from prying into their customers' private lives, but rumors abounded due to the nature of their work. If Roo really was part of a foreign royal family, she should've heard something about it. Perhaps he'd gone to lengths to keep that completely private, though.

Was there some reason why he would do that? Or...had he already been disinherited by the royal family?

That was a distinct possibility. He was already in an awkward position now with the birth of the crown prince. Perhaps Claudia's guess was right on the mark, and he'd been disinherited by that point. The king would want to solidify his son's claim to the throne to avoid any unnecessary infighting.

Nevertheless, Claudia couldn't think of why the king would make such a call. He'd already ousted his younger brother from his kingdom entirely. Having cemented his son's position as first in line, he had no cause to disinherit Raul. Being part of the royal family had value, both domestically and internationally. It made Raul an excellent diplomatic tool. Even if the king were to relieve Raul of his royal status, Raul was still a close blood relative. Surely the kingdom wouldn't want to lose such an important figure.

There's no way for me to confirm the truth with him now. But if anything suspicious should happen, I won't ignore it.

His familiar face had ushered in a tidal wave of emotions, but, as Claudia reminded herself, she had a different life now. She couldn't let her time in the brothel dictate her actions anymore.

Once the announcement had finished, Sylvester stepped into the crowd to begin introducing Raul to people one-on-one. By the time she realized what was happening, her brother had joined them.

"Raul," said Sylvester, "these are two of my bridal candidates: Claudia, daughter of Duke Lindsay, and Louise, daughter of Marquess Savile. Ladies, as I am sure you are already aware, this is Prince Raul of Bari."

Claudia and Louise offered polite greetings in response, which Raul amiably returned.

"I have known Sylvester since I was a child, but I never realized what a harsh tradition Harland Kingdom forces on its crown prince. You ladies are both so lovely. If I were in his place, I would struggle to choose between you."

That's rich, considering how much you struggle to deal with ladies at all, Claudia thought. He was only paying them lip service. She knew he was secretly eager to get away as quickly as possible, and she had half a mind to pinch his hand for it. As much as she tried to keep reminding herself that they were meeting for the first time, seeing him up close was even more thrilling. He was wearing the light, flowing garments of his homeland. Formal though they were, he left the top button unfastened, as was customary in Bari. His muscled chest peeked out invitingly—and he looked no less elegant for it.

Impressive. We called him Pheromones On Legs for good reason.

The senior sex workers had dubbed him as such after catching glimpses of him at the brothel.

Sylvester was no less alluring, but in a decidedly different way. In Harland, it was customary for one to pursue perfection down to every minor detail of their appearance, and so—unlike Raul—Sylvester's top button was fastened to accentuate his prim and proper image.

If I were to liken them to flowers, Sylvester would be a lily and Raul would be a rose, Claudia decided. The lily was an elegant flower with a sweet fragrance one could only enjoy once they got up close. A rose, meanwhile, was far more upfront with its appeal, hence its popularity; it was beautiful, with a lovely aroma to match.

Seeing them together seemed to multiply both men's intoxicating sex appeal. Claudia's head began to spin. She maintained her smile but subtly averted her gaze. Her eyes happened to land on someone hovering behind Raul.

He wasn't the only one from Bari studying in Harland. A retinue of noble lords and ladies—supporters of Raul's claim to the throne—had accompanied him. They all stood a respectable distance from their prince. There was one among them who particularly commanded Claudia's attention: a young man with snow-white skin. His attire was no different from the other scions who accompanied him, but there was something off about his waif-like appearance.

Due to its temperate climate, most of Bari's citizens had dark-brown skin. Perhaps the reason he stood out was because he deviated from the norm.

Raul followed her line of sight. "Aha," he said with an even bigger smile. "Is Lestea more your type?"

"Oh? That's intriguing," Sylvester commented with a dangerous glint in his eye.

That wasn't the nature of Claudia's interest in the man, but she risked offending him if she flat-out denied it. Still, Sylvester's pointed look triggered cold beads of sweat to trickle down her back. Claudia's smile turned blithe, and she said, "Lord Lestea, is it? He has such a beautiful face. I couldn't tear my eyes away."

It wasn't a lie. Lestea was unmistakably handsome. He looked a bit delicate for a man with his slender frame, gentle facial features, and sky-blue eyes.

Lestea bowed and took a step forward. "Lestea Degani. I am flattered by your praise. Your suspicions about me are right on the mark, my lady."



Claudia's eyes widened. She hadn't expected Lestea to admit it out loud. Nor had she thought Lestea would correctly guess what she was thinking when Raul hadn't been able to do the same. Was I really ogling so rudely?

The one saving grace was that Lestea didn't seem the least bit offended. If anything, he looked pleased. His eyes softened as a gorgeous smile stretched across his face, eliciting squeals of delight from the nearby noble ladies.

The bigger issue here was what, exactly, Claudia was right about. Before she could ask, her eyes finally worked out the truth. With Lestea so much closer now, it was more obvious. One wouldn't notice if he stood perfectly still, but the way his clothes shifted around his form as he moved gave it away.

There were several differences between men's and women's bodies. One of the more notable ones, besides breasts or wider hips, was the shape of the pelvis. Men's were much narrower, whereas women's were wider. To be even more precise, the way the thigh bones connected to the pelvis was different too: women's were angular, while men's were straight. These differences manifested themselves in one's waistline and how their trousers fit them.

Claudia was particularly sensitive to such minute details because she endeavored so tirelessly to maintain an attractive waistline herself. Few others could have spotted this difference. She had her brothel days to thank for her being so well acquainted with male and female bodies.

Lestea was a lady, not a lord.

It was unheard of for a lady to wear pants to a party like this. People had a habit of assuming anyone in men's clothing was a man—Claudia included. But that was also why something had struck her as odd about Lestea so quickly.

Lestea smiled. "You are the first person in Harland to realize I'm not really a man. You have a good eye."

Whispers erupted around them. Those from Bari were impressed with Claudia's ability to see through Lestea's disguise. Meanwhile, those from

Harland were shocked by the revelation that Lestea was actually a woman. The voices closest to Claudia drew her attention. She was surprised to see Tristan trading whispers with Louise.

Goodness. When did the two of them get so close?

Tristan was still hovering behind Sylvester, but Louise had gone out of her way to approach him. Both looked shocked to learn Lestea's secret.

Claudia tweaked her inner relationship diagram with this new information.

Come to think of it, Helen was awfully knowledgeable about my elder brother's preferences. When she was debating what to get him to commemorate his graduation—and, frankly, even before then—Helen had been an unfaltering fount of advice. She was just as informed about Virgil's likes and dislikes as Claudia. That wasn't necessarily strange since she served their family. She could have simply studied up as part of her job.

Incidentally, Virgil was ecstatic about the brooch she had given him just before the party. His smile had been so sugary sweet, it made her want to ask those around him why they so insisted on calling him the Ice Scion.

As she continued revising this relationship diagram in her head, Claudia felt someone's gaze on her and turned to find Raul gawping at her with those big eyes, brown as bitter chocolate.

"Incredible!" he shouted. "I can count on one hand how many have discerned Lestea's gender upon their first meeting!"

"I'm embarrassed to have done so. It's not something that needed to be openly pointed out," Claudia reflected.

Judging by how nonplussed the other nobles from Bari were, Lestea's attire was nothing out of the ordinary to them. It was unusual, to be sure, but if they were unaffected by it, perhaps she would have been better off pretending not to notice. It made her anxious thinking she had done something offensive.

Raul reached out and gently lifted her hand. "Lestea was the one who openly

admitted it. There's no need for you to feel the least bit ashamed, Lady Claudia," he assured her, putting her fears to rest. "I must admit, I am curious what sort of dancing one as beautiful as a rose like you is capable of. Might I have the honor of being your partner for the first dance?"

It was uncanny that he would liken her to a rose when she had done the same in her head moments prior. Her fingertips heated against the touch of his hand. There were no restrictions when it came to who she danced with. Even Sylvester couldn't refuse on her behalf, since it was a foreign prince making the request.

"I would be delighted to act as your partner, Your Highness," Claudia answered automatically.

Raul led her to the dance floor. Though Claudia maintained a cool facade, her heart was thundering over the prince's unexpected invitation. She hadn't expected him to dance with anyone tonight.

I thought he had a hard time around women! Especially women like me!

Even assuming he'd made his offer as a polite formality, Louise had been right there beside her. She should have been the more appealing dance partner, given her more modest and reserved appearance and demeanor. *Did he select me because I am a duke's daughter and higher-ranking than her?*

Claudia snuck a glance at Raul. She wanted to know what he was thinking. Unfortunately, glimpsing his profile only brought memories flooding back. Nostalgia mixed with heartache. She never dreamed they would reunite like this. Claudia felt terribly guilty she had died without ever answering his proposal.

Calm down, she told herself. He doesn't know about any of that.

Tears sprang to her eyes, but she managed to hold them back. The best thing she could do for Raul now was to wrap up this dance as quickly as possible without offending him. She knew better than anyone that he'd secretly prefer that.

"Honestly, how long does my elder brother intend to keep me waiting?" Claudia grumbled under her breath. She was sitting alone in a carriage outside the party venue.

Although the abrupt announcement that Raul would be studying abroad this year had come as a shock to the rest of the aristocracy, the graduation party had wrapped up smoothly. Virgil had left the venue with her and come out to the carriage, then claimed he'd forgotten something inside and left her.

"I bet someone stopped him for a chat."

Virgil was the duke's heir, after all. Even with his Ice Scion moniker, he was still popular in high society. It wouldn't surprise Claudia if someone had pulled him aside. Unfortunately, being alone like this meant her thoughts wandered to Raul. She knew it was pointless to think about him, but she couldn't help it.

"What happened to you before we met?" Claudia wondered aloud.

At the brothel, Raul had told her he was a high-ranking nobleman, not a prince. A prince wouldn't have been able to pay a sex worker's way to freedom. She could only guess he had been driven out of the royal family before they met. Once he was bumped down from royalty to a mere aristocrat, he would be able to marry a commoner if he wished. The most frequent method was to have a close friend adopt the girl into their family so—at least on a surface level—she would be of respectable status. And, in fact, Raul had proposed just that. It wasn't until that point she realized he meant to take her not as a lover or mistress but as his legal wife.

"Even if you felt responsible for me, that was a little overboard."

To buy a sex worker's freedom, one only needed to pay an exorbitant amount to the brothel that kept her. This would only work if the sex worker in question agreed to it, however, and Claudia had no desire to be Raul's legal wife.

"Ironic, given how much of a player you made yourself seem."

Her mind shifted back to present-day Raul, who was much younger than the one she'd encountered in the previous timeline. There'd been nothing unpleasant in their brief interactions with each other. It was only natural that he treated her like a stranger. But there was something so familiar about him, enough to remind her of the man he was when they first met—when he slumped onto her couch instead of crawling into her bed.

"I wonder if we can become close again this time," Claudia muttered absentmindedly.

"With whom, pray tell, do you intend to become close?"

Her whole body stiffened when her words were met with an unexpected response. A figure appeared in the door of her carriage, and it wasn't Virgil as she'd expected.

"You have a habit of crossing people's boundaries in the blink of an eye. It's troubling, really."

It was her beloved, with his beautiful head of silver hair.

"Syl?! Should you really be here?"

Although their engagement was informally set in stone, to the public, Claudia was still only one of several bridal candidates. It would be inconvenient if the two were seen alone together. Moreover, he should've had a duty to accompany Raul even if their introductions were already done with.

"It took a while, but I managed to get rid of everyone. The Barian delegates have retired to their respective rooms." Sylvester slid onto the seat beside Claudia. He flagged the driver outside, and the carriage lurched into motion.

"So the reason why I waited out here so long..."

"Is because you were waiting for *me*, yes," the prince answered for her. "Rest at ease, I already spoke to Virgil about this."

"Can I really rest at ease?" Claudia shot back, glancing pointedly down at her hand. Sylvester had already threaded his fingers with hers. This wasn't so

scandalous as to be out of bounds for an unmarried lady, but the direct touch made her cheeks heat. She cursed how innocent her body was.

When Sylvester realized what she was referring to, he gently lifted her hand and planted a chaste kiss on the back. "I only wish to convey my love for you."

As he spoke, he mimicked the same action he'd taken when he proposed to her the second time, his lips traveling from finger to finger. The sound of his kisses made blood rush to her head. Unable to watch him, Claudia looked out the window instead.

That's right. The second time he proposed was in my bedroom. She remembered the dream she'd had that had felt like a divine revelation. When she refused Sylvester the first time, they had been outside. His second proposal had been indoors, and when he'd sincerely communicated his love, she'd been swallowed by a wave of strong emotions she'd never experienced before.

Everything about both instances was incongruent with her dream.

Besides, the man in my dream was Prince Raul, not Syl. Having reunited with Raul, she was certain there was no mistake. He was the kneeling figure in her dream. In that case, was it just a normal dream and not a divine revelation—or anything special at all?

"What's on your mind?" Sylvester asked. He lightly tugged on her hand to draw her attention.

"Oh, um...your second proposal. Do you like my fingers that much?"

"I love them, of course, but you won't allow me to kiss you anywhere else, will you?"

"Absolutely not!"

Claudia had forbidden him (and herself, for that matter) from excessive touching so she could achieve her objective of becoming the perfect lady. She didn't trust that either of them, being as inexperienced as they were, could control their desires otherwise. Case in point, her body was already feverish

from the kisses he'd planted on her fingers.

"So stubborn," said Sylvester. "There's no need for you to turn your head away like that." His fingers rose, capturing her by the chin and guiding her toward his face.

"We can't—"

Her words cut off abruptly when their eyes met. The tip of Sylvester's nose brushed against hers. Before their lips could meet, she swiftly lifted both hands to block his mouth.

"I see the way you look at me, yet you would deny me?" Sylvester challenged. She had no way of knowing exactly *how* she was looking at him, but she could see what it did to him. His brows were drawn, his breaths coming out in tight, shallow gasps. Frustrated, he let out a heavy sigh. "I want to take you to bed right this second."

"You're being a little too direct, don't you think?!"

From the moment their unofficial engagement was decided, Sylvester made no secret of his desire for her.

Abashed, Sylvester quickly replied, "I'm sorry. I couldn't think of a better way to say what I'm feeling."

As Claudia suspected, he was having trouble dealing with the mounting heat inside his body. Sylvester raked his hands through his hair in an uncharacteristic display of open frustration. There was something alarmingly suggestive about the way the locks of his silver hair spilled between the gaps of his fingers. And beneath it all, his golden eyes peeked out at her.

Any other lady would have thrown herself at him, ready to relinquish her chastity immediately. Even agonized as he was by his unsatiated appetite, Sylvester looked as beautiful as a painting. There was a limit to what Claudia could do to ease his suffering.

"Why don't you sit across from me for now?" she suggested.

"No."



Anytime they were alone, they repeated this same pattern.

"I don't want to be apart from you. I hate that I won't be able to see you for a while," Sylvester said. He meant every word.

Claudia's own loneliness peaked when he mentioned the unavoidable truth. "You will be going back to your family's lands, then."

"Yes, it's as you've heard. I only plan to stay there a short time, but regrettably, the trip there and back will take some time."

Traveling would take up more of his time than the stay itself, a fact that obviously burdened Sylvester.

"It's not as though we can see each other that frequently anyway, but it still makes me feel terribly lonely."

Sylvester perked up, looking relieved. "You feel the same? I'm not the only one, then!"

Claudia lifted a brow. Did he really think she wouldn't be just as sad? "Of course I do. I'll miss you."

"So you will. You were so focused on Raul today that I worried I was the only one depressed about it."

"I wasn't..." The words caught in her throat. As always, Sylvester's intuition was so on point, it had her stomach in knots. How much had he sensed? He had no idea that she'd lived a different life, working for years in a brothel, yet he managed to see right through her.

"There's no need for you to panic," Sylvester hastened to say. "You were only being polite to our guests, right? I am impressed you managed to see through Lady Lestea as well." He went on to explain that Raul had introduced her beforehand as a lady, so he'd already known.

Claudia was relieved that he seemed to know she had no romantic interest in Raul. "Then it was just my imagination that you were glaring at me, I assume."

"No, I was jealous."

She pursed her lips.

"Life would be so much easier if I could control my feelings through rational thought, but alas." Sylvester gave a bitter chuckle as he stroked a loose strand of hair that had fallen to Claudia's shoulder.

He was absolutely right. There was nothing more difficult than trying to control one's own emotions. Claudia couldn't count how many times she'd lain in bed, flailing in frustration, because of how much she'd struggled with hers. She identified so strongly with his feelings that she couldn't bring herself to refuse his gentle touch.

Sylvester's fingers trailed down the length of her hair until he arrived at her upper arm. His caress against her sensitive skin almost made her shudder with excitement, until his words hit her like a bucket of ice water.

"Dia, do you and Raul know each other?"

Claudia nearly screeched in surprise. How was he able to sense so much simply by the way she looked at Raul? And why did he always wait until the exact moment she had her guard down to make such shocking remarks?

"N-no, we don't," she stammered.

"Hmm. For not being acquainted, you seemed to know exactly how much personal space to afford him."

"Is that really how it looked?"

Sylvester nodded. "When you first meet a person, you observe them closely to gauge how much personal space they require, right? But you didn't do that with Raul."

He was awfully perceptive. Under different circumstances, it would be flattering to know she commanded so much of his attention. Not this time, though. It was ironic to think Lestea had complimented Claudia on her keen eye for detail. Compared to Sylvester, she was but a novice.

I really screwed up, Claudia reflected. She lamented the time she'd spent reminiscing. It was time better spent exercising more caution. Fortunately, Sylvester didn't seem to suspect any relationship between them.

Claudia's hands grew clammy as she reminded herself she could still come up with a plausible excuse. "Perhaps I was nervous being in front of a member of Barian royalty. In retrospect, I feel that maybe I put up too much of a wall with him."

She knew keeping Raul at arm's length was the perfect distance for him, but no one else had any way of knowing that. Sylvester knew how she was with other people normally. It made her defense all the more logical—or so she hoped.

"That's unusual." Sylvester cocked his head to the side, initially skeptical, but all the tension left her once he nodded to himself. "I suppose even you get nervous, hmm?"

It was impossible to read what he was really thinking behind that gentle smile.

But one of his redeeming qualities is that he doesn't jump to conclusions. If there had been any inconsistencies in her rationale, Sylvester would have surely pressed her further. Her explanation made enough sense to him that he quickly backed down.

Claudia was grateful that the worst had passed. It was her turn to ask a question. "So, you and His Royal Highness are acquainted?"

Prior to her societal debut, Claudia hadn't had any opportunity to make the foreign prince's acquaintance, but Sylvester was a different story. He had been attending to his royal duties from the time he was a young child.

"The first time we met was six years ago, I believe..." Sylvester said, voice trailing off. "It was in the port city of my family's region. It had already been drilled into me not to express any emotion in front of others by that point."

At the time, Raul would have still been first in line for the Barian throne. They would have had a lot in common as future heirs to their respective kingdoms. Harland couldn't afford for their crown prince to show any sign of weakness.

"I have heard Prince Raul is an amiable man. Was that your experience with him?" Claudia asked curiously.

"Yes. I was wearing the same fake, innocuous smile I always do, but Raul didn't seem bothered by it in the slightest. He eagerly struck up a conversation with me. He was candid and forthright. Seemed to me he had much more freedom to express himself than I did—though at present, he is anything but free," Sylvester amended. "The way he manages to slip so naturally past a person's defenses reminds me somewhat of you. He puts on a good show of being carefree, but you can tell he's shrewder than he lets on. That part reminds me of you too."

Sylvester's impressions of Raul matched Claudia's perfectly. For as happy-golucky as Raul made himself seem, there was a twinkle of intelligence hidden in his eyes. If Sylvester was to be believed, the present Raul was no different at his core than the man she once knew.

"One small piece of advice," Sylvester said, breaking her out of her thoughts. "It would be wise to keep an eye on his relationship with Lady Lestea."

Claudia arched a brow. "Why? Did something happen?"

"From the time he invited you to dance until it finished, I noticed him sneaking glances at her."

"Was he clocking her reaction, I wonder?"

The way Sylvester explained it suggested that Raul had romantic interest in Lestea, that he was surveying her for any signs of jealousy to gauge whether he had a chance with her. Could that explain why he chose someone flashy like me to dance instead of someone more subdued like Lady Louise?

She knew how much Raul disliked women. Lestea would be the easiest

romantic partner for him.

Sylvester shook his head. "That wasn't the feeling I got from it. It was more like a parent keeping tabs on their child, I suppose? It's hard to describe."

"Regardless, I understand what you're saying. I will keep an eye out."

If someone as perceptive as Sylvester was concerned, there was bound to be something to it. Claudia tried to dig through her memories of her brothel days, but it was futile; Raul had never mentioned Lestea to her.

Odd. If he had someone that unique so close to him, it should've come up naturally in conversation, right? The phrase "handsome woman" suited Lestea perfectly. A lady who was unaware of Lestea's gender might fall head over heels for her.

No, Claudia corrected herself, she might fall even if she knew.

In theater, women sometimes dressed in men's clothing for their role. The female audience would always support such performers, for though they looked the part of an attractive man, they could relate and empathize with their female viewers more than a man.

I hope the only reason he never brought her up is because he was heartbroken, though I feel bad for Raul if so. But judging by Sylvester's reaction, whatever was between them wasn't so banal.

As the lights of her family's mansion winked into view, Claudia recalled something important. "Oh, Syl! There is something I want to give you!"

Claudia knew she would see him at Virgil's graduation party, though she wasn't sure if they would find any time alone together. She had brought her finished handkerchief along just in case there was an opportunity. It was folded perfectly to show off her embroidery, with a ribbon wrapped neatly across. She handed it to him.

"After I heard you would be leaving, I embroidered this," Claudia explained.
"Y-you can never have enough handkerchiefs...right?"

Even though Helen had given her seal of approval, Claudia was still worried over the appropriateness of her design. Her lack of confidence bled into her voice.

Oh no, what now? I can't meet his eyes.

Logically, she knew Sylvester would be overjoyed, but it required a great deal of courage for her to glance at his face and see his reaction. Courage she didn't possess.

"Thank you. I will treasure this."

Prompted by his words, she tentatively lifted her gaze. The moment her eyes met his, she sucked in a breath. Her heart almost stopped beating. His smile was so radiant, so beautiful—his love for her written plain on his face. There was almost something childlike about it, like a kid's whole face lighting up because they were eating candy for the first time. But there was also something mature about it, like a man savoring the flavor of a rich wine. It made her dizzy. Never before had Claudia been confronted with a gratitude that seemed so sensual in nature. Her heart throbbed so fiercely it hurt.

"I will gaze at it each day I am gone," Sylvester said, stroking the handkerchief affectionately—the same way he lovingly stroked her hair. If that wasn't embarrassing enough, he lifted it to his lips and planted a kiss on the embroidery. Claudia's face heated, the blush traveling all the way to the tips of her ears.

Chapter 3:

The King's Younger Brother Sighs

Raul Sighed as HIS ROOM filled with the rich aroma of coffee. Thankfully, the beans he'd brought from his homeland had not gone stale on the trip here. Since black tea was the staple drink of Harland, coffee was difficult to find. He had brought an abundance of beans that wouldn't spoil easily for his long stay.

Coffee had an invigorating scent, owing to its origins as a fruit. It tickled and teased his nose, which Raul thoroughly enjoyed as he turned his gaze to the only member of his inner circle still in the room with him.

"Why don't you learn a little self-control?" Raul ventured.

"Prince Sylvester is a magnanimous man," Lestea replied.

Part of him wanted to throw his head back in exasperation at her for cross-dressing in a foreign country. They were lucky that Sylvester graciously permitted it, saying he didn't mind what style Lestea wore as long as it was formal attire. Raul felt responsible for the situation; he was the reason Lestea had started all this.

It began when she learned how uncomfortable I am with women, Raul recalled.

In fact, Raul struggled the most with women like Claudia.

Ever since he hit puberty, Raul found himself entirely surrounded by women. He grew faster than other boys his age, so he was forced to mature just as quickly. His sensual "bedroom eyes" (as others described them) further drove the impression he was a playboy.

I'm still traumatized by that time a strange woman showed up in my bed naked.

His position as crown prince had an enormous impact. There was no end to

the number of women who wanted to bed him in the hopes they could tie him down in marriage. It cast a bleak shadow on his early teens. Such women came in all shapes and forms, but the very first he saw naked in his bed was a voluptuous woman. It had ingrained a distaste in the opposite sex in him.

At the time, he was to be the future king, so he went to painstaking lengths to keep his aversion hidden. Lestea was the first to discover the truth.

It's hard to believe that until that point, she'd always worn modest dresses.

His image of her as a handsome woman in men's clothing had grown too strong for him to recall what she looked like back then. At first, Lestea had only dressed in men's clothing in private. Over time, she began wearing it more and more. That habit followed her to Harland.

It's obviously her own personal preference and not just for me.

He had tried, in fact, to stop her while they were still in Bari. Lestea's cross-dressing was no more common there than it was here; he'd never seen another woman attend a party in anything other than a dress. As anticipated, people had gawked with open curiosity, but she seemed unbothered. Perhaps her style of dress didn't have as much of an impact as he thought. She had already been pretty isolated from the beginning, what with her all-too-quick wit.

It seems like she's gained more female friends since she started cross-dressing, actually—but are they really her friends?

For whatever reason, the other girls had avoided Lestea when she dressed like a woman. It was only after she began wearing men's attire and hanging out with the boys that the girls began to swarm around her. Her popularity rivaled that of Raul's now.

Raul eyed Lestea suspiciously as she lounged in a padded armchair. She flashed a smile at him, but he wasn't the least bit happy to receive it. They had been around each other long enough for him to know her inside and out.

She's the type to gut someone without hesitation, smiling all the while. No

matter how charming her smile, it was no reassurance to him.

"Lady Claudia was an intriguing woman," Lestea commented. "You're averse to that type, right?"

"Yeah..."

Averse was somewhat of an understatement. Claudia had the look of a strong-willed woman who was confident in her impeccably cultivated figure. What first drew his attention to her were the soft waves in her long, ravenblack hair. Raul's hair was also wavy, so perhaps he was intrigued by that shared trait between them. Then there was her bluish-white dress, which stood in stark contrast to the darkness of her hair and outlined the shape of her perfect body.

Raul disliked women with figures like Claudia's, yet he found beauty in hers. He thought she would be an ideal partner so long as she kept her mouth shut. In his head, he could already imagine the saccharine, ingratiating tones of a woman of her looks and stature. It would shatter the illusion, he was sure. But his worries turned out to be unfounded.

"I never imagined you would invite her to dance," said Lestea.

"I only did it because you screwed things up," Raul said defensively.

"She wasn't the least bit bothered by it."

Lestea had a bad habit of reading a person's thoughts and blurting out the answers to the unasked questions. Most people were openly disgusted by it. Claudia was different. So different, in fact, that she'd actually apologized. She'd been considerate enough to consider Lestea's position and not point out what she'd noticed. It was Lestea's fault for ruining things by uttering the truth. That was why Raul had invited Claudia to dance, by way of apology to her. If she was the only aristocrat he invited to dance at the party, he figured the honor would inflate her pride.

"Are you interested in Lady Claudia?" asked Lestea.

"Don't be absurd. She's one of Sylvester's bridal candidates."

Despite his vehement denial, Lestea smiled knowingly. It unnerved him how she seemed to peer into his mind. For all her quirks—and Lestea most assuredly had many—she was still an incredibly capable person, which was why he hadn't dismissed her from his service.

Most women would nestle up against Raul when he escorted them, hoping the physical contact would stimulate his sexual appetite. Somehow, Claudia had sensed that. She kept a respectable distance from him, just enough to avoid making him uncomfortable. Before he knew it, their dance had already ended. Raul was stunned. At the same time, he had no choice but to pull himself together, fearing what Lestea would do if left unsupervised.

"I am interested in her," Lestea confessed.

"What do you mean by that?"

"She has a good eye and keen instincts. Doesn't strike me as a prideful duke's daughter at all."

Raul nodded thoughtfully. "She has a reputation for being the perfect noble lady." Perhaps that was how she so perceptively gauged the appropriate social distance with him.

"From what I have seen of her so far, I would believe it. I am impressed. She's an amazing woman, Raul."

"She wasn't put off by you either."

"Precisely! She understands that the eyes are windows to the soul—that one's very expression can give away what they're thinking! I would be willing to bet she's far more observant than most."

Raul was only trying to fish for more information because Lestea was being vague, but instead, she began gushing in a way he'd never heard before. He stared at her with his mouth wide open.

"Her powers of observation really get my blood pumping!" Lestea continued

feverishly. "Most duke's daughters are less sensitive to the subtleties of others' gazes since they are so accustomed to being the center of attention."

Lestea was right. Girls of Claudia's status were normally raised like pampered princesses, never developing such keen perception. Claudia especially stood out when compared to the rest of the noble ladies her age in Harland. He wondered if she was simply born with that gift.

"I understand how much she moved you, but don't do anything over the top, all right? Need I remind you that you're being watched too?" Raul threw a glare her way, remembering how she had left him behind to travel ahead to Harland's capital. Raul had permitted it, assuming she wouldn't do anything too ludicrous while they were under the watchful eyes of his older brother's bodyguards. Lestea's early arrival in the capital had allowed her to rendezvous with the stationed diplomat and consolidate information.

"Yes, I know. Assigning bodyguards to keep tabs on us almost makes it seem like His Majesty is challenging us to sneak around and scheme behind his back."

Raul snorted. "Yes, and if we were caught scheming, he would immediately have our heads."

It's as if my older brother changed completely once his heir was born, Raul thought. It was such a dramatic shift that the Barian king almost seemed paranoid, even though Raul had never once gone against him.

Raul was a pacifist. He wanted nothing more than to avoid an armed conflict, for he knew it wouldn't end with just him and his older brother. When those in positions of power waged wars, it was always society's weakest who suffered the most repercussions. That was why he meekly accepted his demotion and the order to study abroad.

"He must be eager for us to make a move so he can get rid of us, especially with how much criticism he's facing for suddenly and causelessly sending you away."

Raul's older brother publicly demanded his obedience, but in truth, he

secretly hoped Raul would turn traitor. The sooner Raul turned on him, the sooner the king could have him and his co-conspirators executed. But Raul had no intention of granting his sibling that wish.

"Once the crown prince grows up a little, I'm sure His Majesty will regain his composure," he assured Lestea.

"I can only hope you are right."

The king's choice to send Raul abroad had also earned him scrutiny from the aristocrats aligned with Raul—Lestea chief among them. All Raul could do now was watch her and the others who'd accompanied him closely, to make sure they didn't cross the line.

Chapter 4:

The Villainess Faces Reality

C LAUDIA AWOKE earlier than usual. Not drowsy enough to nod back off, she rose from her bed. Fingers of sunlight poked through the window as the sun peeked over the horizon. The sight was captivating enough to coax her toward the window. Sadly, there was too much condensation on the glass for her to see anything, thanks to the difference in temperature between her room and the outside.

Melancholy clung to Claudia, like rainwater seeping through her clothes and into her skin.

"I never imagined it was a budding insurrection," she murmured, thinking back to her trip home from the graduation party with Sylvester.

Before she climbed out of the carriage and parted with him, Sylvester finally informed her of the real reason he was leaving for an inspection of the royal family's territory. The truth had come as such a shock that, even though Sylvester had already set out on the road by now, Claudia was still shaken.

She wrung her hands and shut her eyes. The memory of their conversation inside the carriage came rushing back. Her mind had been taken with how breathtakingly beautiful Sylvester was until he confided the truth, his expression pensive.

"I hesitated about whether to tell you this until the very last minute, Dia, but I need to be honest with you," Sylvester said. "Would I be right in assuming you'd be cross with me if you found out later instead?"

Claudia was still flabbergasted by what he'd shared. She nodded numbly. She could easily imagine herself angrily demanding why he hadn't told her sooner if he'd kept all this a secret. Still, his honesty didn't lessen her worries.

"There will be no potential danger to you, will there?" she asked, anxious.

"No need to worry. The matter has already been settled. It's not as though this will lead to civil war or something."

The word "insurrection" was an overstatement. In truth, the issue had been a collective of people *plotting* insurrection. Local authorities had already raided the collective's hideout and prevented their plans from coming to fruition.

Ordinarily, a simple report to the crown would be enough. But the location of the incident was the core problem, as this had taken place in the royal family's territory, in the very port town where the Barian prince had been staying. The royal family couldn't afford to turn a blind eye.

"It seems the main cause was friction between the locals and the new administrative official we installed," Sylvester explained.

Most aristocrats with long noble lineages possessed their own territory. Those of the highest echelons had particularly large swaths of land to maintain, but most of them employed a representative to handle such affairs on their behalf. It was difficult for the head of the household to oversee such management when they were busy politicking in the capital. While there were some who preferred to administer their lands directly, well over half entrusted the duty to a relative instead.

In the royal family's case, they appointed a capable administrative official to the role. It was a prestigious position that guaranteed one's future success. Once the official in question eventually returned to the capital, they had a spot waiting for them within the government's core administration.

Although the royal family's situation in that respect differed from that of other aristocrats, it wasn't uncommon for friction to occur between the people and a representative—or, in this case, an administrative official.

"We can't rule out the possibility they were incited to this, though," Sylvester added.

"So this is all part of some larger conspiracy?!"

"That's how it seems based on the reports, which is why I need to move quickly. Father is treating the matter with casual indifference. He told me to use it as an opportunity to learn and grow."

"But there's a possibility that some third party orchestrated this, right?"

"That's nothing unusual, you know. You experienced your younger sister's devious maneuvering firsthand, after all."

Claudia vehemently shook her head. "This is on an entirely different scale!"

An entire region of Harland was involved. The issue with Fermina was small enough to be settled within the confines of the academy—well, yes, it *had* spilled out of the academy by the end, but at least the principal offender was only a student.

"This scale is normal for me," Sylvester replied without skipping a beat, his tone gentle as always.

His words hit Claudia hard. Her mind wandered back to that moment when he'd proposed they simply erase Fermina entirely. That, too, was normal for Sylvester. Until this moment, she hadn't realized how heavy and oppressive that option was. Her chest tightened.

"This will be normal for you too from now on," Sylvester said. "Have I scared you again?"

It was obvious what he was referring to. His thoughts had wandered to the same place hers were in; he remembered how unnerved she'd been.

Claudia vigorously shook her head a second time, with no regard for how the motion might tangle her hair. She reached over and grabbed his hand, squeezing tight. "No, I'm not scared at all! I was only shocked at myself for not understanding the weight of my new position. And a little bit irritated at myself too, if I'm being honest."

Sylvester was the crown prince of Harland Kingdom and its future king. With

their engagement all but official to the public, she was the future crown princess and the woman who would one day be queen. Claudia sat at the top of the aristocratic hierarchy, being a duke's daughter, but she was still a servant to the crown, much like any other citizen. Their marriage would change that. She would be the one commanding the loyalty of an entire nation instead of offering hers.

Logically, Claudia understood all this, but her emotions hadn't yet caught up with her new reality. She was ashamed of herself for it. More than anything, though, she felt guilty, having realized now why Sylvester was so concerned about sharing this with her.

He didn't want to scare me.

Perhaps he was even worried she would be so intimidated by the responsibility that she would distance herself. Claudia would never do that.

"Still," she said, clutching at her chest, "I cannot help but worry. There will be no drawing of blades on your trip, will there?"

"Rest assured, everything will be fine. I'll have Tristan and several skilled bodyguards accompanying me. The only other person I will be having close contact with is the administrative official we assigned to our territory."

"Oh, so Lord Tristan will be going along as well." Claudia's thoughts immediately wandered to Louise. Did she already know about this?

"Yes," Sylvester said. "It will be a good experience for him."

The prince's visit would demonstrate the royal family's concern to the locals. That would provide immense reassurance and nip any dissent in the bud—thus preventing any further attempts at insurrection, Sylvester reasoned.

"So there's no need for you to worry." He caressed her cheek with his free hand. Claudia sensed him leaning toward her. She pressed her index finger to his lip, stopping him.

"As worried as I am for your safety, kissing is a different matter entirely."

His expression soured. "You would deny me even knowing we won't be able to see each other for a while?"

"Please make do with the handkerchief."

The two were smiling again by the time she peeled herself away and climbed out of the carriage.

When Claudia's eyes fluttered open again, the sun was already blazing.

"I should have asked for a token." A token or some such would have reminded her of Sylvester's smiling face.

No matter how the fireplace warmed her room, a chill crept in from the window. Claudia drew the frigid air into her lungs and let it clear her thoughts.

"If I continue moping about how lonely I am..." She pursed her lips. "No, Syl wouldn't laugh at me. He'd be ecstatic."

It would thrill him to know how much he filled her thoughts. Alas, the real world marched on regardless of her melancholy.

"One step at a time," Claudia told herself. She wanted to stand proudly at the prince's side in the future; she couldn't let her emotions rule her forever.

The little bit of sunlight had done wonders to drive away the gloomy cloud that hung over her. The condensation on the window glimmered, crystalline, when the light hit it.

"First, I need to get ready for this tea party."

While Sylvester was away from the capital, his bridal candidates were tasked with filling in for him and entertaining Raul. Each was to hold a tea party at her estate in hopes of helping their Barian neighbors discover the joy of black tea, as it was less common than coffee back in Bari. Raul would attend a total of four parties. The main issue, then, was in what order the girls were to host. All the girls were, to some extent, aware of the prince's basic preferences, but not so privy that they felt confident in drawing first blood.

No one wanted to go first—not normally, anyway. But when the involved houses had met to discuss the matter, Duke Lindsay volunteered his daughter after Claudia insisted that was what she wanted.

"I never knew there was a café specializing in coffee," Louise remarked with notable surprise.

Claudia smiled. "In truth, I learned of it only recently myself. The owner is from Bari, and the flavor is authentic enough that the Barian diplomat frequents this establishment."

They were sitting at a counter together, in seats that gave them a sweeping view of the rest of the café. There were tables near the wall where one could sit and enjoy a drink at their leisure, as well as standing tables where one could down their drink if they were in a hurry.

This does strike me as the kind of place people might drop into during work hours, Claudia thought. Among the café's current patrons, she spotted some who looked like craftsmen and others sporting crisp suits. A surprising number favored the standing tables over the ones with proper seats.

Claudia and Louise would have drawn attention anyway, but they commanded the spotlight by sitting at the counter in the middle of the café. There was no helping it, though; Claudia's aim was to do some market research, and this was the best spot for it. Besides, being at the counter also meant she would be able to speak with the owner directly.

The two girls had chosen modest outfits for the occasion so as not to clash with the relaxed atmosphere of the café. Claudia was clad in a dark emerald dress. The primary color of Louise's was beige, giving her a similarly subdued look.

"You really did me a favor by suggesting a dress code beforehand. If I had worn my usual colors, I would have stood out like a sore thumb here," Louise

whispered, leaning closer.

"Happy to be of service. I happened to learn beforehand that this place has a chic interior, like the gentlemen's boutique I visited not too long ago. By the looks of things, it seems most customers here are men too."

Claudia had actually visited this establishment a number of times in her brothel days. Ten years from now—which was odd to think about, since it was the past for her—this place would look no different. The owner should have looked younger to her at least, but he had the same white hair and beard, and his rich brown skin was covered in layers of wrinkles. It was as if time had frozen for him. As a former sailor, the man was a solid block of muscle despite his age —but in front of two young noble ladies, his expression melted into a warm, welcoming smile.

Other male customers seemed interested in approaching the two girls, but the maids and bodyguards Claudia and Louise had brought with them pinned these would-be suitors with such menacing glares that they thought better of trying anything.

I hope Helen is getting herself some much-needed rest.

Helen was supposed to accompany Claudia today since she was on duty, but Claudia had forced her to stay home on account of the gruesome bags beneath her eyes. When Claudia gave her orders, Helen's face had darkened with utter despair, but even she seemed conscious of how sleep-deprived she was and at last acquiesced in fear she might not be able to fulfill her duties properly if she went.

It doesn't seem as though she has anything pressing on her mind. I wonder if her exhaustion simply caught up with her.

As worried as Claudia was, she decided to focus on what was in front of her. When she lifted her head, her eyes met the owner's. He stood there with a grin, arms folded over his chest. He was accustomed to high-profile customers, given that even Raul visited this place. Noble ladies like them didn't intimidate him at

all. He was friendly, free of sarcasm, and considerate enough that it brought a smile to Claudia's face.

"Ladies, is this your first time drinking coffee?" he asked.

Louise nodded. "It is for me."

"I have enjoyed it a number of times," Claudia said. "The medium roast is delicious."

The man's face lit up. "Aha, you know your stuff!"

Louise regarded her quizzically, so Claudia launched into an explanation about coffee roasting. She couldn't admit it, but she was parroting information Raul once relayed. "You know how tea can differ based on how its leaves are processed, right? Similarly, the strength of a coffee's roast impacts its flavor."

"Where the beans were produced also has an effect on its flavor," the owner added as he worked. "Us Barians prefer a dark roast."

Intrigued, Louise leaned forward in her seat, watching as the owner poured a fresh cup of coffee.

Thank goodness she's so interested.

Claudia kept tabs on her friend out of the corner of her eye as she ordered a few sweets from the menu. The whole reason she invited Louise along was so that they could share information with each other.

Claudia and her family would host the first tea party, but Louise was right after her. The bridal candidates were all invited to attend one another's parties, so the other two would be able to gauge the guests' response to Claudia and Louise's parties and alter plans for theirs accordingly. Claudia had no interest in making a competition out of this. She wanted to work together with the other girls. After all, it was their duty to entertain Raul and the other aristocrats from Bari.

Sadly, our status as bridal candidates means we're in no position to work together. They were supposed to be rivals vying for Sylvester's hand. If she'd

suggested to the other two that they all work together, they would have suspected she had ulterior motives.

Not even Louise was aware that her engagement to Sylvester was essentially set in stone, but she at least knew where Sylvester's heart was. That made her a more willing candidate. Simply offering information upfront might have called into question where Claudia had learned so much. That was how she came up with the idea of inviting Louise to this café. Letting the owner fill in the gaps and offer explanations would make him the source of all the information instead of her. All the other two candidates needed to do was attend her and Louise's parties to steal this knowledge for themselves.

Once their orders arrived, Claudia and Louise enjoyed their coffee and sweets, as well as the newfound knowledge they were gaining from this little outing.

"I am shocked Barians prefer their sweets so sugary," said Louise.

"The strength of the coffee and its bitterness requires any sweets eaten with it to have an equally strong flavor."

Like his countrymen, Raul loved a deep roast and adored sweets. Claudia could remember him grumbling to her about how people always mistook him for a man who loved alcohol and would offer him only salty snacks.

Maybe his facade was sugary enough for these people that they feared actual sweets might give them heartburn. She didn't want to face the more likely scenario that those people simply hoped to get him inebriated so they could drag him off to bed. That would only make Raul more pitiful.

"This was a real learning experience." Louise smiled appreciatively. "Thank you for inviting me along today, Lady Claudia."

"Did it help to get your mind off things?"

Louise furrowed her brow, looking perplexed. "I...suppose?" she said, blinking slowly.

"What I mean is, Lord Tristan left along with Prince Sylvester," Claudia

elaborated. "Don't you feel lonely without him?"

"Wha—?! I... Yes, I suppose..." Now that she understood, Louise's cheeks flushed pink. She pressed her hands over them. Her emerald eyes nervously glanced up at Claudia. "You must think I'm completely deprayed."

"Depraved? What?!" Claudia doubted her ears for a moment. It was her turn to blink at Louise in surprise. The concept didn't at all align with what she knew of Louise's disposition.

"I was so enamored with His Highness, but the moment I realized I had no hope of his obtaining his heart, I went and pivoted my affections toward another gentleman." Louise hugged her arms around herself, forlorn.

Claudia still didn't understand. What part of that was depraved? For a moment, she worried that maybe her values were distorted since she was a former sex worker, but she quickly shook her head and dismissed that idea.

"Lady Louise," she said, "while I would happily praise your ability to look ahead and keep moving forward, I would never call you depraved."

It would be a different story if Louise were two-timing, but given her austere personality, that would never happen.

"Um, but it's nothing concrete yet, only budding interest," Louise prattled on. "Oh, no, don't mistake me—Lord Tristan is an incredible man, to be sure! I only meant budding interest as in friends, of course! At least while I am still officially a bridal candidate for His Highness."

"R-right," Claudia responded awkwardly, unsure of what else to say when faced with her friend's ardent denial.

Recalling how close they seemed at the graduation party, she pitied Tristan. From what I saw of them, I suspect he's also interested in her. He might think twice about making a move on one of Sylvester's bridal candidates, but Tristan was already aware that Sylvester was secretly engaged to Claudia. She waffled over whether or not she should simply fill Louise in about that so there was no

further room for doubt.

"Oh! But I fully realize His Highness is in love with you," Louise continued. "I have no intention of trying to reestablish myself as a potential bride for him!"

"Umm, all right. But in that case, I see no issue with you and Lord Tristan becoming closer." Now, more than any other time, she resented Sylvester and Tristan both for insisting she keep her engagement a secret.

Louise slowly shook her head. "This is my way of drawing a line in the sand. Knowing you, I am sure you haven't done anything improper either, have you, Lady Claudia?"

"No, but His Highness is well aware of my feelings for him. You haven't even reached that step with Lord Tristan."

"True." Louise shrank back, hesitating. "Um, would you mind if I confided in you?"

"If confiding in me would help you at all, I would be more than happy to lend you an ear."

Claudia forgot entirely about her preparations for the tea party after that, instead offering all sorts of advice to Louise. In the process, she started to resent Tristan for a very different reason. What does Lord Tristan think he's doing, making her so uneasy?

She had no idea if the advice she offered Louise would help with Tristan.

Chapter 5:

The Villainess Holds a Tea Party

W HEN THE DUKE ANNOUNCED to his household staff that they would be holding a tea party to entertain foreign aristocrats and royalty, their elderly butler and the head maid Martha eagerly stepped up to the plate for the preparations. Neither spared any effort. For the butler, this was an opportunity to flaunt the Lindsays' wealth and prominence. For Martha, it was her chance to demonstrate to even more people just how splendid the lady of their house was.

As the day of the tea party arrived, servants scrambled through the halls in a flurry of activity, trying to put together all the last-minute preparations.

"It's chilly today," Claudia noted as she stood in the middle of their party venue. Her breath came out in white wisps as she spoke.

The tea party itself wouldn't begin until just before noon, but Claudia awoke early and arrived at the assembly hall to survey the scene of the upcoming gathering. The frigid air crept across the ground, sinking into the very tips of her feet. If she hadn't felt cold before, she did now. Claudia pressed herself against Helen, trying to regain a little bit of warmth.

"As the head maid requested, we have many blankets for everyone to drape over their laps. Is there anything else on your mind?" asked Helen.

Claudia shook her head. "No, that should be everything. I apologize for making you go through this too, Helen."

Helen regarded her with a look of dismay. "What are you saying, my lady? There is nothing I desire more than to serve at your side."

"I suppose," Claudia began, shooting her an amused look, "you would have been called here regardless to help with preparations, wouldn't you?"

Ignoring that, Helen said, "As your loyal servant, I would follow you even to

the very depths of the underworld, my lady!" Her exaggerated claim prompted a laugh from Claudia. But despite her silliness, the sentiment was still sincere: Helen would rather serve beside her than be dragged into assisting with miscellaneous tasks by Martha.

"I can only hope it warms up closer to noon." Claudia glanced out the window, eyes peering up at the sky. It wasn't too overcast today, but given the season, it was probably too much to hope for a much warmer temperature. Since it was so cold outside, there would be little opportunity for the guests to appreciate their flower garden.

"Would you like us to guide the guests through the garden entrance?" It was as if Helen had read her mind.

"Yes. Our gardeners went to the trouble of selecting flowers that would bloom in the winter for this occasion. I would like our guests to enjoy them at least a little."

Their assembly hall faced out toward the garden, with a direct entrance attached. There were enough windows in the room to give the guests a good view of the flowers, but the condensation that would surely form on the windows would render flower viewing an impossibility.

"It would be best to restrict the number of people using that entrance. Let's limit it to our guests from Bari," Claudia decided. Opening the doors would allow the icy air to flow inside, thereby wasting all the effort they were putting into heating the room.

Claudia summoned Martha over to convey this change, and she was quick to nod in agreement. "I believe that would be the best course of action as well. If possible, it would be better for us to have long sofas available for the guests instead of all these single-seater armchairs."

Martha's input was reasonable. Even without everyone pressed close together, just sitting nearby would provide added body heat.

"I understand why you would suggest that, but I would like to ask that you

keep our seating arrangements as planned. I have a good reason for it, I promise."

"Very well, my lady."

Claudia gave the head maid an apologetic look. "I know I am asking a lot of you."

At that, Martha quickly shook her head. "If it's something you thought through, I have no qualms about it."

Compared to a normal tea party, the setup for this one significantly broke with tradition. In Harland, it was common for people to hold their tea parties on the same sort of banquet tables they sat around for dinner. They were long, narrow tables with ordinary wooden chairs set along the lengths. Tea parties were an opportunity to deepen one's connections with people whom they were already well acquainted with, so there was no need for people to walk around and offer greetings since they already knew one another. But such was the way of things, especially in the winter, when it was impossible to hold a garden party. That was why Claudia elected to break from precedent.

Introductions will have already been made at the graduation party, but it's still basically everyone's first time meeting the Bari group. At the very least, no one was close enough to be considered acquaintances. Not even Raul, since her acquaintance with him was entirely one-sided in this timeline.

"It looks like we can leave the rest to Martha," said Claudia. "I imagine I should begin getting myself ready soon, shouldn't I?"

"Yes. We have finished drawing warm water for your bath, my lady."

At Helen's prompting, Claudia turned her gaze to the inside entrance of the room, where her maids were waiting. She didn't typically bathe in the morning, but today was a special occasion.

Although I already bathed last night before bed. Now I'm going to do it again?

If her maids had anything to say about it, it was going to take her much longer

"Your gardens are incredible! I was so enchanted I almost forgot how frigid it was," Raul commented, his eyes taken with the vivid yellow of the boat orchids.

Gardeners were heroes in the shadows, the true extent of their labor seldom noticed or appreciated. The garden teemed with their tireless work, such as the pastel-pink cyclamens and other colorful winter flowers. When the sun sank behind the horizon each day, the gardeners would carefully extract all the potted plants vulnerable to frost.

"It is an honor to receive such glowing praise," said Claudia. "Many of these flowers continue blooming until the beginning of spring, so I would be happy to show you around the gardens once we're graced with warmer weather."

"The thought of having you all to myself is so tempting that I am eager to take you up on that right this second—but I can't be too selfish now, can I?" Raul grinned at her.

"Indeed, you can't," Lestea agreed with a solemn nod. "Lady Claudia is much more delicate than you are, Raul. Show some restraint, please."

Lestea's pale skin stood in stark contrast to the earthy tones of Raul's. Both were accustomed to Bari's more temperate climate, but their looks suited the season perfectly as they stood beneath Harland's winter sky. Especially Lestea, whose alabaster skin made her look almost like a winter fairy. Granted, few would probably compare her to such when she was dressed in men's clothing like she was now.

Claudia had to crane her neck to look up at them because they were so much taller than her. "Barians aren't accustomed to the cold, are they?" she said. "It's even chillier than usual today. I have had hot drinks prepared for everyone, so please, enjoy and warm yourselves inside."

Since the capital was in the middle of Harland, the area wasn't nearly as cold

as the north. But to the people who lived south of the mountain range, like Raul and Lestea, it probably felt freezing. Snow hadn't fallen, but the temperatures were low enough that the layers of ice coating ponds and lakes wouldn't be melting anytime soon.

As soon as Claudia guided their guests into the venue, everyone rushed to offer each other their greetings. All the attendees were present, including the other bridal candidates. Claudia had already said hello to them prior to Raul and his entourage's arrival.

Once inside the venue, the guests soon realized what Claudia's intentions for the party were. It wasn't set up like the average tea party, where acquaintances could form tighter connections with one another; this party was intended to help the guests find *new* acquaintances. It was more like a standing buffet.

Native Harlanders were visibly shocked when they entered and didn't find the usual long, narrow tables. Claudia had instead provided tall standing tables. As for seating, there were armchairs, but each only fit one person. They were separated in sets of ten, arranged in a circle so those occupying them could engage in conversation with the rest.

Attendees immediately gravitated to Raul, who had settled into one of the armchairs, and began calculating how to get in close to the foreign prince. Those who could grab nearby seats would be the lucky ones, while the rest would have to eye other opportunities. But before any of them could sit, they had to line up so they could first offer their greetings to Raul.

On the other hand, the Barian nobles found themselves with nothing to do after they exchanged their greetings and instead retreated to the buffet to sample the cuisine. This wouldn't be possible at a regular tea party, where they would have to sit together at a table and wait for food to be served. They were quite delighted to find this wouldn't be such an overly formal affair. Best of all, even though this party was in the name of acquainting them with tea, Claudia had also prepared coffee for them—and deep-roasted coffee at that.

"Since it's such a rare opportunity, I thought it would be nice if we could sample coffee as well," said Claudia. She had prepared a more palatable medium roast for her fellow countrymen.

The Barian nobles were moved by her sentiments and showed no restraint partaking in both the tea and coffee. They savored the differences between them. The Harland nobility followed suit. It didn't take long at all for this drink sampling to result in friendly discussions about the merits of both.

Raul chuckled heartily. "How long has it been, I wonder, since I've attended such an enjoyable tea party?" His eyes crinkled as his smile widened. The mirth in his eyes somehow softened the bitter chocolate color into something sweeter and more delectable.

His gaze was focused on the other guests. The conversations unfolding between them were enthusiastic—if sometimes a bit too heated—but it was as if everyone in attendance had found commonality and forgotten the differences that separated them. It was of great comfort to both sides to find a shared point of interest. Each side was knowledgeable about their respective country's staple drink, and at least when the subject was beverages, there was no imbalance of experience between the sexes on the topic. Ladies and gentlemen mingled together without reservation.

"If you are pleased with the party, nothing could make me happier," Claudia said with a smile.

"I'm more than pleased. I am impressed," Raul replied. "They all willingly accompanied me here, but that doesn't mean they weren't nervous about coming to an unfamiliar land. How could I not be pleased, seeing them all smiling and grinning like a bunch of fools?"

"Yes, and you were grinning like an idiot yourself just moments ago," Lestea added matter-of-factly.

He glared at her. "That, right there. Your habit of always quibbling with people the moment you find an opening—that is what makes people avoid

you."

"Avoid me? Everyone always tells me how wonderful it is that I can speak so candidly with you, Your Highness."

"And by everyone, you mean the girls who fawn over you." Raul rolled his eyes. "There's no need for you to stay with me. Run along and have fun."

"Oh, no need to worry about that. I am having plenty of fun staying right here with Lady Claudia."

"And you think that doesn't give me cause for worry?!"

Claudia found herself occupying an armchair between them, with each leaning toward her and talking directly over her head. Their humorous banter made her giggle. It was amusing witnessing their relationship, which was markedly different from the one Sylvester and Tristan shared. Tristan always kept a respectable step behind the prince and showed him deference, while Lestea met Raul head-on as an equal.

They get along so well.

She wondered why Raul never brought up Lestea during her brothel days. From what she'd heard so far, they had been close for a long time.

"You two are very frank with one another," she observed.

"Lestea's a little *too* frank, I'd say," Raul grumbled. "I'd advise you to be careful around her, Lady Claudia. Don't let your guard down with her just because she's a woman too."

"Oh, unlike a certain someone, I am always a perfect gentleman when dealing with the ladies," Lestea shot back.

"You make it sound like I play around."

Lestea placed a hand over her chest in a theatrical manner. "I never said I was referring to you. You're the one who let the cat out of the bag, not me."

"You little...!" Raul scrunched his face and waved her off. "Look, one of the

girls over there is giving you a heated look. Hurry up and humor her."

"Thank you for being so transparent in your attempts to shoo me. As much as it pains me to take my leave, Lady Claudia, I hope you will excuse me. I would hate to disobey my master's orders." She lifted herself from her armchair, took a bow, and strode off.

Lestea's exchange with Raul might have come across as impertinent, but Claudia could tell they were close enough that Raul didn't really mind it, for all his complaints. Still, if Raul weren't so magnanimous, Lestea wouldn't be allowed to get away with such behavior.

His charisma is very different from Syl's.

Lestea had pointed out as much earlier, but Raul didn't filter his emotions like Sylvester did. He opened his mouth wide and laughed when he wanted. His show of humor was infectious. When Claudia was with Sylvester, she found herself sitting up a little straighter, but when she was Raul, it was like she could completely relax.

Although when Syl and I are alone together, I—no, it's best to not to think about it right now. She nearly recalled his smile when she gifted him the embroidered handkerchief, but she quickly shook her head to drive the image away.

Trying to refocus her thoughts, she subtly brushed her hand through her hair. Even such a subtle motion was enough to command Raul's attention—which she soon noticed when she lifted her gaze and their eyes met.

Her thoughts came to a standstill. Those eyes she always subconsciously likened to bitter chocolate had softened into something sweet.

Why?

Claudia was dumbfounded by the familiar affection he was showing her. This was only the second time they had met—in this timeline, anyway. Even in her brothel days, it had taken a while before he finally warmed up to her.

He detests girls like me, doesn't he?

She politely smiled back at him, but her mind was ajumble. Perhaps this Raul didn't have as strong of an aversion to women as the future version she knew. Or was he more skilled at pretending to be a womanizer than she realized? While she struggled to categorize him, Raul grinned blithely at her.

"I love all the sweets here at the party," he said. "Did you select them?"

"Yes. I researched what sorts would best match dark roast coffee."

Claudia purposefully avoided catering completely to his preferences, lest he suspect he had a spy in his midst. She had consulted with the café owner and kept their menu to a selection of common Barian sweets.

"They strike me as a bit too sweet to go with tea. I guess you compromised for us?"

She gave him a meaningful smile. "Even with tea, there is great variety. Trying to find a brand that would couple well with the strong sweetness of today's snacks was an enjoyable challenge."

"Hmm, interesting. I would be happy if the sweets from my homeland picked up in popularity in Harland."

It was a casual conversation about nothing too important, much like discussing the weather. And yet, she noticed Raul's gaze wandering uncomfortably away from her.

His habits haven't changed either.

In that instant, she knew he wasn't any less averse to women after all.

Although Raul had plenty of women approach him physically, he always kept an emotional distance from them. That was why he acted so embarrassed when speaking to one directly, like he was with Claudia. Composed, simple conversation like this didn't come easy for him. That was why he'd awkwardly blurted out his offer to buy her freedom out of nowhere.

"Mind if...I call you Claudia?" Raul asked haltingly. His next words came

quickly, tumbling together. "You can just call me Raul. That's what Lestea calls me, and none of the others in my retinue bother with any titles or the like! Sylvester is the same way. So there's no need to be all polite with me."

Claudia was tempted to tease him on several points, and it took everything in her to resist. Also, why are you acting all embarrassed with me?! Where had that confident, composed man to whom she'd first been introduced gone?

She forced herself to smile again, knowing that was the most innocuous reaction she could offer. Claudia was starting to understand why Sylvester always kept that same inoffensive smile on his face. No one could find fault with it.

Maybe he's feeling emboldened since he's got his own personal space, sitting in an armchair by himself.

It was for Raul's sake that she had prepared these single-seater chairs. If she had provided even a single long sofa for her guests, Raul would have felt pressured to maintain appearances and seat himself there. No lady would try to squeeze into the armchair with him—no noble lady, at least. She knew a few sex workers who wouldn't show such reservation. He probably found himself more comfortable than usual since he had proper space between himself and the other guests.

"I am deeply honored you would make such an offer. In that case, please allow me to call you Prince Raul instead of 'Your Royal Highness.'"

"You don't have to speak so politely either. You can take it down a notch with me. Neither I nor my retinue prefer all that stuffy formal speech. Besides, I'm extremely grateful to you."

At that, Claudia's face pinched. "I haven't done anything noteworthy enough to earn your gratitude."

"You created an atmosphere where my countrymen and I feel comfortable enough to start conversations with the Harland nobility. I feel much less tense already about attending the next tea party, and I am sure they do too. Everyone

has been on edge, trying to learn proper Harlander etiquette."

"They all come from respectable houses. I see no reason for you to worry about that."

In fact, she was the one tiptoeing on eggshells. All the lords and ladies who had accompanied Raul were part of the faction loyal to his claim. Even if some were on the lower rungs of the aristocratic social ladder, they still hailed from notable enough houses that she'd heard their surnames before. One of them even came from the region bordering Harland, which spoke volumes about how much ire Bari's king had invoked by sending Raul away.

"Maybe, but it's not as if we can all say 'hola' to each other and be done with it."

Claudia giggled. "No, perhaps not." Not that such manners would be acceptable in Bari either, but she found it amusing how he shrugged and joked about it.

In her periphery, the other attendees were battling with one another over who would get to occupy the seat that Lestea had vacated. No one had seized victory as of yet.

"Pardon me for interrupting your conversation," Lestea cut in. "Lady Claudia, would you mind if I took a stroll out to admire your garden?"

When Claudia glanced over her shoulder, she noticed a group of ladies she'd been close with since childhood hovering behind Lestea.

"When I told them about how beautiful it was when we entered, they expressed interest in seeing it as well," Lestea explained.

"I don't mind. Let me send someone with you to act as a guide. There may be a little sun out, but it's still chilly. Please don't stay out longer than you have to."

Moreover, these ladies were plenty familiar with her garden. They had attended one of Claudia's winter tea parties, and she'd known them since

before her debut into high society. They likely wanted an excuse to sidle up closer to Lestea.

I see she's already got a fan club.

Claudia kept her commentary to herself and told the girls to have fun after instructing a maid to accompany them. Far from chiding them, she was impressed they were so desperate to monopolize Lestea that they were willing to brave the cold. At any ordinary tea party, it would be nearly impossible for them to find private time with Lestea like this. It was yet another reminder that she had made the right choices with this party.

Sadly, it would not be one without incident.

Claudia happened to spot Charlotte having an uncomfortable run-in with a young noble lord from Bari. She paused to glance at Raul. He nodded, giving her the go-ahead, so she left her seat.

Charlotte's face was flushed deep red, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. That, plus the fact that the young lord was gripping her arm, was enough to tip Claudia off. It was entirely inappropriate, yet there was something about it—something that wasn't immediately obvious—that niggled at the back of Claudia's mind.

This is beyond different cultural etiquette and a more a breach of basic decency, she thought.

It was unheard of for a man to force himself on a lady in high society, and that rule bypassed national borders. As if the man wasn't already shaming himself with his actions, he was also staring unabashedly at Charlotte's ample bosom. From the looks of it, he was trying to drag her over to join a group of other gentlemen, with not a single lady in sight.

It would be better if she would refuse him outright, but perhaps she's too afraid to say anything.

Charlotte had been wearing a shawl all night in an attempt to conceal her

chest. The whole situation struck Claudia as odd. She didn't seem the type to wear a dress that flaunted her curves because she clearly didn't want to draw attention to them. Louise had called Charlotte calculating, but Claudia was convinced that Charlotte was bumbling—and this was proof. It reminded her of the new sex workers who were strong-armed into catering to customers' preferences even when they weren't comfortable with the idea.

Even being as experienced as she was, Claudia would still feel uncomfortable with a customer seizing her arm like that. It was scary, being overpowered by a man whose strength one couldn't hope to oppose—and there were indeed some clients who got their kicks from frightening women. Thankfully, the brothel's policies protected the girls enough that those sorts were thrown out and banned before things got too ugly.

The new and the timid couldn't voice their complaints.

Worse yet, sadistic scumbags would always go after those types, which meant it took a while before someone found out and took action.

Claudia snapped her folding fan shut, dispelling those bitter memories. She strode toward Charlotte. When she was close enough, she opened her fan with enough exaggerated flourish to draw their attention. The first thing their eyes landed on was the fan's detailed rose embroidery before shifting to the hostess of the party herself.

If the two had already met Louise, they would be aware her fan was a matching set with Claudia's. It was a gift Louise had given her, a way of thanking her for all the information she provided at the café. The embroidery itself was different; Louise's sported butterflies. But the handle design, inlaid with pearls, was the same for both. Perhaps this shared link between them was what filled her with the dauntless energy she had seen Louise display in the past.



Claudia gently fanned herself as she said, "So this is where you were, Lady Charlotte. You left your seat unoccupied for so long that I was compelled to come look for you."

She motioned toward the seat that Lestea had left unoccupied. It went without saying that she didn't mean any of it; this was an excuse to intervene.

Her gaze purposefully wandered to the man's hand, which was gripping Charlotte's arm. "Oh, goodness me, am I interrupting?"

Caught red-handed, the young lord hurriedly wrenched his hand away. "I was only trying to escort her," he said quickly.

Aha, so he's aware of how inexcusable his actions were.

Both his actions and his attempt at an excuse suggested he had a conscience beneath the impropriety. She was tempted to snap at him that he shouldn't have been such a scoundrel in the first place.

Unaware of Claudia's inner dismay, the young lord breathed a sigh and continued, "It was Lady Charlotte who solicited my attention first. I suggested introducing her to my friends, but she suddenly started throwing a tantrum."

Whatever his reasons, Claudia had decided before she walked over here that she would be on Charlotte's side, even if there was a kernel of truth to his words and some blame lay with the lady. There was a clear line between what was and what wasn't appropriate. Assault was very obviously in the latter camp.

Claudia stepped in front of Charlotte, shielding her. Helen, who had been watching from the wall, hurried over to retrieve the poor girl and usher her to a guest bedroom.

Claudia's interference had caught Raul's attention by this point, and he hovered in his chair, about to get up. She pinned him to the spot with a look. She wanted to avoid making a bigger deal out of this than necessary.

"I see," she said with a polite smile. "But you are aware, I'm sure, that she is

one of His Highness's bridal candidates. Or am I mistaken?"

Claudia and Louise weren't the only ones Sylvester introduced at the graduation party. Even assuming he had somehow neglected to introduce Charlotte to Raul and his entourage, one should at least make themselves familiar with which girls were potential brides for the crown prince. Especially if this gentleman's loyalties lay with Raul's faction and he did his due diligence as a retainer. There was so much at stake if he caused a scene in Harland.

"Of course I know," the man said. "But Lady Charlotte here is the one tempting other men." His voice was laced with disgust.

"If you believe that justifies what you have done, then you are sorely mistaken," Claudia retorted.

The way he spoke insinuated he didn't think Charlotte was appropriate as the future king's potential bride, but in so doing, he was basically saying that the royal family had made a bad judgment call by selecting her. It was impudent of him. For as insulted as she was on Sylvester and Charlotte's behalf, Claudia found it strange that he was still being polite and respectful with her.

I don't understand this.

She had thought him a miscreant for putting his hands on Charlotte, but rather than erupt at her in anger for interfering, he was being perfectly calm and rational. Not that his argument was any less problematic for it.

"Am I to understand that you object to a decision that was made by Harland's royal family?" Her fan stopped moving as she waited for his answer.

He lowered his head apologetically. "Oh, uh, I... No. I just...wanted you to know what sort of person she was. Please forgive me for my impropriety."

Claudia's brow creased. This solidifies it. I really don't understand this man.

When she gave the man a pointed glare for having laid a hand on Charlotte, he panicked and pulled away. But now he was acting perfectly composed. Most people acted at least a little awkward or ashamed when they were caught doing

something inappropriate, and they would flee the scene as quickly as they could. Despite his initial alarm, the young lord seemed completely unperturbed.

Maybe he was simply a bold degenerate. In that case, there was no use thinking about it any more than she already had. But she couldn't shake the sense that something in his attitude and actions was incongruent.

The door to the gardens flew open, yanking Claudia from her thoughts. Her eyes met Lestea's. Lestea charged straight toward her, seemingly aware of the situation.

"My humble apologies! I frequently hound the boys to be mindful of how they treat young ladies, but I am afraid my frequent reminders didn't prevent this. If you have a punishment in mind—whatever it may be—please, speak freely."

Claudia snapped her fan shut and lowered her arm. "No, it seems it was a simple misunderstanding. As long as the young man in question endeavors to be more prudent in the future, I have no issue with it."

Besides, even if they insisted he apologize, Charlotte had already left the venue. She might not want to see the man's face again.

The discussion about the gentleman's inappropriate behavior ended there, thanks to Lestea appearing and claiming all fault lay with him.

But what exactly was all that about?

Though no further trouble happened after that, it didn't stop that whole encounter from weighing ceaselessly on Claudia's mind.

"Big Sister Claudia!" Charlotte wailed.

"Yes?"

As soon as the party was over, Claudia dropped into the guest room to check on Charlotte. The lady nearly bowled her over the moment the door opened. Claudia stumbled back a few steps, but thankfully Helen was there to support her.

"I'm so...so sorry!" Charlotte wailed between sobs, sniffling. "It's all my fault... that your party—"

"It's all right. Calm down," Claudia cooed, trying to placate her.

Charlotte was so relieved to be away from the party that it was like a dam had broken inside her. Claudia motioned for the poor girl to join her on a nearby sofa. They sat side by side.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte reiterated. "I-I just... I knew I should have said something. I knew it in my head. The words just wouldn't come out."

"It's fine. That happens sometimes. Nothing came of it, so there's no need to worry." Claudia stroked the girl's back as she began prompting Charlotte for more details.

Charlotte fidgeted in her seat but slowly told the story. "I was just telling him that coffee was delicious. He grabbed my arm out of nowhere, and I was so caught off guard that I wasn't sure what to do... Perhaps I did something to offend him—something we Harlanders don't consider offensive here..."

"The only person who did anything offensive was him. You have done nothing wrong," Claudia told her firmly.

From the way she tells it, he really was just making excuses. I will nevertheless have to confirm with some witnesses that this is the full story. Claudia pictured the attendees she had seen standing nearby. The bridal candidates commanded the attention of all guests, regardless of which faction they were affiliated with. There had to be someone—or maybe even a few someones—trying to eavesdrop on their conversation, just for their own entertainment.

"You weren't with your friends?" Claudia asked.

"We were together at first, but by the time I realized it, I was all alone..." Charlotte hesitated before adding, "I didn't solicit him! But..."

"But?"

[&]quot;People often misunderstand me...because of the size of my breasts." She

hugged the shawl tighter around her, hiding her voluptuous chest. It was painfully obvious how much Charlotte struggled with her figure.

Chapter 6:

The Earl's Daughter and Her Admiration for Her Older Sister Figure

"CHARLOTTE! Why won't you listen to me? I am your mother!"

Charlotte's shoulders jumped as her mother's shrill voice cracked through the air. She had managed to fool her mother before leaving for the graduation party, but when she returned home, the cat was out of the bag. Her mother knew Charlotte had changed out of the dress she'd selected and into a boatneck design.

"H-His Highness prefers women with some modesty!" Charlotte protested. She had practiced that excuse in advance, but it did nothing to quell her mother's fury.

"How many times do I have to tell you?! Gentlemen like a woman who is modest with her *words*, but they love a woman who shows off what the Capricious God gave her!"

Unlike Charlotte, who huddled and shrank in on herself to hide her breasts, her mother stood up straight so that her own were more pronounced. Charlotte had inherited her shapeliness

from her mother, but she hadn't inherited—or ascribed to—her mother's way of thinking.

"Just look at Lady Claudia! It should be obvious to you then," her mother continued. "Her beauty and fine figure are what allow her to stand beside His Highness without any shame."

"But—"

Her mother's hands clamped down on her shoulders, effectively silencing her argument. "You are blessed, Charlotte. It may feel daunting to go head-to-head with Lady Claudia, but have some confidence in yourself. You have something

she doesn't."

Charlotte wanted to contest that, to scream at her mother that she didn't. But her guts shriveled up along with her heart and kept her from voicing her true thoughts. Her mother gently stroked her head, but it did nothing to assuage the turmoil inside. Displeasure turned to an acidic bile that roiled in the pit of her stomach.

"Those doe eyes of yours are sure to make His Highness feel protective over you. Your pastel-pink hair gives you such a colorful and unforgettable appearance, and His Highness will surely find your shorter stature adorable too. And if that wasn't enough, your chest is bigger than every other lady out there! There isn't a gentleman who wouldn't want to be with a full-breasted lady like you! This is a gift from the Capricious God!"

Her mother went on ranting, but the words went in one of Charlotte's ears and out the other. All she was concerned with was how quickly she could retreat to her room and be done with this.

"Gentleman this, gentleman that... It's all Mother ever talks about!"

Charlotte plopped herself on a couch, snatching up her favorite cushion and clutching it tightly to her chest. She knew well enough how the men ogled her, even without her mother pointing it out. It wasn't only the young lords her age who stared when she walked in a room; older gentlemen stole glances too. The ladies who noticed resented her for it. How many times had rumors circulated of her being a...well, an amorous woman, to put it delicately?

Thinking about it brought unpleasant memories racing back. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes.

"This isn't...a gift at all."

Nothing she wore ever looked right on her, thanks to her unwieldy chest, and just walking around prompted ridicule from the other girls. Charlotte had lost

count of how many times people had laughed at her at parties.

It was absurd.

Why did she have to suffer this much just because she inherited her mother's ample bosom? And if that wasn't bad enough, she hated how childlike her face was too.

"If only I could look more mature, like Big Sister Claudia."

Charlotte pulled out the portrait she kept hidden in her bookshelf. The lady depicted in it had black hair that usually fell in loose curls down her back, but here they were fluttering in the wind. She was a goddess. Charlotte had commissioned this portrait in secret. She wasn't the only one; many ladies kept pictures of people they fancied or admired. Portraits of Claudia were so highly requested that the artist Charlotte had purchased hers from was well practiced at painting her.

"That white gown she wore today was especially beautiful." Charlotte's face fell. "I hope I didn't come across too awkwardly when I said hello."

"Big Sister Claudia" was an endearing term Charlotte had come to use for Claudia in secret, but the two weren't particularly close. Charlotte had been so nervous seeing her in person at the party.

"Mother doesn't understand at all."

Charlotte wasn't daunted by Claudia. She was enraptured by her unique beauty, which she'd have described as "dignified" and "mature." From the first time they met, Charlotte couldn't get Claudia's stunning blue eyes out of her head. They were like the deep, unknown depths of the ocean, overflowing with gentle affection.

Most people reacted to Charlotte's chest when they first met her. Not Claudia. She never mentioned Charlotte's breasts at all. In fact, she kept her gaze focused on Charlotte's face, which had left Charlotte blushing. That was the first time she had ever felt like someone was looking at her as Charlotte the

individual rather than Charlotte the big-breasted noble lady.

"It's a well-known fact that she's wise beyond her years."

After all, Claudia had acted as the incoming students' representative when she first entered the academy. The school festival, which had been such a resounding success, had also been Claudia's idea.

Princess training was conducted equally between all the bridal candidates, but even Charlotte had heard comments about how much Claudia was excelling over the rest of them. The prince acknowledged her because of all her accomplishments.

Charlotte's mother only ever assessed people based on their outward appearance. That was why she didn't give Claudia the acknowledgment she deserved. No, her mother truly believed that big breasts were all it took to get Sylvester's interest. Her father, the earl Lord Roger, was of the same mind because that was the whole reason he'd married her mother, which made it impossible to reason with either of them.

Ostensibly, Sylvester had requested that his bridal candidates hold tea parties so they might entertain the visiting foreign prince—but for the girls, this was their chance to prove they deserved their positions. House Lindsay naturally drew attention when they volunteered to go first. Claudia was apparently the one who insisted on it.

By contrast, Charlotte had no confidence in catering to guests from a foreign kingdom. She was happy to go last, if she'd be so lucky.

I shouldn't be surprised Big Sister Claudia would be so bold, though. Charlotte was only more impressed with Claudia's tenacity, but her good spirits were soon dashed by her mother's scheming.

When the day of the Lindsay tea party rolled around, her mother nagged her numerous times, saying, "Do whatever you can to get Prince Raul's attention!"

During the graduation party, she'd said Prince Sylvester instead of Prince Raul, but it was the same old song and dance. Charlotte was sick of it.

Lord Roger was aligned with the aristocratic faction—an association that put them in a precarious position considering the most recent scandal. That was why Charlotte had forgiven her mother's antics before the graduation party. She thought it was all because her mother wanted her to secure their standing.

The same reasoning would not work with Raul, who was a prince of a foreign kingdom. Charlotte had no desire to marry into a foreign family. Her mother's insistence on ignoring what she wanted in favor of personal gain drained her of any desire to go—or do anything, for that matter.

"But, Mother-"

"It's better to keep as many doors open as possible when it comes to your marriage prospects, you understand. Besides, I hear Prince Raul is a huge womanizer. Show off all you've got to him! I won't allow you to swap out the gown I chose for something less flattering this time!"

Charlotte wanted to burst into tears when she saw the dress her mother had chosen for her, with its audaciously low neckline. If she wore this out in public, she could hardly complain when people whispered about her lack of chastity behind the scenes.

Just when she felt as if she were drowning, one of her maids threw her a lifeline. When she was climbing into her carriage to leave, the woman handed her a shawl.

"Hold your head up high and take this with you," the maid whispered conspiratorially. "You are a beautiful girl, Lady Charlotte, make no mistake about that!"

"Thank you." Heartened by her maid's show of encouragement, Charlotte clutched the shawl tightly.

Unfortunately, reality was a bitterer pill to swallow, and her hopes were all

too soon dashed at the party.

"Please allow me to introduce you to my friends, Lady Charlotte."

"Oh, um, please hold on."

Claudia's tea party was not a standard affair. Thanks to the standing tables, where they could come and go freely, the party was turning out to be an exciting break from tradition. Charlotte had been so impressed by her beloved idol's ingenuity that she had decided to partake in the discussions comparing tea and coffee as well. And she had quite enjoyed herself.

It should have been a relaxing time.

Charlotte blamed herself for being distracted when she heard the door to the gardens swing open and turned away. The man had used that opportunity to snatch her arm. Her face drained of color.

"Um, this is making me uncomfortable," she mumbled.

"Why? I only want to introduce you to my friends."

It was the first time she had ever experienced a man other than her father seizing her like this. His grip was so firm that she knew she couldn't simply knock him away. Fear clawed at her heart. The way he gawked at her chest made her even more uneasy. Was this considered normal behavior in Bari? Maybe it was her fault for not studying their customs better.

Would it be rude for her to refuse him? Charlotte didn't know. How could she? This man was a stranger.

Someone, please, tell me what to do.

She scanned the area, hoping her pleading look might compel someone to step in, but all she found were curious eyes staring back at her. The friends who were supposed to be with her had wandered off at some point and were busy talking to other people.

Please...someone...

Her vision darkened as despair began to swallow her up. She was about to descend into full-blown panic. Charlotte was terrified of the strange man whose fingers were digging into her skin.

Why did this have to happen to her?

It wasn't the first time she had been accosted. Once, at a garden party, a man snaked his arm around her waist and nearly dragged her off into some bushes. Charlotte was lucky that a friend had caught her just in time to put a stop to it. Sadly, her friends were too preoccupied to notice this time.

"Come, let's go," the man urged.

No! Charlotte opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Even sending desperate looks at the other party-goers hadn't convinced them to come to her rescue. *Whatdoldo, whatdoldo, whatdoldo?!*

Why did she have to be tormented because of her big breasts? *It's not like I* ever wanted them!

Her vision blurred as her tears threatened to spill. Her heart was hammering so furiously, she thought it might split right open. Its thumping drowned out all else.

Then out of nowhere, she sensed someone approaching and turned her gaze.

"So this is where you were, Lady Charlotte. You left your seat unoccupied for so long that I was compelled to come look for you."

In an instant, all the color that had drained from Charlotte's world came flooding back thanks to the radiant goddess gracefully fanning herself before her. Both she and her fan were adorned with detailed rose embroidery. The handle of the fan was inlaid with pearls that gleamed like a rainbow and made her eyes shimmer with light. For Charlotte, that was the light of hope.

Chapter 7:

The Villainess Goes Overboard

A FTER THE TEA PARTY ENDED, Claudia dropped by the guest room Charlotte was in to check on her. As they sat side by side on the couch, Charlotte gave voice to the complex she had been grappling with all this time.

Claudia kept stroking Charlotte's back. She knew from experience how healing touch could be. Surprisingly, there were many clients who sought such comfort from sex workers. All she had to do to please them was stroke their head or back. It probably went without saying, but the taller the client, the more such attention seemed to soothe them.

Charlotte has no positive experiences. All feelings and memories involving her chest were negative. It was only natural she would develop a complex. This was further complicated by the fact that catching a man's attention, as her mother promised she would, was never a pleasant time for Charlotte. Her mother should have been her number-one ally; she should have noticed how uncomfortable she was. Since she didn't, that only caused Charlotte more pain.

"Men steal lecherous looks at me because of my breasts, and women hate me for them," Charlotte went on. "There's nothing good about them."

Her shoulders slumped. She curled in on herself, trembling with anguish. All of her negative experiences had not only given her a complex, but also made her lose confidence in herself as a person.

"I can see why you feel so troubled," said Claudia.

There was no overnight solution to this issue. Charlotte hadn't done anything wrong, but if she kept on this path, she might develop a deep-seated fear of the opposite sex.

"This may not be any consolation, but I think your view of the situation is biased."

"Biased?" Charlotte echoed curiously.

"Yes. But why don't we have a cup of tea before we discuss this any further? You must be parched." Claudia motioned for Helen to pour them some more piping-hot tea, which had kept coming since Charlotte had composed herself enough to carry a calm conversation.

The invigorating scent of the tea leaves filled the air, causing both young ladies to breathe a satisfied sigh. Claudia always found Helen's tea delightful.

"First," Claudia began, "it isn't as though all men prefer a more endowed woman. I hate to be contrary to your mother, but there are men who find more appeal in the rear, or a lady's legs."

Men with no interest in breasts wouldn't actively approach Charlotte. The only ones who unabashedly went for her were, sadly, those who *did* have a love of large breasts. But that was exactly what made her think all men were perverts. With no exposure to other types of men but those who actively drooled over her, she'd developed a narrow-minded view of the opposite sex. As had her mother.

"Once you make your official debut into noble society, you will have more opportunities to meet other people. If you keep in mind what I'm telling you, you should be perfectly capable of finding men who have no interest in your chest."

If she only had a well-behaved gentleman in her family, she might have a more rounded view to begin with.

Unfortunately, from what Claudia had heard so far, all the men in Charlotte's life were more pragmatic than polite. It was little wonder why negative experiences stuck out more in her mind. That was only heightened by the human tendency to remember the bad over the good. It would take time and patience to revise Charlotte's view of the world. Still, she really needed an opportunity to change her way of thinking.

Charlotte nodded, prompting Claudia to continue. She peered into those

candy-colored irises. "Next, let's visit the issue you have with other women. It isn't that most women hate you for your breasts, Lady Charlotte. They are just envious. When you see a woman with an average bust, you envy her, don't you?"

Again, Charlotte bobbed her head. "Yes, very envious."

"Similarly, a woman with an average bust can't help but envy what you have. I also find myself wishing I had a more voluptuous figure like yours."

Charlotte's jaw dropped. "Y-you do?! Even though you're perfect?"

Claudia giggled. "There is no such thing as a perfect person. There are plenty of people who find me intimidating because the shape of my eyes makes it seem as if I'm glaring all the time." She added, "I wish I could have your large, adorable doe eyes."

"Not at all!" Charlotte insisted, shaking her head. Her entire face had gone bright red. Passion laced her voice. "People aren't intimidated by you. They're only nervous because of how radiant you are!"

Claudia caressed Charlotte's head, grateful for her kindness. If it had been Fermina, she would have had fake tears in her eyes as she proclaimed how terrified she was of Claudia. "It's sweet of you to console me," she said.

"Of course I'd console you!" Charlotte cried.

"If you feel it's such a given for you to console me, then surely you can understand my desire to comfort you is no different, can't you?"

"We feel the same ...?"

"Yes. And likewise, envy and admiration are two sides of the same coin. It's all people wishing for something they don't already have. I won't lie and tell you there aren't people out there who will find any excuse to ridicule and scorn you. While I'm sad to say they do exist, most people do not hate you. It really is just envy."

"Is it really?" Charlotte's head drooped. "But I am nowhere near as beautiful

as someone like y-"

Claudia pressed her index finger to Charlotte's lips. Drawn in by her gentle touch, Charlotte glanced up. Claudia caught her gaze, staring straight back into those big doe eyes as she said, "You *are* beautiful, Charlotte. I guarantee it."

"L-Lady Claudia, you..."

"And," Claudia added with a smile, "you're completely adorable too."

The reason she had foregone usage of a title when saying Charlotte's name was to make sure her words carved a lasting mark in Charlotte's memory. She needed Claudia's reassurance after how much confidence she had lost because of the issue involving her breasts.

Claudia curled a finger under Charlotte's chin and lifted her head. With her other hand, she reached out and tucked a lock of pastel-pink hair behind Charlotte's ear, fingers lingering sensuously. Charlotte quivered, her candy-like eyes growing moist.

"It's cute the way your soft, supple cheeks turn red as an apple when you blush," Claudia told her. "I could go on and on about all your endearing qualities, but I will refrain because we haven't much more time today. Would you mind if I invited you to come visit me again in a few days?"

"N-no...of course not..." Charlotte muttered, dazed.

"I will spend the intervening hours trying to come up with a strategy for how you can spend less time worrying about the size of your chest."

"Wha...? Um, you're actually going to help me?!"

"Why, of course I am. I would hate to see such a pretty face looking so sad again."

"R-right," Charlotte responded, her voice hitching.

Claudia gently caressed her blushing cheek, and Charlotte almost collapsed. She was unsteady on her feet as she got up and left with her maid.

"I wonder if she will be all right," Claudia said as she watched them leave.

Helen shot her a look. "You overdid it."

"Oh dear, did I?"

Subconsciously, she had slipped back into her old habits as a sex worker and been a bit too handsy with poor Charlotte. Helen had rightly pointed out that the experience was too stimulating for a girl as innocent and inexperienced as Charlotte. Claudia genuinely felt guilty about that.

That evening, Raul surprised Claudia with a visit, which had her scrambling to dress herself and apply makeup before rushing to the drawing room to greet him. Before sweeping through the doors, she charged Helen with bringing some coffee and sweets.

"I'm sorry for the wait," she said when she walked in.

"No, I'm sorry for springing this on you. I just wanted to apologize for what happened today."

As he explained it, Lestea had filled them in on the details after they left, and he couldn't bear waiting until tomorrow to address the issue with Claudia. Lestea was seated beside him on the sofa, her head similarly bowed.

"We're terribly sorry for causing such issues," Raul continued. "Especially after all the trouble you went to, accommodating and entertaining us."

"You needn't trouble yourself with the matter, Prince Raul. I wasn't the one personally affected by it," said Claudia.

He nodded plaintively. "How is Lady Charlotte doing? I was thinking of sending her a written apology first."

"I believe that would be for the best. She is still probably too terrified of the young lord who did it to face him directly."

"If there is anything I can do—anything at all—please just say the word," Raul

said with an imploring look in his eyes. "The lord in question is normally very calm and laid-back. As he tells it, Lady Charlotte was so mesmerizing that he came on a little too strong with her. Not that it excuses his behavior. It should go without saying that scaring a lady is inexcusable." His face contorted, nose wrinkling. For as difficult as he found women to deal with, he still couldn't condone what one of his own had done to poor Charlotte.

Claudia offered him a reassuring smile. "With how caring and considerate you're being about this, I have no doubt Lady Charlotte's worries will ease sooner rather than later."

"I can only hope you're right." He sighed. "I can't believe this."

"Well, there is nothing more we can do about it now. I have had my maid prepare coffee for you, so please, drink up."

Helen had already set down piping-hot cups of coffee and sugary sweets to go with them. They were cookie sandwiches, with a thick layer of cream inside—Raul's favorite.

The prince chuckled heartily. "Oh, Claudia, you seem to know exactly what I like."

"I find myself with a hankering for sweets too when I am feeling anxious and overwhelmed."

"Interesting. So we have something in common, then. You wouldn't happen to find men difficult to deal with, would you?"

"No?" Claudia blinked slowly. She never dreamed he would get that idea.

Realizing he wasn't even close to hitting the mark, Raul smiled bitterly. "Well, I'm uncomfortable with women."

That came out of nowhere, though it was just like Raul to blurt things out.

I never dreamed he would confide in me so quickly.

She couldn't tell him the truth—that she knew all that already.

"You are only the second person I have ever told," Raul went on. "The first was Lestea, but you don't have to follow her lead and start cross-dressing."

At that, Lestea interjected, "I think you would look dashing in a suit, for what it's worth."

Raul glowered at her. "Enough. Don't try to encourage more people to take up your hobby."

More likely than not, Lestea had cut in hoping to ease some of the tension in the air.

Claudia knew this was no easy thing to confess. Raul had established an image for himself as a womanizer, so it was deeply significant for him to tell anyone the truth.

He must be really opening his heart to me. Part of her found that heartwarming, but another part of her found it alarming that their relationship was progressing so quickly.

With his soft, dark-brown hair and alluring bedroom eyes, Raul was a lady magnet. His dark, earthy skin only enhanced the hard lines of his toned body. His friendly smile was so well practiced, none of the women at court would ever guess the depth of his discomfort around them. Belying the rest of his sensuous appearance was that unwavering spark of intelligence in the depths of his eyes. It was why Claudia always likened those beautiful brown irises to bitter chocolate. And yet, as his gaze fixed on her, they seemed far too sweet for such a comparison to hold water.

"For some reason, I feel fine around you. It's probably because you don't view me sexually." With a strangled laugh, he confessed, "Honestly, as a man, it makes me worry that I don't have any appeal."

"You are incredibly appealing, I promise."

"I will take you at your word for now."

Claudia exaggeratedly pressed a hand over her chest. "Goodness, I meant

every word! But while we're on the topic, might I inquire as to why you decided to confide in me?"

"Good question." Raul took a quick sip of his coffee, as if he needed the break to put his thoughts in order. "I'm confident that you won't go around spilling the beans to everyone, for one—but more than that, I just didn't want to hide the truth from you."

"You didn't?"

"I guess it'd be more accurate to say I wanted you to know. That's all."

From beside him, Lestea muttered, "Why can't you simply tell her the truth? You don't want her to misunderstand if she catches you acting intimate with another lady."

"Just can't keep your nose out of this, can you?" Raul snapped, his cheeks flushing.

Lestea poked her tongue out at him. "My bad. Didn't realize you weren't conscious of your feelings yet."

"Don't you go spouting such careless things!" Incensed, he huffed. "Ugh, Claudia!"

"Yes?!" Her voice came out a little more high-pitched than she intended, shoulders jerking in surprise.

Raul raked his fingers through his hair as he stared down at the carpet. His gaze wandered next to the wall, then to the cup of coffee in front of him. "Anyway, now you know!"

"Yes, I guess so...?" Although confused, Claudia thought better of pressing the matter and just nodded.

She already knew Raul's personality well enough that she wouldn't misunderstand even if she found him in a compromising position with another lady. For him to go out of his way and spell it out could only mean one thing. Should I assume this means he likes me?

It was so sudden that her mind couldn't digest it.

Claudia hadn't asked him for an explanation with any real purpose in mind. She was simply curious. *And regardless, I can't yet tell if the feelings he has are more than platonic.* Inwardly, she admonished herself for being so eager to jump to conclusions. Raul already knew she was one of Sylvester's bridal candidates, after all.

Despite all logical reasoning, her heart drummed in her ears.

Raul was acting more awkward with her now than he had been before, but she hoped that was only her imagination.

As Claudia was seeing them out the door, a thought suddenly occurred to her.

"Lestea," she said, bringing the other lady to a halt. "I realize it is improper for me to ask this of you, and I feel terrible about that, but..."

It would be reassuring to have Lestea's help resolving Charlotte's issue. She gave Lestea a condensed rundown of the situation.

Lestea soon nodded her assent. She reached toward Claudia, took her hand, and planted a chaste kiss on the back. "Nothing would please me more than to be of service to you, my lady."

Her lips peeled back in a dazzling smile that would have made any other lady swoon. Claudia had more resistance to such overtures; it was more like a way of greeting for her. She returned the gesture with a smile of her own.

I guess I am immune so long as it's not Sylvester doing it. Her body was putty only with the man who'd captured her heart. Lestea was a charming lady, to be sure, but Claudia felt nothing more for her than that.

Raul smacked his friend in the back of the head for her antics. "You don't need me?" he asked Claudia.

"No, just Lady Lestea," she said.

Dejected, he hung his head. "Oh. All right..."

Now that he'd confessed his secret to Claudia, he was being completely open and honest with her. The ease with which he expressed emotions took her aback. She had half a mind to reach for him and pull his head flush to her chest, as she once had at the brothel. Oh, she could still remember how angry he had gotten at her for it.

"Thank you for having me today, Lady Claudia," Charlotte said with all the eagerness of a maid who'd been newly appointed to their house.

"Oh no, the pleasure is all mine."

Once Charlotte lifted out of her curtsy and her candy-colored eyes met Claudia's, Claudia quickly mentioned how adorable she was. Charlotte's whole face heated to the point Claudia could almost see steam coming out of her ears.

"Yeargh!" Charlotte blurted through nervously clenched teeth, which nearly made her words incomprehensible. "Yer beashiful too, Lady Clauzia."

Oh dear. It looks like Helen was right on the money. I really did overdo it with her, Claudia reflected, feeling a pang of remorse.

She guided Charlotte in through the entrance to the drawing room. She could have invited Charlotte directly to her room if she had wanted, but she decided to keep their meeting in the drawing room since she was anticipating other guests today.

"I invited Lady Lestea to join us. I hope that won't be too much for you, will it?"

When Claudia explained the situation to Lestea, she had left out Charlotte's identity. It wouldn't be right of her to share someone else's vulnerabilities without their permission. Even without the full details, Lestea had readily agreed to lend her assistance. She was waiting elsewhere, to be summoned only upon Charlotte's approval.

As for the young lord who had accosted Charlotte, he had already apologized

directly to Charlotte, but it was entirely possible that Charlotte had reservations about the rest of his countrymen after his unscrupulous behavior.

After Claudia voiced such concerns, Charlotte said, "It was a very courteous apology, and he seemed to genuinely regret his actions. Lord Lestea accompanied him when they came to see me and told me a bit about him. I could see he wasn't a bad person. Besides..." A huge grin spread across her face. "It's thanks to that whole incident that you have agreed to help me with my problem."

She planted herself on one of the sofas sandwiching a coffee table. Claudia took her seat on the one across from Charlotte. It gave her a better view of the younger girl's face as she peered up abashedly with those adorable doe eyes.

"I have always admired you," Charlotte went on. "It filled my heart with such joy when you helped me out at the tea party, I thought it might burst. Really, thank you so much for stepping in back then! I should have expressed my gratitude to you right away, but I was so preoccupied with myself and my problems. It made me realize that what I need to focus on improving first is myself."

"You have done nothing wrong. I'm glad if my intervention gave you a reason to reevaluate things, but all I did was listen."

Charlotte shook her head. "No, you did more than that. You even went out of your way to make time today for *me*, of all people."

It was a relief to see her state of mind already making a change for the better, but that didn't appear to extend to her self-confidence.

"Please don't say that," Claudia urged, leaning forward in her seat. "I made time today precisely because I want to be there for you, Lady Charlotte."

"Thank you so much!" Charlotte hesitated. "Um...if you wouldn't mind, could you just call me by my name?"

"Certainly."

Charlotte shot up straight in her seat. "You mean it?!"

"Y-yes, I do," Claudia said with a rigid nod, surprised by how excited the other girl was. She must have really liked it when Claudia called her name absent of a title last time.

"Oh, um, actually, could I ask one more favor?"

Claudia tilted her head. "What would that be?"

"Could...could I call you Big Sister?"

Come to think of it, Charlotte had already slipped and called her that before on the day of the tea party in the guest room. It made sense now. In her confusion, maybe she'd blurted out what she was already calling Claudia in her head.

"Sure, why not?"

"Th-th-thank you! This gives me a reason to keep living!"

Claudia's brow wrinkled. "You jest."

Being called "Big Sister" made her mind wander to her half-sister. If Charlotte would be calling her that from now on, then perhaps that would overwrite her memories of hearing Fermina call out to her so "endearingly."

If Claudia was the beautiful, more mature type of woman, then Charlotte was the cuter, more girlish type. That was something Charlotte had in common with Fermina. Thankfully, however, her feelings toward Claudia were the exact opposite of Fermina's.

"Lady Claudia, your guest has arrived," Helen announced at the door.

Claudia motioned for her maid to guide Lestea in. It was fortuitous timing, since she could wipe her memory of Fermina and refocus on the situation at hand.

"Now then, why don't we get this strategy meeting started?" Claudia said, clapping her hands together.

Chapter 8:

The King's Younger Brother Worries

LESTEA, WHAT IS the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of what?"

As soon as the two of them returned to Raul's personal quarters, he rounded on his friend and confronted her with that question. It grated on him that she played stupid when he was sure she knew perfectly well what he meant. Worse, her lips spread into a grin, light-blue eyes crinkling.

"Are you trying to get me in trouble? Claudia is one of Sylvester's bridal candidates!" Raul reminded her.

"Ah yes, how naive and innocent first love is."

"Hey!"

Raul had to admit, he didn't think Claudia was unattractive. Even though she was the type of woman with whom he felt the least comfortable, she didn't speak to him in the same ingratiating tones similar women did. That alone was enough to score her some points with him. At the same time, the arm's length at which she kept him was aggravating. Disappointing.

But it wasn't love.

At least, Raul didn't think it was.

"I have only met her a couple of times," he reasoned, perhaps more so with himself than Lestea. "Your words must've come as a real shock to her."

"Fair point. I am shocked that you are already on a first-name basis and with no mention of 'my lady' or 'Your Royal Highness' either," said Lestea, giving him a meaningful look.

Raul shook his head. "I was only trying to repay her for all the effort she put

into entertaining us."

Claudia had gone out of her way to visit a café that specialized in coffee before holding her tea party. In fact, Raul heard from the owner himself about how she had sampled one of his brews and asked him all about Barian preferences. Other girls would have left such detailed preparations to their parents, preoccupied only with what style of dress they would wear for the occasion. The difference between them and Claudia was night and day.

"Lady Claudia is an amazing woman, Raul. You have made an excellent choice," said Lestea.

He put his hands on his hips. "I have not 'chosen' her."

Lestea pressed her hand over her mouth in an exaggerated gasp. "Goodness, you mean you just fell head over heels?"

"How about I grab some needle and thread and sew your mouth shut right this second?"

"Yes, yes, I know how skilled you are with a needle and thread. Come to think of it, Lady Claudia also seems to be talented at embroidery."

Embroidery was typically a skill for noble ladies, but Raul had picked it up for reasons of his own. He had never displayed his skills publicly, but those close to him were well aware of his talents.

"Not like that's rare," Raul muttered. "Most noble ladies are."

"Yes," Lestea said with a nod, "but it's not lip service with Lady Claudia. She is the genuine article. Duke Lindsay has even bragged about her, and Prince Sylvester likewise adores her handiwork."

"What, so he's already set on Claudia?"

Lestea shrugged. "Nothing is certain, but that does seem to be the way things are trending."

Bearing in mind Claudia's reputation and familial status, the odds of the crown prince choosing one of the other candidates was slim. Raul had no way of

knowing what Sylvester thought of Claudia, but that was nothing new; Sylvester had always been impossible to read. It was an exercise in futility to try to guess what was going through his head.

"Please don't be discouraged. Nothing is set in stone. You still have a chance of winning her heart."

Raul waved a dismissive hand at her. "Enough of that. Marrying me wouldn't be advantageous for the Lindsays in any way, shape, or form."

It would have been a different story before Bari's crown prince was born, but now Raul was nothing more than an obstacle to his older brother. It didn't matter that he was a royal. Anyone could tell he wasn't the type of husband a duke would want for his daughter.

"There are plenty of advantages," Lestea insisted, wagging her finger. "The Lindsays own vast farmland, but their region is inland. Nowhere close to the sea. You could provide them with maritime support and connections—something they would love to have, I'm sure."

"If that's what they want, all the more reason for them to push ahead with a marriage to Sylvester."

There was a short pause before Lestea asked, "So you're going to give up?"

"You are putting the cart before the horse. Are you really that desperate for Claudia to throw herself into the fire with me and endanger her own well-being?"

Realization dawned on her face. "You want to protect her."

"This conversation is over. I don't mind if you lend Claudia your assistance, but don't start something."

"Lady Claudia is a clever woman. I can't tease her the way I do with you."

"Hey!" Raul clenched his fists, brow furrowing. "Someone bring me a needle and thread!"

Lestea didn't know when to keep her mouth shut.

A servant scurried over, providing Raul with his requested items. By the time he was threading his needle, Lestea had already made a tactical retreat. In her absence, he took a piece of cloth and started on some embroidery.

Head over heels, huh?

No matter how much Lestea badgered him about it, he couldn't give a firm answer either way. All he knew was that, for some strange reason, Claudia's azure eyes gave him a sense of tranquility he never thought possible. Being around her was comfortable.

He remembered the tea party and its seating arrangements, with circles of armchairs instead of full-length sofas. Raul had never enjoyed a tea party as much as he enjoyed hers. Part of him wondered if she'd already figured out how uncomfortable he was with women.

But she was shocked when I told her. Perhaps she sensed it without being entirely aware.

Most people were shockingly oblivious, more so than they realized. Lestea had complimented Claudia for being perceptive. She was sensitive to subtle details, to the way people looked at her and each other. Maybe that was because, unlike most, she became aware of what her subconscious picked up on. Put more simply, she had a keen eye for reading people.

She's a talented woman, to be sure.

Not only was she beautiful, but high society considered her to be the model image of everything a young lady should be. Hypothetically, even if what he felt for her was not friendship but romantic interest, he couldn't act on it.

I can't drag her into my mess.

No matter how much he tried to deny it, there were still those pushing for him to be next in line for the throne of Bari. Those voices had enough power that the crown prince's followers were actively plotting against him. Raul was doing what he could to keep the peace and settle the situation amicably, but if things went sour, blood would be spilled.

At the very least, I should be grateful for the opportunity to meet her, he told himself.

Being sent away to Harland at least gave him the knowledge that there were women as incredible as Claudia out there. He might have a chance in the future for love. Regardless, he also had to remind himself not to forget how uncertain his future was right now.

"If only," he whispered under his breath. "If only we had met sooner."

Perhaps then he could put a name to the emotions stirring in his heart. Perhaps then he could hold some hope of their relationship developing.

This was the first time in Raul's life he found himself cursing his royal lineage.

Chapter 9:

The Villainess Revolutionizes a Young Lady's Frame of Mind

As CLAUDIA ROSE from her seat to welcome Lestea into the drawing room, the latter gave a courteous bow. "I humbly extend my gratitude for your gracious invitation here today."

"The honor is all mine," Claudia assured her. "I cannot thank you enough for your willingness to assist me."

Without wasting any more time on idle pleasantries, the group got straight down to business. The topic at hand was Charlotte's complex over her breasts.

Peering up nervously at Lestea, Charlotte muttered, "Lord Lestea, I, um... You are not interested in a lady's chest, are you?"

"Not particularly, no. A woman's value is not determined by the size of her bosom."

Charlotte perked up. A smile split across her face. "As I thought! Big Sis was right when she said that there are gentlemen out there with no interest in breasts!"

From the way Charlotte acted, Claudia sensed there was still a misunderstanding at play here. Not that she could really blame Charlotte for it, but since she had asked for Lestea's assistance in such a sensitive matter, she felt it pertinent to clear the air.

"Charlotte, would I be right in assuming you aren't aware that Lady Lestea is actually a handsome woman in men's clothing?"

"Huh?"

Charlotte wasn't there the moment Claudia saw through Lestea's disguise. The rumor mill was going strong, but perhaps some of the ladies had decided against spreading word, content to keep the dream alive.

"A handsome woman in men's clothing?" Charlotte repeated, her face scrunching as she processed this new revelation. Her doe eyes looked like they were about to pop out of her head. "So...Lord—erm, Lady?—Lestea isn't a man? I-I guess I just thought I misheard you when you said 'Lady' before."

Lestea smiled innocently at her.

"But...but your chest is totally flat!"

Claudia nodded. "Haven't you ever seen a play before with a woman in a man's role?"

She stiffly shook her head. "N-no, never."

Then her shock made sense. Of course she couldn't fathom it if there was no precedent in her mind.

"In such cases, the performer will use a sheet of cloth to bind and flatten their breasts. Lady Lestea will be teaching us how she accomplishes this," said Claudia.

Claudia could have used her connections to reach out to a troupe and summon a performer for this occasion, but those actresses only performed as males on stage. Lestea could provide a more practical approach, as someone who donned men's clothing daily.

"Wait, does that mean you can completely flatten my chest?!" Charlotte asked excitedly.

"Unfortunately," Claudia said gently, "I don't think it would be possible to completely flatten yours. For the moment, why don't we go somewhere more appropriate for this?"

As their group left the drawing room, Claudia felt guilty for getting Charlotte's hopes up, but she couldn't lie to the girl. Given the size of her chest, the odds of being able to flatten her breasts completely were next to zero.

The group arrived at the Lindsays' dance hall. It was an enormous room, which sadly meant it was more difficult to heat. The winter chill nipped at their

feet. On the plus side, the dance hall was equipped with an enormous mirror.

Lestea gasped. "This is incredible! I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to find something like this at the Lindsay estate, but it's amazing you were able to obtain a mirror of this size."

"Wow!" Charlotte squeaked in delight. She hopped up and down, unable to control her elation. "We can see all our reflections in this, can't we? This is like a dream!"

Claudia couldn't blame her. She didn't learn the true value of a mirror until she landed in the brothel, and hearing the price had sent her jaw to the floor.

Producing a mirror was a time-consuming task. The larger its size, the more difficult it was to maintain a clean reflection. The more daunting issue was how to transport it, though. Mirrors shattered all too easily. Horse-drawn carriage wasn't a viable option, what with all the bumps and divots in the roads. It was a symbol of power to possess an enormous mirror like this one.

"Lady Claudia, do you happen to know how your family managed to transport this to the capital?" Lestea asked.

"As I am told, they hired laborers to carry it. There was also an armed escort with them. A bit of an extraordinary tale, if you ask me."

It was a tale that took place long, long before Claudia was born. When a princess from the Harland royal family married into the duke's household, the reigning head had prepared the mirror for her as a gift. Due to the time required to deliver it on foot, it didn't make it quite in time for the wedding, but when the duke's new bride finally laid her eyes on it, it was said she erupted in tears of joy.

"It's extremely old, but still perfectly usable." Claudia spun around to face Charlotte. "Now then, Charlotte, will you come over here?"

"Yes!"

Claudia positioned the younger girl directly in front of the mirror, her hands

gently cupping Charlotte's shoulders. "I am sure it is probably born of your desire to hide your chest, but you make yourself look chubby by slouching, which has the complete opposite effect." As she spoke, she pulled Charlotte's shoulders back, fixing her posture.

"But, Big Sis, don't you think this only emphasizes my breasts more?"

"It may feel that way, yes, but take a look at your reflection." Claudia quickly added, "Not just your breasts, but your entire body."

"My entire body, you say..."

"The whole reason I brought you here is so that you can get a better look at the whole picture. Believe me when I tell you that there are very few people out there who will judge you on your chest alone."

That was true for people who loved big breasts and those who would scorn her for them—but the way she carried herself affected everyone else's impression of her.

"That said," Claudia continued, "your breasts will be the first thing that draws people's attention. When people criticize someone, they always go after whatever stands out most in the target's appearance. But consider what we discussed before. You don't think I'm intimidating just because the shape of my eyes makes it look like I'm always glaring, right?"

"Absolutely not! You are beautiful and intelligent—and you have a perfect figure. I admire everything about you!"

Claudia giggled. "Well, thank you. The point is, one's flaws are only a fraction of the whole. That's why you need to look at your reflection and carve this image of your whole body, not just your chest, into your mind. And keep in mind what I am about to tell you. Just as I must deal with the shape of my eyes for the rest of my life, you will have to do the same with your chest. These methods to help you combat your complex—which we are about to test—are ultimately just ways of making you live more comfortably in the body that you have."

After all, there was no way for Charlotte to get rid of her breasts. It was more constructive to pour her effort into learning to love what she had rather than spend her life hating it.

"Today will be your first step in learning to acknowledge your breasts so that you can develop self-confidence," Claudia concluded.

"All right!"

"I like that response. Now then, why don't we begin by practicing chest binding?"

"Allow me to show you how I bind mine," Lestea said, stepping forward. She had already shrugged off her overcoat, and her fingers were moving to her buttons. She was only on the first one when Charlotte let out a squeak.

"Lady Lestea is a woman," Claudia reminded her.

Charlotte blushed furiously. "Y-yes, I know, but...I've never watched someone else undress before."

This revelation was a bolt from the blue for Claudia. It never even occurred to her that someone might find it embarrassing to watch a member of the same gender strip. Her days at the brothel had completely desensitized her to such things.

Charlotte's reaction is completely normal, though, isn't it? It seems so obvious now that I think about it. Claudia hadn't seen another person naked since awakening as her younger self in this timeline.

Lestea hadn't hesitated to shed her clothes, which was why it wasn't immediately apparent to Claudia how embarrassing this was supposed to be. Still, it would look unnatural if she pretended to hem and haw about it now.

Best just to insist there is nothing wrong with it since we're all women here!

Besides, for all Claudia's panicking over suggesting something very unbecoming of a young lady, Charlotte was too preoccupied with Lestea to really care about Claudia's reaction. Claudia was lucky Sylvester wasn't here to

clock her.

Perhaps I should invite Helen to bathe with me. That way, I have a viable excuse for why I'm so accustomed to seeing other women naked.

While Claudia was entertaining such thoughts, Lestea unfastened her final button and peeled her tunic back. Most of her skin was covered up by a thick layer of wrapped cloth, which made it impossible to see anything. No wonder Lestea hadn't felt embarrassed at all.

Goodness, look at those abdominal muscles.

Lestea trained enough to give herself a well-defined abdomen, leaving no room for any fat on her stomach. Claudia had seen many a naked woman in her time, but it was rare to find one who was all hard lines and sinew like Lestea.

"I wrap my chest like this. I have much smaller breasts, so it's easy to compress them," Lestea explained. "I imagine it would be much harder for ladies as endowed as you two."

Given Charlotte's earlier embarrassment, Claudia couldn't possibly ask her to strip and try binding that way, so they did it over her dress instead. She even summoned Helen over to help her try it too.

"This really does create some pressure against your chest," Claudia observed.

"You are essentially putting a corset over your chest to flatten them, so yes," Lestea said. "I tested all sorts of methods before arriving at this one. I needed a way to bind my chest painlessly for long hours."

Charlotte was pleased at how well this method obscured her cleavage. "It's still uncomfortable, but they don't look as big this way."

Claudia knit her brows, studying the mirror. "It's not flattering," she declared.

On that, Lestea seemed to agree. She smiled stiffly, offering, "At that thickness, your chest is about the same as Raul's."

It might be one thing if they were dressing in the more relaxed fit of a man's tunic, but it would be impossible to chest bind and wear a dress. Especially

since the larger one's breasts, the more one had to obscure the line of their body to flatten it. The sight of it reminded Claudia of how awkward Charlotte had looked in that boatneck dress at the graduation party.

"So...it won't work?" Charlotte choked out, dismayed.

"I won't say it's out of the question, but perhaps you should draw conclusions only after examining your body in the mirror. Make sure to turn from side to side so you get a better picture of what you look like," Claudia said, motioning to Charlotte's reflection.

Charlotte had only seen herself straight on at that point. As she spun to the side, she groaned, reluctantly admitting, "Ugh, you're right. It's not flattering at all."

"I'm sure it would depend on what you wore, but for a gown at least, this won't work." Still, Claudia could think of some potential uses for this method in the future. She made a mental note in her mind not to forget the technique Lestea taught them.

The girls unwrapped themselves, and once they felt a little less winded from the constraints around their chests, Claudia moved on to the next method on her list. Lestea's services were no longer required by this point, but she appeared interested enough that Claudia invited her to stay.

"Has the designer arrived?" she asked one of her maids.

"I shall summon her."

While they waited, Claudia explained, "I couldn't think of any other way to physically compress the size of your breasts besides binding. The next possibility requires the assistance of a designer. The aim is to create the optical illusion of a smaller chest."

"Oh, that sounds interesting," Lestea said with an appreciative nod.

Beside her, Charlotte timidly lifted her hand. "Um, Big Sis? What is an 'optical illusion'?"

"A way to deceive the eye, to make something appear different than it really is. I want to investigate the possibility of working an optical illusion into your dress to make your breasts less prominent."

The designer suddenly appeared in the doorway, so Claudia paused to introduce her as the person she regularly used for her own gowns. She also demonstrated what she meant by "optical illusion" for everyone's benefit. She drew two horizontal lines that were the exact same length. For one, she added arrowheads pointing inward, and for the other, arrowheads pointing outward. Despite being the same length, this little detail completely changed how people interpreted the lengths of each line.

"See?" Claudia said. "They are the exact same, but the one pointing outward looks longer, doesn't it?"

"Whoa, you're right!" Charlotte said with a gasp. "That's uncanny!"

"When it comes to clothing, horizontal lines make your body look wider while vertical ones make you look slimmer."

It wasn't only the pattern of clothing that had an effect but the color too. White created more emphasis while black minimized. Whenever Claudia wore lighter colors, she always made a point of wearing her hair down. The contrast of white against her raven-black hair gave her the illusion of more height and emphasized the flattering outline of her body.

"I assume that at home, your mother is probably the one ordering designs that emphasize your breasts. But why don't we come up with designs that do the opposite?" Claudia suggested.

The designer found this challenge inspiring and was eager to give it a shot. There were many noble ladies eager to make their breasts appear larger, but there apparently weren't many who sought to downplay them.

Incidentally, back in Claudia's brothel days, black was all the rage for giving the illusion that a woman's body was much less curvaceous. Therefore, it was surprising and stimulating for her client when she undressed and her breasts

had much more volume to them than expected.

Claudia had already instructed her designer to bring along fabrics so they could put something simple together right here that might work for Charlotte.

"This is amazing! I can't begin to describe how much this means to me. I never knew that colors and patterns and the like could influence a person's perception so much," Charlotte said. It had never occurred to her to try a different gown design, since she had spent her whole life with her mother making those decisions for her.

Charlotte and the designer worked in tandem, testing different ideas to see what worked and what didn't. Charlotte's eyes sparkled with newfound hope. She was no longer slouching as well.

With nothing else to do, Lestea leaned in and whispered into Claudia's ear, "I envy Lady Charlotte." Seeing all the weight that had lifted from Charlotte's shoulders had made her jealous—an emotion Claudia never expected her to express. "You knew the right answer all along. Why did you bother asking for my help?"

"Because Charlotte is the one who must decide what the right answer is. With that in mind, I wanted to offer her as many options as possible."

There wasn't necessarily a right answer, but Charlotte couldn't even see one because she had such a narrow view. Claudia had wanted to broaden her horizons. To that end, Lestea had been of great help in sharing a different perspective from the norm.

"Don't you think you handed her the answer on a silver platter without letting her think for herself?" Lestea challenged.

Claudia shook her head. "How can you expect someone to come up with an answer when they don't even know what the question is?"

It wasn't that she thought Charlotte was unintelligent. She had potential, or else she wouldn't have been chosen as one of Sylvester's bridal candidates.

One's ability to study didn't translate into an ability to come up with new and novel ideas, however. Especially when someone had a complex like Charlotte's; her negative experiences had closed her mind off to new possibilities. Charlotte first had to learn that it was possible to overwrite someone's perception of her based on what she wore and how it made her appear.

"See? She's thinking for herself now," Claudia said, motioning to Charlotte. She would pause occasionally to request Claudia's input, but for the most part, she was studying her reflection in the mirror, conferring with the designer, and making her own judgments. As Claudia advised, she would twirl to check every angle of her figure, and she looked adorable as she did so. "Anyway, today is only a single step forward for her."

Even if Charlotte managed to find a design she liked, her mother wouldn't be quick to accept it. Charlotte would have to decide how she was going to face her own inner turmoil as well as her family. Her battle was just beginning.

"Only she can resolve her own deep-seated issues. Still, having exposure to a variety of different perspectives will widen her own viewpoint so she can have an easier time coming to terms with her problems. All I have done is show her the way. It's up to her to take it from there," Claudia said.

"I see now. I think I understand where you're coming from." Lestea paused, then said, "Actually, there is something I would like to consult you about. Would you be able to make time for me after this?"

"Certainly. I have nothing else planned."

"Thank you. It has to do with Raul."

At the mention of his name, Claudia's head jerked up. Their gazes met, and Lestea's light-blue eyes were filled with conviction.

Meanwhile, Charlotte and the designer had really hit it off. They agreed to collaborate on her dress designs from now on. Charlotte would have to gradually persuade her mother to agree to it.

"Charlotte," Claudia said, "I know this may not be agreeable for you, but I do have some advice."

Altering a design to make her chest appear smaller wouldn't actually shrink her breasts. If a tall gentleman approached and glanced down, it would shatter the optical illusion completely.

"You could tell your mother that such a dress design is meant to be a surprising reveal. With this, you can avoid feeling embarrassed in public but also secretly highlight the size of your breasts at the same time."

That was a trick of Claudia's during her brothel days. From afar, her figure would look much more modest—but up close, the client would marvel at how curvaceous she really was. She had seen the effectiveness firsthand. If Charlotte wore such a dress to a party, more men in high society would find themselves experiencing the same thing. Although, given Charlotte's complex about her breasts, perhaps she wouldn't be too pleased.

"Actually, the designer and I were both racking our brains about how to keep the illusion from breaking when a gentleman looks down at me. I mean, I am short. But hearing your input, I realize that maybe there's no need to keep up the illusion forever!"

Claudia's eyes flew wide open. "And you would really be all right with that?" Even though she had given the advice, she hadn't expected Charlotte to be so receptive.

Charlotte beamed. "Yes! I don't expect to be able to solve all my issues instantly. I plan to think long and hard about how to accept and live with my chest the way it is. I want to test all the tools you have given me in the process!"

Claudia was relieved, both to see Charlotte so happy and to hear that she had gotten something out of all this. "I will support you however you go about it," she said.

"Having your support is the most heartening thing of all, Big Sis!"

With Lestea accompanying her, Claudia saw Charlotte off at the front door, praying she would be able to overcome her complex as soon as possible. The two then started toward the drawing room rather than retiring to Claudia's personal quarters.

"Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to speak with me," said Lestea as they walked together.

"Not at all. When it comes to Prince Raul, I'm happy to help in any way I can."

"I apologize for my behavior last time, teasing you two like that."

Claudia shook her head. "It didn't bother me at all. I suspect you had your own reasons for doing it."

The tension left Lestea's shoulders. "It's a relief that you are so understanding about it, my lady."

As they arrived back at the drawing room, a maid quickly brought each of them a piping-hot cup of coffee. Claudia enjoyed it, but she preferred hers with an ample helping of milk—however rare it was in Harland. Lestea kept hers black with only sugar to soften the bitter flavor.

She sat on the opposite sofa with her legs spread wide, her back hunched forward, and her elbows perched on her legs. Even to Claudia, she looked like a man. She said, "In truth, it's less that I want to consult you about something and more that I want to request a favor."

"And what favor would that be?"

"Lady Claudia, could I ask you to provide Raul comfort?"

Claudia studied Lestea for a moment. "Comfort him, you say?"

It was no easy feat to comfort a man; this wasn't a brothel.

"I hope it goes without saying that I wouldn't ask you to forsake your own comfort to do me this favor. I realize you are the strongest among Prince Sylvester's bridal candidates. But with that in mind, I still must ask this of you."

"What, precisely, do you mean when you say 'comfort'?"

Lestea steepled her fingers. "All you need to do is talk to him and drink coffee with him just like this. That is what he needs the most right now."

Claudia's eyes widened. Was Raul really in such a precarious state? She hadn't gathered as much during the tea party or even afterward when they spoke privately.

Lestea's smile turned hard, solemn. "He's always so quick to put himself last. The other lords and ladies aren't the only ones feeling anxious coming to a foreign land. That same unease extends to Raul."

"Of course. You're right."

Claudia was shocked she hadn't realized it before Lestea pointed out the obvious. Raul struck her as someone who was accustomed to diplomacy, having visited foreign nations before—but this time was different. He had been driven out of his country. It stood to reason he would be distressed.

I wonder why I thought he would be just fine.

"It's no surprise that you didn't notice," Lestea said, as if reading her mind.

"He isn't even aware of it himself. See, Raul has a habit of ignoring his negative emotions, including whatever worries or anxieties he has."

That makes sense. It also explained why he made such a point of hiding his discomfort with women. That was nothing to be embarrassed about, yet he went out of his way to regularly visit a brothel just to keep up the womanizer facade. All because—as Lestea had rightly indicated—he had a habit of hiding his negative emotions. Raul probably thought it would be inappropriate for a man of his status to openly acknowledge his distaste for women.

Sylvester and Raul had something in common after all: both princes hid what they were feeling. In Raul's case, he didn't even acknowledge such emotions existed, no matter how much they affected him.

"That must create an immense strain on him," Claudia said, and Lestea

sighed.

"It's become the norm for Raul. I'm worried the dam holding all this in will eventually break."

"That's why you are asking me to comfort him?"

Lestea nodded. A smile spread across her face, making her eyes crinkle. She kept her gaze glued to Claudia. "You are incredible. You know exactly how much distance to keep between you to put him at ease. When I learned he feels uncomfortable with women, the only idea I came up with was to change my appearance.

"Granted, part of the reason I dress in men's clothing is because I enjoy it—but I hate the prejudices people have about women. I dislike being beholden to people's ideas of what men or women should be. And to be clear, I am not saying all this just to make excuses for being bad at embroidery." She winked.

Claudia burst into a fit of giggles. Lestea was skilled at lightening the mood to keep things from getting too somber.

"Yes," Claudia said. "I think Charlotte would agree about disliking such prejudices."

"You mean the stereotype people have about all men loving women with big busts? Absolutely ridiculous, honestly. But I digress. Now you know why I dress the way I do. I want to support Raul as a man, not a woman."

Lestea was part of Raul's inner circle, the woman closest to him. It would be strange if engagement talks hadn't entered the picture at all. Yet, as Lestea had indicated, she wanted to work beside Raul, not support him by building a family.

"Although," Lestea went on, "at present, no ladies can marry Raul."

"What do you mean?" Claudia asked.

"His Royal Majesty won't allow it. Much like Prince Sylvester, Raul once had several bridal candidates in the past, but the moment the crown prince was

born, their candidacies were annulled."

That was an extreme call for a king to make. It was dizzying to think about; Claudia found herself clutching her head. "You mean to say that His Royal Majesty won't acknowledge any engagement at all? With *anyone*?"

Lestea had essentially said that already, but Claudia couldn't help wanting to clarify. It was hard to wrap her mind around.

Harland had a similar system to Bari in that all noble engagements and marriages required the king's consent. For marriages in the lower rungs of the aristocracy, this only required signing and handing in formal documents—but it was a different story entirely for the highest echelons of society, such as Claudia's family.

"He hasn't said as much publicly, but yes. That's exactly what I am saying.

Once Raul steps down from the line of inheritance, he may be permitted to take a wife who would be no threat or help—no, perhaps the only woman the king might approve of is one who would impede any aspirations of gaining power."

Claudia recalled her brothel days. It was as if the final piece of the puzzle had fallen into place, and everything made sense. She could see why Raul had offered to buy her freedom by marrying her. A former duke's daughter turned sex worker would do nothing but impede Raul politically. No wonder his homeland would have accepted it.

"Will he be forced to remain single for the rest of his life, then?" she wondered aloud.

"That might be doable for Raul, given how uncomfortable he is with women," Lestea quipped with a shrug and a dismissive wave. While it effectively dispersed the tension that had settled in the air, that was one joke Claudia couldn't laugh at.

Soon enough, she found Lestea eyeing her with envy. A sensual passion burned inside those blue eyes, and considering Raul's preferences, that wasn't necessarily a good thing. Claudia shifted uneasily in her seat.

"But you, Lady Claudia... You are different," Lestea said. "You are the one woman who *could* comfort him. Oh, but please, don't misinterpret what I am saying."

"Of course not. Though I must ask, how would I misinterpret this?"

Lestea smirked knowingly. "Don't be coy. You're more mature and experienced than the innocent Lady Charlotte. I can tell."

Claudia deflected with a smile of her own. "I only know a couple of tricks to draw a man's attention. That's all."

"A couple?" Lestea shook with laughter, throwing her head back. Claudia didn't bother to respond. After all, Lestea had overheard the advice she offered Charlotte. "Ah, but maybe it would be fun to have you use all that knowledge to play with Raul. That would make for some good entertainment."

"I am afraid I must decline your request in its entirety." Claudia wouldn't even be able to meet Sylvester's gaze anymore if he heard she was doing such a thing. Besides, she had already promised him that she wouldn't affiliate herself with other men any more than was absolutely necessary.

"Must you? Well, in that case, how about joining me for some tea at least? If we have it in the girls' dormitory, surely you will feel more comfortable."

"Girls' dormitory?" Claudia asked, confused.

"We can't continue staying in the royal palace forever, so we've rented a boys' and girls' dormitory close to our embassy. For security reasons, Raul will be the only one staying at the embassy."

There weren't *that* many lords and ladies accompanying Raul to study abroad in Harland, but they had brought along a whole host of servants to look after them. As Lestea rightly said, they couldn't continue living at the palace for the entirety of their stay.

The tea party Lestea planned on holding was the exact opposite of Claudia's, in that the only people attending would be the ladies from Bari, Raul, and

Claudia.

"If we were to hold it at the embassy instead, the affair would need to be opulent enough to demonstrate the extent of Bari's power and affluence. Raul would have to host it and invite all sorts of people. As long as I am the host and we do it at the girls' dormitory, it can remain a private event." Lestea then added, "I'd prefer to keep it on the small side, and for Raul's own peace of mind, I want to limit whom I invite."

When Claudia didn't immediately respond, she went on, "And to be clear, though it would be private, it wouldn't be a secret or anything. All the Barian ladies will attend. I am sure it would cause hard feelings if you were the only Harlander I invited, so I will hold a separate party for each bridal candidate to attend."

If Lestea sent all the invitations at the same time, then at least everyone would know about the parties even if the dates were different. The first would be like a trial run for Lestea. She obviously wanted some pretext to give Raul and Claudia the opportunity to talk.

"As long as you aren't the only one I invite and I frame it as our way of conveying gratitude for the tea parties you hosted for us, it won't stir any unseemly rumors. If it's clear from the outset that Raul will be attending as well, Harland will pass it off as a diplomatic affair, and that will be that."

Raul was widely known as a womanizer, thanks to the image he worked to uphold. Nevertheless, it was all too easy to predict how poorly things would go if he caused a scandal now. The palace and the rest of Harland's administration understood he was an upstanding, respectable man.

"In addition, His Royal Majesty has us under surveillance," Lestea informed her. "So you know we can't do anything inappropriate."

"Yes, I've heard of the precarious position Prince Raul is in."

Lestea nodded. "I am sure my meeting with you today will be written in a report and sent off to His Royal Majesty. Goes to show how anxious he is for us

to step out of line."

In Bari, the people's animosity toward their king was mounting. The king needed some excuse to justify his decision if he hoped to quiet them.

"Fortunately, the people are on Raul's side. Since there is no concrete evidence to prove he's conspiring against the king, His Royal Majesty has no grounds for punishing him. 'Precarious' is an understatement. We can't even afford for those around us to grow suspicious. Raul wouldn't approve of us showing favoritism to any house here either."

That explained why Lestea planned on holding successive parties to invite the other candidates. No matter how soon she planned to hold hers, it couldn't happen until all of Sylvester's bridal candidates had held their tea parties. Lestea also shared that she would have small tables prepared so only a couple of guests could sit together at a time and chat, which would alleviate some pressure for Raul.

"Won't it be a bigger burden on Prince Raul to have to attend so many tea parties?" Claudia reasoned.

"The ladies attending are familiar with his disposition, and he with them. I won't say it will be a breeze for him, but increasing his opportunities to see you will make him happy, I'm sure."

Claudia leaned back in her seat, considering Lestea's words. "In that case, wouldn't it have been better to invite me normally, rather than go to the trouble to say all this?"

She wouldn't be able to simply ignore an official invitation to a high society function. Her house would most likely have to accept.

"I wanted to make sure you understood you are more special than the rest. Plus, I want you to speak with Raul and really listen to him." Lestea paused for a moment. Her eyes lit up, as if an idea had suddenly occurred to her. "Oh, I know! Your maid—Helen, was it? I shall send her an invitation too. I imagine you would feel uneasy having no one from your homeland there with you."

"I appreciate your consideration."

The reason Lestea had suggested for Helen to accompany Claudia was because they would have any bodyguards wait in a separate room. That wasn't out of the ordinary; the Lindsays had kept the Barian bodyguards in a separate room during their tea party. Of course, as Lestea had pointed out, Claudia would be uncomfortable attending by herself. She was grateful to be allowed Helen's company.

Besides, by the time all our tea parties are over, Syl should be back in the capital.

As worried as she was about Raul's well-being, she thought it would be ill-advised to take Lestea at her word and make any decisions without Syl's involvement. There were delicate political issues at play here, ones she would have to be conscious of if she attended this party Lestea was hosting.

Harland had no intention of ignoring Raul and his plight. If they did, they wouldn't have bothered charging Claudia and the other bridal candidates with entertaining him. Still, Claudia wanted to touch base with Sylvester before she made any decisions.

Chapter 10:

The Crown Prince's Inspection

As MUCH AS SYLVESTER assured Claudia there was nothing to worry about, there was one thing he had kept secret from her: the provocateur who had attempted to incite an insurrection had yet to be apprehended. He hadn't lied to her about his safety being guaranteed, though.

His carriage trundled along with Tristan sitting beside him, the region's administrative official across from him, and vigilant guards on horseback outside the carriage as escorts.

"That handkerchief you're always staring at," Tristan remarked out of the blue. "Did Lady Claudia embroider it?"

"She did. She gave it to me before I left." Sylvester glanced at his friend. "Did you not get anything from Lady Louise?"

Tristan sputtered. "Wha—?! Huh?!"

Sylvester sneered at him. Surely Tristan didn't think the obviously intimate air around him and Louise had gone unnoticed.

Tristan's ears turned the same shade of fiery red as his hair.

"Dia's realized it too," Sylvester told him.

"No, um, I mean...Lady Louise and I aren't like that." Tristan hastily added, "Yet."

"Lady Louise must already know how Dia and I feel about each other. Why aren't you making a move?"

Tristan fidgeted in his seat, gaze darting back and forth. "It's not like I'm not making a move, so much as, um..."

"If you keep beating around the bush, some other man will come and sweep

her off her feet," Sylvester warned him with a pointed look. "She may be one of my bridal candidates, but I have no claim to her emotions. She is free to fall in love with whomever she chooses."

"Urgh." Tristan groaned in defeat, unable to argue.

If he expected that no other man would try something with her while she was a bridal candidate, he was sorely mistaken.

The worst part of it—for both of us, really—is that he may have more than men to worry about. Sylvester's mind lingered over how affectionate his fiancée and Louise had looked together. He was regretting more and more that he hadn't made Claudia promise to stay away from other women too.

Sylvester glanced down at the handkerchief she embroidered for him, at the design of a black pansy and blue bird, and found that it helped soothe him. She said she made this while thinking of me. Never realized she had such an adorable side to her.

When he closed his eyes, he could vividly picture the soft waves of her ravenblack hair and those piercing blue eyes. Their tapered shape gave her a perpetual glare that he found alluring, but his favorite part was how they looked when they softened. Those inviting looks she mischievously sent his way made his chest heat up. His mind was just about to wander to her graceful frame and the alabaster color of her skin, but he shook his head to disperse the image.

There were more pressing matters at hand.

Sylvester's eyes landed on the man across from him. Daniel Eaton was a tall man with an oval face and, most noticeably, dark circles under his eyes. His skin was past the point of being called pale; it was ashen—Sylvester would've called it "waxlike." He was so lanky and thin that his skin stretched tight over his bones, prompting comparisons to a walking skeleton. Despite appearances, Sylvester knew him to be in perfectly good health, and he also knew Daniel was capable and perfectly competent at his job. The only reason the insurrection

ended before it had even begun was, in large part, thanks to Daniel.

"Have we still not located the secret operative behind all of this?" Sylvester asked him.

"My deepest apologies," Daniel said quickly, hanging his head. "We have been following up on any leads about newcomers to the region. We've commenced door-to-door searches hoping to locate our culprit, but our efforts haven't yielded any concrete results yet."

"They found the perfect vulnerability to exploit."

What they had uncovered thus far was that their assumed culprit had infiltrated the area by posing as an old couple's grandson returning to the port city after living in the capital for a while. The area was under strict control due to Raul's stay, but the elderly pair had nonetheless assumed he was family and welcomed the man into their house. After all, their son had moved to the capital and had been living there with his wife and children. The operative had enough of a resemblance to him that the elderly couple didn't suspect a thing. It wasn't until the authorities conducted an inquiry in the capital that they realized the couple's grandson was still there and had never left.

"As long as you have some business acumen, you can make a living for yourself in Port Brenach, but for the sons and daughters of generations of fishermen and any others from less fortunate backgrounds, the capital holds more promise," said Daniel.

Port Brenach acted as a trade hub between Harland and its various neighbors. It wasn't a poor city at all; just the opposite. The frequent comings and goings of merchants meant that propitious rumors from the capital flooded in constantly. It was only natural that the port's young residents would find the capital more appealing than their rural hometown, saturated as it was with the salty smell of the sea breeze.

Most of the young people who moved to the capital soon found their dreams shattered and were forced to return. For those who stubbornly stuck around,

daily life was harsh enough that they couldn't find the time or money to return home. It was exactly this sort of family that the secret operative chose to use for his cover.

"I suppose there's no way for us to prevent something like this," Sylvester muttered to himself, stroking his chin.

"What about offering enough money to such families living in the capital to usher them back home?" Tristan suggested. "If the real family members came back, our culprit would lose his cover."

Sylvester reached over and smacked his friend in the head. "Most of the citizens residing in the capital are originally from rural regions. If you are going to propose such an expensive scheme, then can I also assume you have thought up some way to drum up enough finances to support it? Let's not forget children don't stay children forever. Having people return home wouldn't be a one-time deal, it would have to be periodic to prevent this from happening again."

"Oh, uh...sorry. I wasn't thinking," Tristan said sheepishly. He averted his gaze.

"Your perspective isn't all bad. It simply isn't realistic given the costs. The problem remains: how can we prevent people whose families are living far away from falling prey to such scams? It's a matter that will require further consideration." Sylvester wanted to leave as little leeway as possible for an operative to infiltrate the local population again, but that wasn't the only issue they faced. "Have we still not discovered how they entered Brenach in the first place?"

Daniel shook his head in defeat. "During His Royal Highness's brief stay, passage through all land and sea checkpoints was strictly scrutinized. The officials in this region take pride in the fact that this land belongs directly to the crown. Bribery wouldn't work on them. The merchants have also been even more vigilant than usual. How this operative infiltrated the city is the biggest mystery of all."

It wasn't unusual for foreign operatives to disguise themselves as merchants, stow away with the goods on a ship, and make it to land, but the merchants were being even more careful than the local officials to avoid suspicion. They knew the impact it could have on their sales if they were found to be involved in any capacity.

"You'd think he would have fled already if he had such an easy time sneaking in," Sylvester mused.

"And if he had fair skin, you would think we'd have caught him already," Tristan muttered glumly.

One of the cleverer elements of the operative's plan was his pale skin tone. Most of those in the port city had sun-kissed skin, bronzed from days spent outdoors. Lack of a noticeable tan would immediately suggest the person was from the capital. He would stick out like a sore thumb. But none of the citizens would think much of it if he spent his time mingling among the regular populace. Still, if the authorities were specifically looking for such an individual, it should have been easier to locate him.

"Maybe he doesn't have light skin anymore," Sylvester suggested.

He could use any manner of tools to obfuscate his appearance, including regular paint. All he had to do was cover all visible body parts and no one would be the wiser.

"Our door-to-door search is focused primarily on newcomers to the city—people the residents aren't familiar with," Daniel clarified. "We are keeping a wide net, not narrowing it down to skin color."

Satisfied, Sylvester nodded in approval. "Good. Though there is still a piece of this puzzle that doesn't make sense to me. Why send in a secret operative now, at a time like this?" He couldn't fathom what the mastermind's aim was.

Daniel answered, "It's not all that strange. In fact, what better time than now to make sure their message has an impact? It would've, had it been successful."

It would have been an unsurpassed scandal if an insurrection had taken place while a member of foreign royalty stayed in Brenach and the whole area was on lockdown. If their enemy was looking to damage the royal family's influence, Daniel was right. There would've been no better opportunity.

"I'll grant you it was a foolish gamble, since they failed," Daniel added.

The lockdown had, fortunately, paid off in that respect. If their enemy had only been better prepared, the situation might have gone down a very different path.

"The conventional approach is to have such operatives in place for at least several years, though, isn't it?" said Sylvester.

That way, the operative could blend in and cultivate the people's trust. No doubt foreign spies were playing that exact game in the capital to weasel out what information they could. Their culprit had managed a successful cover story, but he hadn't escaped all suspicion from the other residents. That was why Daniel managed to get so much information on him and stop the insurrection before it happened.

Tristan pressed a hand to his chin and tilted his head, puzzling over the issue. "Having Prince Raul study in Harland was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Maybe the operative didn't have time to integrate beforehand."

"The study abroad itself may have been sudden, but his visit was planned well in advance. The topic of his exchange was floated around before too. If they didn't have enough time to successfully pull off their plan, they should have waited for another opportunity," Sylvester argued.

Despite the deck being stacked against them, the mastermind had moved ahead with the plan. Why? Sylvester thought. Was there some other purpose for carrying out the plan that didn't hinge on its success? Did they assume they would fail from the start?

That would make sense if their culprit had a viable escape plan.

Port Brenach and its surrounding region were directly under the royal family's control. Anything that happened there would be reported straight to them. Perhaps all the mastermind wanted was to cause trouble for Sylvester and his parents. Whatever their aim, he wasn't about to let their actions go unpunished.

They have sorely underestimated us. Even assuming their intention was to fail, the fact remained that they thought they could get away with whatever they wanted in Harland—in his family's territory. Sylvester could feel a crease forming in his brow and forced his face to relax, lest his dismay show openly.

He glanced out the window. Thankfully, they had reached their destination: Glacester, an inland section of Port Brenach. It was here that the Kingdom of Harland began and Sylvester and Raul first met. Glacester was far enough removed from the sea that there was no salty breeze or crashing of waves to be heard.

The area was practically ancient, rich with a proud history dating back to the founding of Harland. From its cobblestone streets to the colossal clock tower, there were aging structures as far as the eye could see. Harland's royalty began making a name for themselves here, and only with the nation's development did they eventually move to what was presently known as the royal capital. Glacester's location and historic landmarks made it the perfect place for hosting meetings with Bari and Harland's other eastern neighbors.

When Sylvester first made Raul's acquaintance, it was because his father had dragged him along, citing that it would be a good experience for the crown prince. Raul's attendance, likewise, had been at the behest of his older brother.

Sylvester and the others switched to a less conspicuous carriage while they began preparations for his official inspection. They didn't want the people noticing the crown prince was among them. To that end, Sylvester had reduced his security detail to the bare minimum to avoid suspicion. The local patrol would instead keep a sharp eye out around the market where he was headed.

"You will be performing your inspection entirely from the safety of the carriage. Disembark only once we arrive at the plaza," Tristan reminded him.

After performing his plaza inspection, Sylvester planned to give a speech. An unannounced one at that. He wanted to observe the people's day-to-day lives without disruption. Admittedly, with preparations well underway in anticipation of his speech, the townspeople were probably already aware that some sort of event was taking place.

Once they were all safely seated in the new carriage, it lurched into motion, trundling along toward the markets. It was still light out, as the sun had yet to sink over the horizon. The main hustle and bustle of the markets had calmed by this point, but there were still lines and crowds everywhere.

Daniel explained, "We stopped the insurrection at such an early stage that, aside from the operative involved, the townspeople themselves weren't even aware of what happened."

The city looked peaceful enough through the carriage window. There were smiles on people's faces as they fussed about, kicking up a cloud of dust that permeated the air. But underneath this veneer of normalcy was enough discontentment to fuel an uprising. The operative had needed but to light a match and toss it in.

"I can hardly believe you visited the local town hall to pay your respects wearing clothes hand-tailored for you at the capital," Sylvester remarked with a pointed look at Daniel.

"It never occurred to me that I would earn their distrust that way. I'm terribly sorry." His already gray pallor turned even more ghastly. His lack of color was the most telling indication that he'd already reflected on his actions and regretted them.

Sylvester understood where Daniel was coming from. In Daniel's eyes, he'd dressed in his best clothes to uphold proper decorum. How could he have possibly imagined someone would misconstrue his spending money on his

wardrobe as intolerably tone-deaf—enough to fan the flames of an attempted rebellion?

The people's issues with the government ran deeper than that, of course, but Daniel's clothes had been the instigating factor. It started a tidal wave of vitriolic gossip: all the newly appointed official cared about was the capital. He'd only come here to score himself some points with the administration there. He didn't actually care about the city or its people. Their culprit had made good use of that backlash.

"Wearing your best is the correct choice when dealing with nobility or rich merchants," Sylvester acknowledged.

But it wasn't the right move for the town hall, where all the employees were locals. They were paid better than most, yes, but not enough to be able to afford hand-tailored garments from the capital. It didn't help that Daniel's appearance was off-putting, with his gaunt face and the dark circles under his eyes. He certainly didn't look like a *good* person. It took no time at all for the people to label him a corrupt official.

"People judge one's character on their appearance," said Sylvester. "That is especially true when meeting someone for the first time. They have no other way by which to judge you, after all. You have a high enough rank that you need to learn how to control the people's image of you."

Rejecting stereotypes wouldn't fundamentally change people's minds. No, better to turn the tables and manipulate them, using their prejudices to your advantage.

Daniel was currently wearing a simple linen shirt, the same sort many of the locals had on. The rest of his outfit could likewise be purchased from the area. That alone would give people the impression he was working hard to familiarize himself with the city.

Incidentally, Sylvester was dressed in his usual princely attire. The people had different expectations of him than they had of Daniel; a royal was supposed to

look the part wherever they went. Keeping up appearances was an important duty for the crown prince.

"Even if you can't stomach alcohol, go to a local pub and find some excuse to treat everyone to a round of drinks," Sylvester said. "All you can do is slowly bridge the gap between you."

If Daniel bought them booze for no reason, it would make him look arrogant. But as long as he had a proper excuse, people would think he was generous instead. This was the same sort of strategy employed by the army's high-ranking officials.

A close friend should've been the one offering this advice, not the crown prince. Unfortunately, for as capable as he was with his administrative duties, Daniel wasn't much of a people person.

"I will take your words to heart, I swear," Daniel assured him. "I realize I am probably only asking this because I still have much to learn, but if you might indulge me: what benefit is there in spurring rumors that I'm an evil tyrant?"

"If you want me to give a concise answer, then I would say to manipulate people's impressions."

As soon as Sylvester laid plans to perform his inspection, he employed people to spread rumors in Brenach: the new regional lord was a despot set on squeezing every bit of tax money he could from the people, he decorated himself in gaudy jewels bigger than a man's thumb, his body was so swollen and bulging that he looked like a pig ready for the slaughter, and so on. The rumors painted a disturbing image of a villain who looked the exact opposite of Daniel.

"This will have no immediately visible effect," said Sylvester.

It was only a handful of rumors among many. Most wouldn't connect the image in the rumors to Daniel at all. He resembled them so little that people would never dream he was the official they'd heard so much about.

"On their own, they're just idle gossip. But that's what makes them key."

Daniel nodded thoughtfully at Sylvester's words. "You mean they only have an effect once the people realize who the rumors are about."

"Exactly. But we won't be the ones putting together those puzzle pieces."

It was hard to anticipate what the result of propagating such rumors would be when it was up to the public to make their own judgments. All Sylvester could do was indirectly influence them. That was where his speech came into play.

Daniel dipped his head dutifully in response. When he peered out the window, the booming toll of a bell filled the air. Outside their carriage, a young man—who had likely ventured out to the market to do some shopping—also paused at the noise and looked up at the clock tower. Sylvester and Tristan gazed out of the carriage, eyes following the source of the sound.

The clock tower was the tallest building in Glacester. Its bell resounded all throughout Brenach.

"This bell has been here since the country's founding, hasn't it?" said Sylvester.

"Indeed," Daniel replied. "The bell is now used to announce the evening hour and acts as a signal for the children playing outside to return home to their families."

A glimpse out the window revealed children scurrying down the streets, presumably headed to their respective houses, as Daniel had suggested. The adults who had been hard at work all day began wrapping things up; it was time for them to return home and begin dinner preparations. The bell had long been an integral part of the people's lives. For Sylvester, the sound signified it was time for them to make their way to the plaza for his speech.

"Our culprit—this operative—you said he is new to the area, yes?" Sylvester glanced at Daniel.

Daniel tilted his head, unsure of the significance. "Yes, that's correct."

Tristan glanced outside, watching the people bustle about. "Syl, why're you

asking that?"

"Take a good look at all the people," Sylvester said, motioning to the window. "Aside from us, no one else bothered to look up at the tower."

After all, the bell tolled each day at the same exact time. The people based their schedule around the sound, but they didn't regard the tower with blatant wonder. They didn't need to, since it had been a part of their lives for as long as they could remember.

"It barely registers in their mind. They recognize that it rang but don't bother to look up," Sylvester continued.

"Oh, I get it!" As realization dawned on Tristan, he bobbed his head. "And the reason we all looked up at the tower is because we're not used to it."

In the capital, there were no bells this loud announcing the time. The people of Brenach had no reason to stop what they were doing and look for the source since they were used to it. It went in one ear and out the other. But the young man they spotted outside their window *did* look up. There were plenty of possible explanations. It was really only a coincidence that he happened to be passing by and caught Sylvester's attention. Still, Sylvester sensed something amiss about him and could quite confidently say this was who they were looking for. The rest he would leave in Daniel's capable hands.

"I suppose he wasn't able to sneak away after all," Sylvester muttered to himself.

He had honestly thought the culprit's reckless moves were a result of a guaranteed escape plan, but obviously that wasn't the case. Considering the man had managed to stay this long without drawing attention, however, he likely had accomplices. Or maybe Daniel's door-to-door searches hadn't yet made it to their culprit's doorstep.

By the time the last echoes of the bell had faded, their carriage was heading toward the plaza.

Chapter 11:

The Administrative Official Reverently Regards the Light

SYLVESTER'S EYES WENT ROUND, drinking in the sight of the plaza as it came into view. Daniel couldn't help staring at him. It wasn't often the crown prince showed such emotion.

Glacester remained the same over the years, proud of its long history. The buildings and roads were maintained, but in the interest of maintaining its appearance at the country's founding, there were no dramatic alterations.

This was Sylvester's second time coming here.

As I heard it, he was only ten when he last visited, Daniel thought.

There were no fancy decorations or embellishments on the stone stage or rostrum, nor on the rest of the cobblestone plaza. Nothing memorable at all. Perhaps the reason Daniel found the area so poignant was because he knew its background.

Harland's first monarch held a festival in that very plaza, celebrating the founding of the kingdom. In all the years since, nothing had changed—as if time were frozen in the moment that everything began.

Six years ago, the previous crown prince—Sylvester's father and the current reigning king—had stood in that very spot. It was Sylvester's turn now.

Given his status, it wouldn't be surprising for him to have a special attachment to this place.

To Daniel's eyes, Sylvester was like a masterpiece a skilled sculptor had dedicated a life's worth of passion and experience to create—a fact that made him seem all the less human to the people who served him.

But I guess even he is human like the rest of us.

That was a given, but Sylvester was so intimidating that one still forgot the

obvious.

The tight security surrounding the plaza had drawn the people's attention. *It's about time, then.* The time when the plaza would have the most profound effect on its audience.

Daniel disembarked first, leading Sylvester toward the stage. The moment he stepped out in his formal white uniform, people began shouting to each other about his arrival. By the time Daniel and the prince ascended the stage, a whole crowd had gathered in the plaza. The mounting clamor produced such a feverish energy, it billowed out toward Daniel where he stood on one wing of the stage. As the crowd focused on Sylvester, a hush settled over them.

Bards often sang a song called "The Glacester Dream," and right now, the citizens were experiencing that dream come to life. All the light in the plaza gathered on the back of the rostrum. The rays of the sun hit Sylvester's back and dispersed through the air, twinkling around him. His silver hair was caught in a halo of light.

The blinding spectacle prompted the crowd to squint and shield their eyes. It was too bright for them to perceive any color from their crown prince. All they knew was that he looked divine. It was the light and nothing else that seared itself in their memories.

Silence hung over the plaza as the moment seemed to stretch on for an eternity. Sylvester knew how short it was, as did Daniel.

"This place brings back such memories," the prince said to the crowd. His voice reverberated through the air, soft but assertive.

This was the place where Harland began. To outsiders, this area of the city might look dated—but to natives, it represented their illustrious history. Sylvester appealed to their pride as he made his speech.

"Looking at the city, I strangely feel as though I've come home to the place where I belong."

Sylvester was born in the capital, but as he told it, his blood remembered this place. His cheeks turned pink, perhaps a side effect of the heat of the sun gathered on his back. He cast his gaze across the crowd, smiling at everyone. Those who met his eyes swallowed hard. Even Daniel's thoughts went blank as he stared at the handsome prince's side profile.

"I will never forget this place," Sylvester continued. "I cannot forget, for it is embedded in the blood of the Harland royal family. I, Sylvester Harland, can confidently call Glacester my home."

Glacester remained the same over the years, from its cobblestone roads to the clamor in the markets, and that was precisely what made it so beautiful.

"Likewise, I hope none of you will forget that Glacester is the true home of the Harland royal family and that it has a special place in our hearts." Sylvester went on to emphasize how much the royal family valued this city and that they would never forsake it.

With each word the crown prince spoke, the people's cheeks flushed with jubilation. His speech had reinforced the idea that Glacester was the most special of all Harland's vast territories—because it had the deepest connection to the royal family. The fact that the crown prince himself was here, speaking so intimately with them, was proof. This was the same man whom even the upper echelons of society could scarcely find an opportunity to speak with directly. Yet they, common-born folk with no power or influence, were seeing him in the flesh, with his raw voice filling their ears.

This would be unthinkable in any other city. They knew that. They kept their mouths firmly shut and their gazes focused on Sylvester.

"I ask that you forgive me for the abruptness of my visit. I wanted to forget all the complexities of the capital and return here to bask in this city's long history."

The people knew nothing about the secret operative hiding among them. Those authorities who had failed to prevent his infiltration were entirely at

fault, and thus the truth had been swept under the rug.

"While I was here, I overheard something I simply could not abide: that the royal family has turned its back on Glacester."

By royal decree, Daniel had come here to serve as an official in place of the royal family. The people needed to be reminded that rejecting him was equivalent to spurning the word of their king. Daniel knew the people probably had no intention of criticizing the royal family, but the circulation of such toxic rumors meant that the people's bond with the royal family had weakened. Sylvester had to stress that their bond was as strong as it had ever been to remove the vulnerability their culprit had exploited.

"This is categorically false! Glacester is in our blood. This is our home. How could we ever forget it? We would only ever send someone capable to administer policies here in our place, never a tyrant!"

The crowds' shoulders jumped in surprise at the fury that now laced Sylvester's voice as he bellowed at them. Who was he blaming, exactly? Before the people could arrive at an answer, his anger abated, replaced by his usual composure. Everyone was relieved. At least until he continued speaking, his brow furrowed.

"Still, it seems there was a misunderstanding. I asked the new official we appointed for answers—why was this happening?"

If Claudia were there, she might have realized that the emotion Sylvester poured into his performance was a technique to keep the people hanging on to every word, to prevent it from seeming monotone. Knowing her, she would also realize this rhetorical question was carefully framed to instill a sense of guilt in the audience without antagonizing them.

Sylvester had communicated his plans ahead of time, so Daniel was already aware of what the prince was doing. Even so, he was impressed by how perfectly Sylvester's intonation shifted to convey his emotions. *He's in complete control of the crowd.*

From the moment Sylvester stepped out of the carriage, the stage was his. As soon as they saw his silver head of hair, the crowd became his captives. He was more enchanting than any natural phenomenon in the world with that halo of light adorning him. Daniel could only imagine what emotions the audience was experiencing, seeing such a beautiful person shift from indignation to lamentation.

"Unfortunately, even that official had no answers for me," Sylvester continued. "So why?"

The answer was obvious. It was a shallow reason—they simply didn't like how Daniel looked—but none of them would admit it. Hence why Sylvester let the question hang unanswered. He let them stew in their guilt while he moved on.

"I have no earthly idea where this misunderstanding came from. What I can assure you is that he is very capable. If he weren't, the royal family would never have entrusted somewhere as important as Glacester to his care."

Sylvester turned his gaze to the wing where Daniel was standing, clad in his linen shirt, looking almost sickly in his gauntness.

"The royal family has personally acknowledged Daniel Eaton for his competency. Admittedly, to my eyes, Daniel looks like he lacks all confidence in himself—but does Daniel look like a bad man to the rest of you?"

Sylvester was purposefully repeating his name to drive the previous negative image from the people's minds and make them focus on Daniel as an individual, not as the man who would be ruling over them. The closer the people felt to Daniel, the more empathy they would have for him. People had a much easier time relating to someone when hearing an anecdote about them rather than being read off a list of their accomplishments. What Daniel needed most right now was to be humanized—the exact opposite of what they wanted from Sylvester.

"I want you to look around. You must be acquainted with all the people you see, I'm sure."

Glacester was only a tiny inland sliver of Port Brenach. Everybody knew one another.

Daniel had to catch himself before he pulled a face. The provocateur who infiltrated this city has commendable skill, but that only makes him more infuriating.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crowd was doing as the Prince had asked and surveying the people around them. Small smiles slipped onto their faces.

"Next," Sylvester continued, "I want you to picture someone you don't see here. Someone who's a bit of a loner, who shrinks invitations to go out for drinks or parties or gatherings. I am sure you know at least one person like that, don't you?"

Those sorts were everywhere. There were also many people who simply struggled with communication.

After a short pause, waiting for people to conjure up a name or face in their mind, Sylvester thrust his finger toward Daniel. "Now, look at Daniel! Does he not resemble the same person you have in your head? He is competent and in a position of considerable influence, but he's terrible with people. He had so little confidence in his wardrobe that he initially picked the most expensive thing he owned. That's how awkward he is. Perhaps this is where the misunderstanding arose."

Daniel wasn't a person of prominence. He was just an average man, the kind of awkward gentleman in everyone's friend circle. With his bland linen shirt, no one would even recognize him if he was out walking in the streets. The people could see how unhealthy he looked. He had no gravitas. Standing near Sylvester, that became even more apparent.

Whatever instinctive animosity the people had toward him melted away, replaced by a sense of familiarity instead. Anyone could identify with being nervous over what to wear when going somewhere special.

"Having said all that, there is something I hope none of you will

misunderstand: Daniel is a part of Port Brenach—of Glacester. As one of its citizens, and as a representative, he will do his utmost to ensure that no one living here struggles to find clothes, food, or housing!" Sylvester gripped Daniel by his hunched-in shoulders and pushed him toward the crowd. "I want you to know that, even though this city is still unfamiliar with this man—for as much as he struggles to communicate with people, as unseemly as he may look—he is fighting fiercely on your behalf!"

Sylvester's acknowledgment of Daniel's appearance, with the dark circles under his eyes and his sickly, skinny body, flipped everyone's impression of him for the better.

The way they look at me has changed completely.

There were no more daggers in their eyes. They regarded the awkward, insecure Daniel with compassion.

"Hey," said someone in the crowd. "Did you hear the rumors? About the new regional lord being a despot?"

"I did, yeah! They said he was burgeoning like a pig ready for slaughter, right? Covered from head to toe in gaudy jewels!"

Murmurs rippled through the audience as the people eyed Daniel, the new official who obviously struggled with insomnia and didn't eat enough. The only time they had seen him dressed in anything opulent was when he had dropped by the town hall to pay his respects. But even that, as Sylvester had explained, was a result of his anxious inability to pick something appropriate.

Daniel almost felt like he could hear the negative image of him crumbling.

"Compared to the rumors, our official seems like he's putting his nose to the grindstone a little too much, huh?"

As their biased notions of him washed away, all that remained was the image of a man running himself ragged to familiarize himself with the city and work for its people.

"Yeah, I mean, he's obviously not getting enough sleep, judging by those circles under his eyes."

"Maybe he's having a hard time adjusting after having lived in the capital for so long."

"Isn't that because he's so busy? The guy's skin and bones. It's clear he's not eating properly."

"Seriously? He's not even got time to have a real meal?"

Gentle whispers flitted throughout the plaza as people became increasingly worried about Daniel's well-being.

Sylvester's dignified voice thundered as he said, "So I ask you all, please, won't you offer him your warm support? Won't you offer to take him out for drinks?" His earnest plea was like a spot of rain moisturizing a drought-ridden desert, further softening the people's hearts. "If he struggles to keep up conversation with you, won't you give him a hearty smack on the shoulder and offer him some reassurance? Daniel is an ordinary man, but he is by no means a bad one. I guarantee you that he can fulfill the duties given to him!"

The people nodded eagerly, and Daniel was reminded all over again of how far he had to go. No matter how much Sylvester lauded him as being capable and competent, he was still the one responsible for giving that provocateur an opening to exploit. Ordinarily, the kind people here would never have doubted the royal family.

I swear, here and now, I will do my utmost to gain the people's trust. I will become a citizen of Glacester and by extension Port Brenach, just like them. So please, I beg of you all, don't let someone else incite you to embrace dissatisfaction your hearts never held to begin with.

That was a fervent wish Daniel and Sylvester shared.

"Please, remember that Daniel is one of you. He wouldn't approve of policies that would cause you distress. That, I promise you. I, Sylvester Harland, would

never allow anyone to harm my home!" A righteous anger burned in his eyes, but this fury was genuine.

Had the rebellion not been prevented before it gained any momentum, there would have been bloodshed. Some of the very people in this crowd could have lost their lives. The children who heard the toll of the bell and rushed home might have become casualties as well. Had the culprit had his way, the innocent civilians would have become criminal insurgents—and for that, Sylvester would make those responsible pay.

Daniel, too, felt his stomach roil with anger.

In the face of Sylvester's passionate speech, the people froze in place, dazed. After a beat, they erupted in raucous cheers.

"Long live the crown prince!" they cheered, voices loud enough to make the ground beneath them tremble.

Chapter 12:

The Crown Prince Contemplates

SYLVESTER STRAIGHTENED HIMSELF as the people cheered and hooted at him, and he gracefully stepped away from the rostrum. Daniel was waiting as he came down from the stage, head bowed in reverence toward the prince. His cheeks were still as gaunt as ever, but after Sylvester's performance, his pallor had at last gained a hint of color.

"I was deeply impressed by your speech, Your Highness. Thank you for your support," he said.

"I only did what was necessary. The rest depends on you."

Sylvester had given him a new opportunity to prove himself, but if Daniel fell flat again, it would all go up in smoke. It was up to Daniel to gradually build a rapport with the people.

Daniel nodded solemnly at the Prince. Their exchange was short-lived; a subordinate hailed Daniel, and he politely excused himself.

The plan was for local officials to take the stage next to warn people against scammers like their culprit. It was Sylvester's idea; this would be but one step toward preventing similar operatives from infiltrating the area. They would warn the people that these scams involved people masquerading as relatives to steal land deeds and ownership. Thus, the officials would recommend that they contact their relatives in the capital and come up with some kind of password or secret phrase to protect themselves from such extortion. If they didn't, they risked losing their housing, or so the cover story went.

Sylvester knew that wouldn't entirely solve the problem. They would need to spread awareness in the capital as well for it to have any real effect. Even for renters, nothing would be more financially devastating than losing their home. The fear of it would get people's guards up.

"Syl, that was incredible!" Tristan exclaimed as he rushed over.

Sylvester bobbed his head in acknowledgment. With the halo effect of the light on his back, he'd almost seemed like a divine presence onstage. The cheers still hadn't quieted down. The excitement that swept the plaza seemed to have affected Tristan as well. He wasn't the only one, of course: even Sylvester's bodyguards were so taken by his performance that their cheeks flushed as they stared at him.

If the people who regularly served at his side were this elated, Sylvester could only imagine the effect he'd had on the rest of the crowd. It was a good sign that he'd succeeded.

The architecture had been part of Sylvester's strategy and a great boon to his speech. Glacester's plaza was erected in such a way that the light would spill between the buildings and hit the back of the rostrum, or whoever was standing in front of it. Even the nearby buildings were positioned so they didn't obstruct the path of the sun as it began to set and cast its light through the streets to the plaza. Everything was arranged so that the speaker would be silhouetted with a halo, making them appear almost divine to the audience.

That same visual effect had been replicated many times since, in the royal palace and in the more prominent noblemen's houses—but those were private quarters. None were as spacious as the plaza, where a speaker was afforded a much broader crowd to sway. Glacester had a long and honorable history, to be sure, but one of the biggest reasons the royal family treasured the area was for its plaza. It helped reinforce the idea among the populace here and abroad that the Harland royal family was special.

The bards were belting "The Glacester Dream," which was really just the royal family's propaganda. After the thrilling performance that Sylvester had given, the people would be singing his praises all on their own. They would enthuse over what a grand figure he was, so different from the rest of them. Yet, unlike the Capricious God who was forever beyond reach, they could see Sylvester and even hear his voice. The story about his performance would travel through the

grapevine, growing more and more embellished as it went.

It was an effective strategy, but it also means less room for mistakes in the future, Sylvester thought.

The one thing he couldn't afford was for people to meet him and be disappointed rather than impressed. That was probably the truth behind his father's orders for him to come here and learn: he wanted Sylvester to understand what it meant to meet people's expectations.

Sylvester's speech had raised an already high bar even higher. Though it was a rousing success, it was also a double-edged sword. He would face even more pressure henceforth to meet people's expectations. If he couldn't shoulder that burden and overcome it, then he didn't deserve to be the next king.

The aristocracy were expected to be exemplars to the people, and it was the king who ruled over them. No ordinary man could fill such shoes. As these realizations dawned on him, Sylvester found himself reaching for the gifted handkerchief. His fingers traced the embroidery. A sigh spilled past his lips.

I want to see Dia.

As the woman touted to be the perfect lady, Claudia could relate to everything Sylvester was feeling and facing more than anyone else. It helped that they were so close. But she was a duke's daughter, with all the lofty expectations that came with the position. She would be exposed to even more once their engagement was officially announced.

To everyone else, Claudia had a dignified air about her. She had worked hard to cultivate that. Yet Sylvester knew there was a fragility she kept hidden underneath it all. Each time he recalled how she had cried about her half-sister being terrifying, he found himself gripped by emotions so powerful they frightened him. It was all in the past now, but at the time, he'd butchered Fermina in his head over and over.

Claudia's vulnerability was a source of great comfort for him. For as beautiful and dauntless as she appeared, she was as human as anyone, with her own

worries and fears. Like any other girl, she shed tears. That in turn made Sylvester feel more comfortable with his own weakness. With Claudia, he could be a person instead of a prince.

Sylvester had lived his entire life with the surety that he would be king someday. It was an oppressive position that kept him constantly busy without any time to breathe. Before Claudia entered his life, all he'd ever done was try to measure up to the expectations people had for him.

Only with Claudia could he be himself, the man behind the facade.

Admittedly, that meant he messed things up on occasion—though never on purpose.

Sylvester loved her dearly. I wonder if Dia feels the same way I do?

He had been conditioned to act like a well-disciplined puppet, but for her, his heart beat with the blood of a man. It reminded him that he, too, was human.

It seems silly to me now that I always took so much pride in how impassive I was. Hiding his emotions came easy thanks to his strict education. Sylvester could control all his emotions perfectly. But not anymore.

Not since he met Claudia. Not since he really came to know her.

There were times when Claudia seemed so desensitized to the opposite sex—save for the dance floor. Anytime he wrapped his arm around her waist, she became visibly flustered. At other times, she would cast a bewitching smile at him, only to turn beet red when he invaded her personal space. Claudia loved him so much that she, too, was nervous about them being so far apart. It was adorable.

"This wraps up our agenda here," Sylvester said to no one in particular.

He was eager to return to the capital as quickly as possible and have Claudia in his arms. Oh, how he looked forward to the tickle of her silky-soft hair on his skin. Sylvester would even revel in her scolding him with a smile when he found himself unable to resist and got a little too frisky with her. It was thanks to her

self-discipline that he was able to maintain control.

His inspection of Brenach was over. If the bar was going to be even higher in the future, he would readily rise to the occasion. There was no going back; he had to move forward. If he grew fatigued, he need only let his mind wander to Claudia. She was enough motivation for him to overcome it all.

Having reaffirmed his convictions, Sylvester climbed inside his carriage, and Daniel soon joined him for a report on their findings. Any life that had returned to the man's complexion had vanished once again.

"You were absolutely right," Daniel said. "That young man was our culprit. Unfortunately, he killed himself before we could interrogate him."

"Didn't you have someone keeping an eye on him?"

"Yes. The man collapsed and began convulsing in front of the guard. According to the doctor, he'd already consumed poison before we apprehended him."

Sylvester's face hardened. "So, he drank poison knowing he'd be interrogated once he was captured."

Sadly, that meant they had no way of finding out where the man had come from. It was possible he was a foreign agent, but he might also be a Harlander with deep-seated resentment toward the royal family.

"We believe he is from Bari," Daniel said, as if reading the Prince's mind.

Feeling a sudden headache coming on, Sylvester massaged his temples. Of all the countries that could be responsible, it had to be Raul's. "I hope you know that there's no room for mistakes here."

Sylvester was well aware of how capable Daniel was; he'd just finished waxing on about it. Daniel would only mention a specific country's name if he had the utmost confidence in his assertion. Still, Sylvester had to drive the point home to him.

Nodding gravely, Daniel continued, "We found proof in the home where he

was hiding. This also explains how he managed to infiltrate the port."

If there was evidence to establish the man's origins, then Sylvester had no choice but to accept the bitter reality of the situation. He motioned for Daniel to continue his report.

"We found orders with details about this plot, signed by His Royal Highness Prince Raul."

Sylvester's heart sank to the pit of his stomach.

Chapter 13:

His Royal Highness's Retainer Smiles Prettily

"So, MATTERS HAVE come to a close."

Harland had dealt with the provocateur quicker than Lestea had anticipated. The royal family's timely intervention receiving the administrative official's support was likely the reason things hadn't dragged on longer. The local townspeople were probably oblivious that there had even been signs of a budding rebellion.

"It seems silly I went to the trouble of disguising myself to go unnoticed."

Much like the provocateur, Lestea was fair-skinned, which made her look no different than the rest of Harland's populace. If people saw her strolling the streets of the capital, they probably wouldn't think twice about her. They'd figure she was a native.

The locals assumed everyone from Bari was brown-skinned. Lestea had feared her appearance at the port with the rest of her countrymen might tip people off and hamper their operative's movements. The royal family and their officials would receive reports about her that likely included her skin tone, but reading something on paper and seeing it in person were different. Thus, when Lestea disembarked, she was careful to disguise herself and set off for the capital ahead of everyone else.

The fastest horse her information network could get a hold of had carried a messenger with this report to her. Having read all the contents, she tossed it in the fire. The flames crackled and popped as they swallowed the parchment, reducing it to ash.

A smile played on her lips. "I wonder if the document with Raul's signature found its way to Prince Sylvester's hands?"

The provocateur's success was never part of the plan. His mere existence and

attempted crimes were what mattered. Admittedly, Lestea would have preferred for the rebellion to gain a bit more momentum and enter the public eye to draw attention. The bigger the discord, the less Harland would be able to maintain a neutral stance. Whether it was the Lindsays, the aristocratic faction, or the royal faction, someone would pressure the royal family to make a move.

It was more convenient for the country to be split into only two factions, as that made it all the easier to root out the opposition. Bari was much the same, with one faction supporting the crown prince's claim and the other supporting Raul's.

"I'll bet the crown prince's faction is disappointed now."

They were the ones who had gone out of their way to sneak an operative aboard the ship to Harland. They were the ones who'd originally planned to incite a rebellion so they could frame Raul. The royal orders they had prepared with his signature would've been undeniable proof of Raul's involvement. Once Harland got its hands on them and publicized it, even Bari's citizens couldn't shield Raul from the repercussions. Harland would have no choice but to be suspicious of him. After all, those orders were a perfect forgery, indistinguishable from the real deal. It would've been impossible for anyone else—but not for His Majesty, with all his connections and resources.

They could only ever play this card once. After they used it, it would never work again. Harland would be more vigilant, on guard against such tactics. Unfortunately for the crown prince's faction, their perfect forgery had been replaced with an identifiably fraudulent copy, ruining their whole plan.

Lestea had laughed when she first found out about their plot. It proved how desperate they were. They were facing more backlash than they had anticipated from the citizenry.

She was grateful to them for their foolishness. She could overwrite their plan and use it for her own ends. The operative they sent was already fish food at the bottom of the ocean. The man who offed himself in Glacester was one of

Lestea's minions. Since the mission was so highly classified, the crown prince's faction didn't continue contact with their man, trusting him to carry out his orders. They had no idea he had been swapped out for someone else.

"Now, the question is...what will Prince Sylvester—or rather, Harland—do with the evidence?"

Personally, she hoped the crown prince's faction would catch word and, without realizing their ploy had failed, kick up a fuss. Once an investigation was performed and their duplicity was revealed, the king would be the one in hot water. There was, however, a distinct possibility that Harland would sweep it under the rug. It was more politically advantageous for them for Bari to remain divided by its factions just as they were. Political administrations tended to avoid taking a clear stance in such situations.

"Whatever they decide, it won't negatively impact Raul." Even so, Lestea wished he would make up his mind quickly.

Raul seemed to believe the king's personality had changed with the birth of the crown prince—but from her perspective, His Majesty was the same as ever. He was always cold and impartial. The only difference was that now he acted that way with his own flesh and blood. To an outsider, it might have seemed like he was playing favorites, picking his own son over his brother. But the crown prince was simply a more malleable pawn.

The king of Bari was renowned for his just rule—yet his aloof, rational way of handling everything kept his loyal subjects at arm's length. Raul was the one who had filled that void for him. The amiable and friendly Raul managed to placate all those who'd harbored strong resentments toward the king. For the people who struggled under the king's oppressive rule, Raul was a light of hope. They served him loyally with the belief that, once he took the throne, he would take their feelings into consideration.

The crown prince's birth snuffed out that hope. Perhaps things would've been different had the king treated Raul with compassion. Instead, he drove his own

flesh and blood from the country. He incurred not only the ire of those loyal to Raul but the anger of all the realm's citizens.

Even Lestea was disgusted with him. *That's saying something since I neither like nor dislike His Majesty.* To her, he was just the man sitting on the throne. Nothing more, nothing less.

Her mind wandered back to when she saw the king in passing while walking the corridors of the royal palace. Raul had been with her then, but the king hadn't even spared them a glance. Perhaps the reason she had no feelings toward the man was that she'd never had the opportunity to become better acquainted with him.

I wonder if Raul respects him so much because they're family.

When it came to political prowess, the king had his strengths and weaknesses. The scales were strongly leaning toward the latter in recent days, granted.

Bari's origins began with southern tribes coming together to form a united kingdom. Of the tribes, the Barians had the greatest power and therefore took the helm in leading their newly established nation. Over time, the people came to accept that they were all part of a larger whole—a singular kingdom. But even now, their sense of identity was tied to the tribes from which they were -descended. There were times when people clung strongly to blood ties. Lately, that had made the kingdom a breeding ground for tyranny, the worst extreme for an obsession with bloodlines. When incompetent people were chosen to serve in positions of power simply because they were family, it was a real tragedy for those forced to serve under them.

Correcting such failures was righteous, but if righteousness alone was a strong enough foundation for a nation, the world would be a much simpler place.

Since he's so cool and calculating, I doubt His Majesty could comprehend such notions.

Raul was different. He had the sort of charisma and influence to persuade people to accept change. Where the king regarded everything as black-and-

white and never considered nuance, Raul would take the time to communicate with people, even criminals. He would argue on their behalf that extenuating circumstances should be considered. His compassion won over so many of the nobility as well as the citizenry.

The king has forgotten that people have emotions. His obliviousness was likely due in part to Raul filling in that gap for him for so long. Raul had been the king's heart. Ironic, then, that the king had torn it out with his own two hands.

Lestea smirked. "It's almost time." She thought of the man she served, whose greatest wish was for peace. Next, her mind drifted to Claudia and that intelligent smile she always wore.

"I wonder if she'll realize what I'm doing."

Her blue eyes crinkled as a beautiful smile graced her lips. She looked all at once like a tender maiden and a dashing gentleman.

Chapter 14:

The Villainess Enjoys a Girls' Party

FINGERS OF SUNLIGHT Stretched through the window, cascading across Claudia's lustrous black hair and creating a halo around it. One might be forgiven for thinking her hair looked like a black rose. And when she smiled, it only strengthened the effect as the subtle floral perfume on her person filled the air. Louise and Charlotte, whom Claudia had invited over for a cup of tea, felt as though they were in the duke's garden rather than his drawing room.

"Thank you ever so kindly for your invitation today," said Louise.

Claudia shook her head. "I should be the one thanking you both for coming."

Charlotte's face softened, a smile playing on her lips. Gone was the girl who always hunched in on herself. "It was an honor to receive your invitation, Big Sis!"

Pleased to see they had all grown closer, Claudia gave a satisfied nod. Still, her thoughts wandered to the only bridal candidate not in attendance. It was unfortunate that she couldn't make it.

"I wish Lady Wendy could've been here," she said wistfully.

Wendy Lloyd was the daughter of a marquess and one year older than Claudia and Louise. She was a sheltered, demure girl. She'd sent word that she wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be able to join them. Claudia got the sense Wendy wasn't avoiding her; neither did she detect any outright hostility.

Louise flicked her folding fan open, covering her mouth as she breathed a sigh. "I don't doubt for a moment that her father made that decision for her. You needn't trouble yourself over it, Lady Claudia."

The Lloyds had a long history as part of the kingdom's aristocracy, but as of late, they had developed a deep connection with the new blood. It was

inevitable that their personal circumstances would create a wall between Wendy and Claudia.

I suppose as long as Lady Wendy herself doesn't hate me, that's all that matters. Oh dear, she doesn't actually hate me, does she? Surely not. Hopefully not. It was hard to be certain since Wendy wasn't the sort to voice her opinions. She was normally a lady of few words.

Whatever the case, dwelling on it wouldn't do any good. Claudia thought it better to move on. "Regardless, you both did well getting through your respective tea parties."

They had wrapped up their final tea party just a few days ago. They had successfully hosted four consecutive ones for the purpose of entertaining Raul. All had gone off without a hitch. Claudia had planned this little get-together to recognize the other girls for their efforts.

"It only went so smoothly because you bravely went first and showed the rest of us how it is done, Lady Claudia," said Louise. "After I returned home from your party, I made a number of revisions to the plans for mine."

"Exactly!" Charlotte chimed in. "It was a huge help knowing what His Royal Highness's preferences were."

"Nothing pleases me more than to know I was of some use to you both." Claudia meant that sincerely. She was glad she had urged her father to volunteer them to go first.

Still, there was something that weighed on her mind.

"I hope you girls will keep this between us," she prefaced. "I found the way the Barian nobility acted at the parties to be...unexpected."

There were no significant problems. It was no understatement to call each party a resounding success, in fact. Yet at each event, something strange happened—something that gave Claudia pause. The incidents were trivial, so insignificant as to slip past most people's notice.

"That one noble lord's abrasiveness toward Charlotte is but one example," Claudia said.

Raul had told her that all of them had studied Harland's etiquette ahead of time, yet Charlotte had been extremely upset after her encounter with one of Raul's countrymen. It was all the more peculiar because these lords and ladies were from notable houses. Societal etiquette would have been drilled into their heads from a young age. One could claim the indiscretion was a consequence of circumstance, that the man in question had simply gotten carried away with the atmosphere of the party.

"I couldn't help but feel that at the party Lady Louise hosted, the Barians were trying to nudge us toward hostilities with each other."

The Barian ladies had purposefully talked Claudia up within Louise's earshot. It wasn't unusual for some aristocrats to whisper about others in the shadows, but these girls hadn't even tried to be discreet.

"Indeed. It struck me as odd as well," said Louise with a nod.

The party Claudia had hosted was well received, to be sure. If the girls had had some sort of complaints about the way Louise was conducting hers, their actions would have made sense, but their insults had all been about Louise's character. Claudia intervened to smooth things over, but their poorly conceived plot to openly antagonize Louise left her livid. Even Louise was less offended by it than Claudia.

"When they tried to elbow me into agreeing, I could feel myself glaring—which is saying something since everyone always tells me I *always* look like I'm glaring." Claudia sighed.

She wondered how the girls had interpreted the almost murderous look on her face. What had been going through their heads? What had compelled them to disparage Louise like that? Thinking about it made her blood boil all over again. Claudia forced herself to take a deep breath to regain her composure.

The issue was that it hadn't ended there. The Barians had continued to make

every effort to ruin the otherwise harmonious atmosphere of the party.

"None of it was particularly obtrusive enough to call out," she noted.

It had been enough to leave a bad impression of the lords and ladies in Raul's company. Granted, since the attendees from Harland's side had changed with each party, there were only a small number who would have realized how disruptive the Barians were.

Charlotte hummed to herself, frowning. Her pink hair fluttered as she bobbed her head in agreement. "What really struck me as odd was how abrasive that young lord was with me the first time, only to act like a completely different person the next time I saw him."

She added, for clarification, that the change was so dramatic she didn't think it could be attributed to him having merely learned his lesson.

Louise fanned herself. "I know what you mean. The ladies who harped on me didn't have a single bad word to say about me at the next party."

Again, one could conceivably claim they had seen the error of their ways and were trying to do better. Claudia couldn't shake the feeling that things weren't lining up. It would be easier to dismiss if it had only happened once, but she was plagued by the hunch that something was off. It reinforced her suspicions.

"Lady Claudia, would I be right in assuming you think the Barians have some sort of ulterior motive?" asked Louise.

"Yes." Claudia nodded. She had no substantial evidence to back that up, though. It was just her intuition. "Hearing that both of you picked up on all this as well makes me even more confident in that assertion. Just to be on the safe side, would you two mind keeping an eye out?"

If it was only her paranoia, all the better, but she would rather avoid anything happening to them if her instincts turned out to be right.

"All of them, His Royal Highness included, are in a tough spot. I will be vigilant," said Louise.

Charlotte threw up a hand. "Me too! If I notice anything at all, I'll be sure to report to you, Big Sis!"

Their instant agreement had Claudia beaming. It was reassuring that they believed in her enough to trust she was on to something. Until she landed in the brothel, Claudia had never had female friends she could be completely vulnerable with. Having these two now warmed her heart so much that her eyes misted over.

Noticing the sentimentality in her gaze. Louise and Charlotte froze before jerking upright in their chairs. Their cheeks flushed.

Louise cleared her throat as a distraction. "Ahem! Might I change the subject?" She turned toward Charlotte. "It's wonderful you have a more positive outlook now, but do you not think you are being a little too familiar with Lady Claudia? You're an earl's daughter, while she is a duke's daughter. Referring to her like she's an older sister is presumptuous."

"That's quite all right, Lady Louise," Claudia cut in. "I gave her permission."

It was true the two hadn't been acquainted for very long, but they had grown close in the short time they'd spent together. That didn't seem to sit well with Louise.

Louise pressed her fan over her mouth, brows drawn. "How generous of you," she said with a noticeable undercurrent of disapproval. With how stringent she was about decorum, perhaps Louise found it difficult to accept such an unconventional relationship.

Could it be...? Is she jealous of Charlotte? Claudia's face heated.

It was faint, to be sure, but she could almost sense Louise's panic of thinking her close friend was being stolen away. Claudia had experienced the same emotion herself when she saw Helen speaking so intimately with the other veteran sex workers. She never dreamed she would be the cause of someone's jealousy.

"Even though nothing has changed at all between us," Louise muttered forlornly.

Those words caught Claudia by surprise. Her thoughts accelerated as she tried to correctly decipher their meaning. There was only one possibility that really came to mind.

"Lady Louise," she said. "We have grown closer since we first started attending the academy, haven't we?"

Claudia searched Louise's emerald eyes, as if she might find her answer there. After everything they had been through together, courtesy of Fermina, Claudia felt completely at ease with Louise. The only reason she remained politely aloof around her was because she feared it too presumptuous to act at ease.

Sensing Claudia's conviction, Louise blinked nervously, her blonde lashes fluttering. "Th-that's right."

"It's embarrassing to bring it up like this, I will admit, but...provided you're comfortable with it, why don't you call me Dee from now on?" Claudia wasn't accustomed to being so forthcoming. The words tasted saccharine on her tongue. Her blush traveled all the way up to her ears, and she was sure she looked red as a tomato.

Unlike Helen or Charlotte, Louise was the same age as her. Maybe that was why she found it more embarrassing. It was silly, though. Claudia was mentally much older. In her head, she'd always thought of herself as an older sister looking after her younger one with Louise, but her heart hammered furiously as she waited with bated breath.

Claudia's flustered suggestion had Louise blushing too. "Th-then you can call me Lou," she murmured.

Although her pulse was racing, Claudia could only manage a stiff nod in response. It was unusual for her to lose her composure. For some reason, Charlotte's face was flushed too just watching her. Perhaps she felt like she'd glimpsed a private side of Claudia she shouldn't be privy to. Either way, this

moment of vulnerability gave their little party a sentimental atmosphere that lingered long after the conversation had concluded.

Helen giggled under her breath. "His Highness will need to stay on his toes even after he comes back."

A missive had arrived days ago informing them that Sylvester had wrapped up his inspection. If his trip back went smoothly, he would return to the capital in another two or three days. But it was the celebratory tea party that had only just concluded Helen was teasing Claudia about.

"Whatever do you mean?" Claudia said, huffing and turning away.

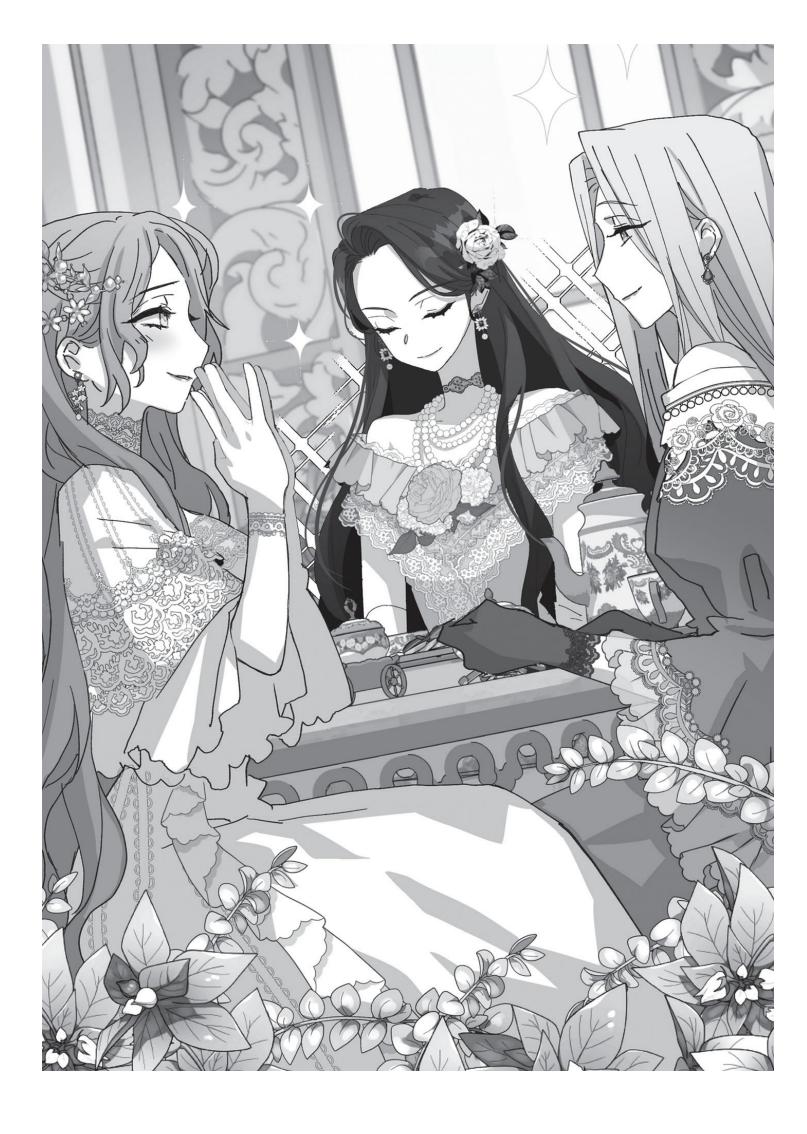
Being older than the rest of the girls, Helen had probably found their sentimental get-together adorable. Claudia chanced a peek into Helen's eyes, only to find them swelling with affection. It made her even more embarrassed.

"Because," Helen continued, "now he's not the only person who knows about this adorable, girlish side of you."

"The relationship I have with Lady Loui—ahem, I mean, with Lou—is entirely different than the one I have with Syl."

The maid quickly nodded. "Oh, I'm sure it is. Platonic love and romantic love are entirely different from one another, but that's exactly what makes both so precious."

Precious enough that it would be impossible to choose between them, in fact. "The passion you feel for your friends is no less strong," she added.



Claudia hesitated over how to reply. She couldn't really deny what Helen was saying. She could already picture Sylvester flashing her that gentle but emotionless smile. It was bad enough that he had sensed the strength of her feelings for Louise, and that was before he left. *Perhaps this is karma's way of telling me to straighten up*.

Still, the bottom line was that Louise was a friend and nothing more. It would be nonsensical for Sylvester to be suspicious of there being more between them.

Claudia's dismay must have shown on her face because soon enough, Helen was pressing a comforting hand to her back. "Personally, I'm relieved. You have always acted so mature for your age. It's nice to see there's some innocence in you yet."

She went on to add, "The firm and dignified way you carry yourself is reassuring, but it does sometimes worry me that you are trying too hard—pushing yourself too much to act like an adult. You should enjoy yourself more. Indulge in the present, my lady."

Indulge in love and friendship, she meant. Even though both were challenging for someone in Claudia's position, Helen sincerely wanted her to live her life to its fullest.

"Although it does make me feel a little sad thinking you will be spending more time with them than me," Helen confessed.

It was a whispered sentiment with no real intent, but it proved to be a dagger that burrowed deep into Claudia's heart. It felt as if Helen was saying they couldn't be friends because she was only a maid and Claudia her mistress.

Claudia spun around. She clasped both of Helen's hands in hers.

"No," she said, her throat strangely dry. Her voice strained with emotion as she emphasized every word. "No, Helen. You're my friend too. You're like an older sister to me! Even though you may be my maid during work hours, you are still precious and irreplaceable to me!"

Taken aback by Claudia's panicked protest, Helen smiled, her cheeks coloring. "As presumptuous as it is of me, I love you like a younger sister, my lady," she managed, eyes regarding Claudia warmly. Her smile reminded Claudia of the same one she'd given when she was on her sickbed.

Strong emotions surged within Claudia, and it was a struggle to swallow back her tears. She knew she would only confuse Helen if she let herself cry here. To hide her quivering lips, she threw her arms around Helen and buried her face in the other woman's shoulder. Like a kind older sister, Helen gently returned the embrace, running her fingers through the loose waves of Claudia's raven hair.

"Stay my older sister forever," Claudia pleaded.

"I will. Absolutely I will."

Helen's soft voice brought tremendous comfort. If she wasn't careful, Claudia would melt, body and soul, into Helen's arms and stay there forever. She had to force her body into compliance so she could pull back.

The two were close enough that Helen's breath skittered across her skin. Claudia could even see the dark circles beneath her beloved friend's eyes. They weren't as pronounced as before, but they hadn't entirely disappeared yet. With the pad of her finger, she gently touched the area beneath Helen's eye. Finding it ticklish, Helen squirmed.

"You aren't pushing yourself too much, are you?" Claudia asked.

"No. In fact, the reason I—"

Before Helen could, at long last, offer a reason for her lack of sleep, another maid interrupted to announce that a guest had arrived. The moment she saw the two girls holding one another, though, her face turned bright red.

"Pardon the intrusion!" she squeaked, speeding back out of the room.

Claudia and Helen glanced at one another and laughed, realizing the maid had misinterpreted things.

As soon as they pulled away, Helen held up her index finger and wagged it at Claudia. "My lady, I understand you are more open with physical affection than most so it doesn't bother me, but you must maintain a respectable distance with other noble ladies! Lest you give them as much of a shock as you gave Lady Charlotte."

"Of course. I'll be more careful."

Claudia was still too accustomed to how things had been in her brothel days, but in high society, being the same gender didn't necessarily excuse such casual displays of affection. She had to remind herself that even in intimate relationships, she needed to observe the proper decorum.

"Were you shocked too?" she asked Helen.

"I was. I never dreamed you would throw your arms around me like that when we first met."

"I-I suppose it did seem out of the blue," Claudia admitted.

Helen's words brought back memories. Much like now, Claudia had embraced Helen to hide her tears. It hadn't really occurred to her before, but it must've been a shock for Helen since she knew nothing of the circumstances that brought them together. This was yet another thing she needed to be more careful about.

The maid reached toward her, gently stroking her shoulder. "For some reason, it felt almost familiar. That was the first time I felt truly wanted, and it brought me such joy. If I were a knight, I would've pledged my sword to you."

A knight's pledge was a rite wherein one vowed lifelong loyalty to someone by offering their sword as a show of deference and respect. All the knights who served the Lindsays had pledged their loyalty to Claudia's father. They were oathbound to serve him until his death.

It warmed Claudia's heart; Helen making such a claim was proof of her devotion. The sentimentality had her blushing furiously. To distract from her

embarrassment, Claudia shot up out of her chair.

"I should leave to greet our guest," she blurted out. "It wouldn't be right to leave Brian waiting."

After her tea party with Louise and Charlotte, the next item on her agenda was a visit from the Evans Company. Claudia could only assume the guest her other maid had mentioned before she fled the room was Brian. If it had been someone else—someone unexpected—the maid would have lingered long enough to confirm whether Claudia planned to see them or not.

"Knowing him, he would probably wait hours for you," said Helen.

"You think so too, hmm?"

It seemed she wasn't the only one who thought he was like a big pet dog: eager, loyal, and prone to excitement.

"Brian, sorry to have kept you waiting," she said by way of greeting.

He quickly shook his head. "Not at all! I am accustomed to waiting. In fact, you are one of the quickest to receive me when I visit."

Among the top ranks of the aristocracy, making someone wait an extended period was a way of demonstrating one's power and influence. Brian and his family had been made to wait far longer before they were officially made part of the aristocracy themselves—or so he told her.

He really does look like a dog frantically wagging its tail. It was obvious from the joyful expression on his face to the way he leaned forward eagerly that, with the whole of his being, Brian was excited to see Claudia. If it was all an act and not genuine, then he ought to join a theater troupe.

Brian's charming smile was so infectious that Claudia found herself grinning right back at him.

"I've brought good news with me today!" he said.

"Oh? I am anxious to hear it."

Brian set a wooden box on the table and lifted the lid. Peeking out of the cushioning material inside was a small bottle. Claudia's eyes lit up.

"We have finally produced something of a sufficient enough quality that I feel comfortable presenting it to you."

The struggle up until this point was that transporting their merchandise took so long, its quality deteriorated by the time it arrived. His family must have finally developed better logistics to prevent that.

When Brian plucked the bottle of moisturizer from the box and handed it to her, Claudia could almost swear it sparkled in the light.

I'm going to test this out tonight! she decided.

"Please try it on your hands first," Brian advised. "Once you're sure there are no negative effects on your skin, feel free to use it on your face as well."

"Oh, no need to worry. I am well versed in how to patch-test cosmetics. All that's left is to see how compatible it is with my skin type," Claudia said.

"On behalf of the entire Evans Company, let me assure you we are dedicated to working together to meet any requests you might have of us, my lady." He bowed his head reverently, hand to his chest. After a short pause, he quietly added, "Also..."

"Also what?" Claudia followed his eyes to where Helen was standing. She suspected he wanted to propose something, but he was so flustered and embarrassed that he hesitated to continue.

Aha, she thought, not missing the subtle emotions reflected on his face. Well, Helen is a beauty. She had a wonderful personality and a perfect figure, to boot. Her breasts were even larger than Claudia's.

The Evans Company will continue to expand in the future, I'm sure. Brian would be a decent marriage prospect for Helen. No, the best she could hope for. Even though his family was relatively low within the rankings of the

aristocracy, they were wealthy enough that Helen could expect to enjoy a relatively luxurious lifestyle. *Plus, Brian is capable and a gentleman.* Even if his company made some ill-advised ventures, he was competent enough to bounce back from them.

It's really not a bad match at all, but what matters most is how Helen feels.

And from the looks of it, Helen was oblivious to the passion in Brian's gaze. It would take some time before romance blossomed between them, if it ever did.

"The sample for you is custom-made, but we would like your maids to test our more generic line and give us their feedback," Brian said at last.

"All right. I will have Helen and a few other ladies in our employ sample it. Is there a specific age range you are targeting?"

He blinked at her. "Age range?"

Claudia sighed, realizing he didn't understand the purpose of her question at all. "Surely you don't believe a woman in her teens and a woman in her fifties have the same type of skin, do you?"

"Oh!"

Aging caused skin to thin and lose elasticity. Consequently, different age groups would require different effects from their moisturizers.

Brian groaned and held his head in his hands. "Why didn't I realize that? You're absolutely right. Of course they're not the same."

Claudia couldn't blame him for overlooking that part. After all, there was no current division for moisturizers based on age groups. Everyone had the same offerings. Mature women and young ladies alike either blindly reached for whatever product the royal family favored or had to shop around to find something that suited their skin type. Those of the uppermost echelons had their own personal apothecary with whom they could put in a request. There was no real demand in the market for products targeting specific age groups. Whatever prosaic requests the aristocracy made of merchants were normally

met with custom orders.

"No need to worry," Claudia told him encouragingly. "It's not like it would be unusable for other age groups. I simply think if you want feedback, it would be better to focus on a specific range."

"Right. In that case, could I ask you to find maids thirty or younger to test it?"

In the wake of Brian's visit, there was an intense scramble among the maids of the Lindsay household to secure a spot for sampling the moisturizer. Helen's participation was already assured, so she avoided being sucked into the conflict, but she nonetheless regaled Claudia with how fierce the battle was.

"In the end, Miss Martha acted as the judge and made the final call on who could participate," Helen concluded.

"I am only glad no one was injured in all this." Claudia paused, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Hold on. Doesn't everyone already have their own moisturizers?"

Most of the maids working in the duke's household were part of the aristocracy themselves. Even the commoners among them, such as Helen, were paid handsomely enough that they could afford their own cosmetics.

"It doesn't matter. Even if it's just a sample, this is a product of the same quality from the company where *you* get your moisturizer, Lady Claudia. Of course everyone is excited!"

"If it means that much to everyone, should we make this moisturizer a regular bonus for all our maids?"

"You would do that?!" Helen asked eagerly, hands clasped to her chest.

Claudia gawked at her. She hadn't expected Helen to be this elated, nor could she understand the reason for it. "I will admit the Evans Company is top-quality, but it's only moisturizer," she reminded her maid.

"It's an incredible honor to use cosmetics of the same quality as one's own

mistress! And considering *you're* our mistress, Lady Claudia, that makes it even more valuable!"

Claudia was widely known as the perfect noble lady, a reputation she'd earned through more than just her conduct alone; her beauty was no secret. As Helen told it, there wasn't a lady alive who didn't desperately desire to achieve even an ounce of Claudia's allure.

"I would bet you anything there will be a battle between the young noble ladies as well," said Helen. "Products are always limited, which means it will be difficult for even those in mid-ranking families to procure it. A price hike is inevitable because of its scarcity. Instead of offering it as a bonus, why don't you make it a reward? The other maids will be more motivated that way."

Helen made a persuasive argument, and Claudia nodded in agreement. When she later approached the butler to implement Helen's idea, he didn't seem to grasp its purpose, but the head maid Martha was quick to throw in her support. That was enough to win the butler over and solidify the moisturizer as a reward for the maids.

Chapter 15:

The Baron's Son Finds a Rival in the Duke's Son

B_{RIAN LAID EYES} on Helen for the first time in the Lindsays' drawing room. He had dropped by to update Claudia on the progress of his family's merchandise. This could've been accomplished by letter, but Claudia had kindly invited him to come see her.

The Lindsays' estate was so vast that even after his carriage pulled through the gate, it was a full minute before it rolled to a stop at their mansion's entrance. No, calling it a "mansion" was understating the grandeur of their home. It was more like a palace.

Brian's anxiety was at an all-time high. His mouth was dry as a desert, but his whole body was so stiff that he couldn't even find it in him to reach for the cup of tea one of the maids had so graciously prepared. For ten minutes, he sat there like a statue.

The rumble of the doors swinging open signaled Claudia's arrival.

Wait, she's already here? Panicked, Brian shot out of his seat. He had expected to wait at least another hour before she arrived. That was how it always went with the other aristocrats.

His mind went blank. Ten minutes hadn't been enough time for him to pluck up his courage to speak with Claudia. Seeing her here now, in the drawing room of her home, she looked like a fairy or a goddess. The way her raven hair rippled behind her resembled a holy veil, providing a stark contrast with the vibrant color of her dress. The gown itself reminded him of a flower.

There was something almost mystical about her; she looked very different from how she did in her school uniform. Brian was so bewitched, he forgot to breathe. It wasn't until his throat convulsed from the lack of air that he snapped back to his senses.

"Th-thank you for...for inviting..." he stammered, unable to look her in the eye. Blood rushed to his cheeks.

Meeting with her privately like this, it was so obvious that he was completely out of his element with her. She far outranked him.

Amid his embarrassment, Brian's eyes somehow landed on Helen. *Even the maids are gorgeous in a ducal house.*

At first, it was only her beauty that he noticed. Helen was stunning enough to be a stage actress. Any other man would have felt the same, but his impressions were soon betrayed in a most spectacular fashion when Claudia turned to seek Helen's input on something.

Ordinarily, Helen wore a glacial mask devoid of emotion. It was only when Claudia turned to her that warmth flooded her face. It was like spring had arrived, melting away the snow and bringing with it new buds of life.

That was the moment Brian felt his entire world change.

He couldn't say precisely how. All he knew was that something was decidedly different. He stared at Helen's smile in a complete daze. In no time at all, he put a name to the feeling.

Ah, could this be love?

Helen was the daughter of the former earl Lord Hoskins. After her father's business ventures failed, their family was stripped of their title on account of their inability to maintain the sort of dignity and grace expected of the aristocracy, at which point they became commoners.

Brian was still in a trance upon his return home from the Lindsays' estate, but he wasn't so far gone that he neglected to order one of the Evans' intelligence officers to investigate Helen. All he wanted was to know who she was and where she'd come from.

The report came several days later, and after reading it, he closed his eyes

and slowly digested the information.

I thought for sure she was part of the aristocracy since she's Lady Claudia's personal maid. Most of the domestic servants in a ducal household were from lower-ranking nobility, after all. Who would have imagined she's a commoner?

In Harland, aristocrats who had accrued too much debt were expected to return their title and lands to the crown. Aristocrats were supposed to serve as exemplars for the rest of the populace. If they couldn't do that, they had no choice but to start all over. If a family *could* serve as an exemplar—and donated a hefty sum of money to the royal family—they could be elevated to aristocratic status even if they were common-born. Of course, the requirements were quite strict. In addition to adequate funds and conduct, one needed a personal recommendation from an already-established aristocratic house. That was how Brian's father became a baron.

If new aristocratic families could be established, it only stood to reason that older ones could fall into disgrace and be dismantled.

She wasn't part of the aristocracy when she was hired, though. Miss Helen only entered Lady Claudia's employ after she'd been reduced to a commoner. Strictly speaking, her employer was Duke Lindsay, not Claudia. But considering Claudia had been the one to recommend her, it was clear where Helen's loyalties lay.

Lady Claudia is about as unfathomable as the sea. Brian wondered where she got all her information. She had scooped up Helen out of nowhere, and she knew all about his family tapping into the cosmetics market with a new moisturizer. Given how influential they are, it wouldn't surprise me if they have spies.

Neither he nor Helen were politically beneficial allies, though. It was hard to think she would employ spies for such little return.

Whatever the case, I have a chance with Miss Helen, don't I?

If she'd still been an earl's daughter, Brian couldn't have hoped to ask for her

hand. Even though his family took a more neutral stance, they were still part of the aristocratic faction, which would have made a marriage to Helen all but impossible if her family was of the royal faction. The political ties between aristocratic families added an extra layer of complexity.

Fortunately, since she was a commoner now, there was no need to maneuver behind the scenes to make their union possible. All that mattered was how they felt about one another.

Brian's lips curled into a smile. It was a small blessing, but at least he and Helen were on equal footing.

I'm sure Dad would prefer for me to marry someone already in the aristocracy, but I know he wouldn't say no to a former earl's daughter who has close connections to Lady Claudia.

In fact, by virtue of Helen being Claudia's personal maid, his father would probably encourage it. There was nothing more precious than having a close connection to the woman who would be the future crown princess.

Huh, wait a second...

The excitement that had his heart thrumming slowed to a grinding halt. The more he considered it, the more he realized that anyone with strong ambitions would see Helen as the perfect prize. Perhaps she was already inundated with marriage proposals from other young lords of low-ranking noble families.

No, hold on, calm down. Miss Helen has Lady Claudia at her side. No one could hope for greater support than that which the royal family could provide. Consequently, if someone earned Claudia's disfavor, it would be ruinous.

Brian could tell at a glance that Claudia and Helen were thick as thieves. *That means Lady Claudia will most definitely protect her. As for me...*

He needed to become someone worthy, someone whom both women would recognize.

There was little he could accomplish while he was still a student, but he was

involved in his family's cosmetics enterprise. I will do whatever it takes to make that flourish and score points with Lady Claudia and Miss Helen!

The fires of motivation roared within him.

It wasn't until Brian next visited the Lindsay household to deliver his regular report that he discovered there was yet another hurdle in his path.

A maid was guiding him to the drawing room when he spotted Helen standing down the corridor all alone. It was rare for her not to be at Claudia's side. Brian started toward her, thinking it was a good opportunity to make conversation—but someone else beat him to it.

A tall young man flagged Helen down. Unlike his younger sister's locks, his raven-black hair didn't have waves in it, and it bounced with each step he took.

Lord Virgil Lindsay! Brian realized. The same man who was referred to as the Ice Scion and was also the heir to the Lindsay Dukedom. Rumor had it that his frigid demeanor melted into something softer when he was around his sister—but judging by the feverish look in his eyes, Brian quickly surmised it wasn't just Claudia who had that effect on him.

No, it can't be.

Was Virgil really going to be his rival? Brian couldn't believe it. Didn't want to believe it. Alas, it wasn't unheard of that a master of the house would mess around with his maids.

No, no. This is Lord Virgil Lindsay we're talking about here. Surely he would never do such a thing. Besides, Claudia would never allow Virgil to use his power and influence to bend Helen to his will and make her a mistress.

The bigger problem was this: what if Virgil had genuine feelings for her? *Oh, crap. I don't think I could ever hope to win against him.*

Virgil was a future duke, of all things. It would be impossible for him to marry a commoner under normal circumstances, but if the Lindsays used their connections to have another house adopt Helen, that would be an easy

loophole to allow their union. Plus, she had been an earl's daughter until very recently. Few people would openly speak up in opposition.

Hold on, this also means I do have a chance.

If his rival had been the unsavory sort, a low-ranking baron's son like Brian would be powerless to stand against him. Fortunately, Virgil was a stickler for proper decorum, and he was the sort who would prioritize Helen's feelings above anything else.

That's right. It doesn't matter that my rival is a duke's son. The rules of the game are still the same.

In other words, the person who stole Helen's heart would claim victory.

A building heat spread out from the core of his body, coursing through his veins. The more challenging the obstacle, the more anxious he was to overcome it. Business was much the same; his family often ran into difficult problems. But it was the Evans way to clinch victory by the end.

That settles it! I'm going to come out on top, you'll see! Brian pumped his fists quietly, ready to take Virgil on. The whole time, he was standing in Virgil's blind spot, entirely unnoticed.

Little did Brian know that a few days later, Claudia would point out several of his shortcomings, leaving him cradling his head in his hands in devastation.

Chapter 16:

The Villainess Discovers a New Friend

Lady Claudia, I am terribly sorry for having someone else fill in for me on such an important day!" Helen cried, hanging her head.

Claudia held up a hand to stop Helen's profuse apologies. "Everything proceeded smoothly, so there's no need for you to worry about it."

Sylvester would be returning to the capital today, and he had scheduled a visit to the Lindsay estate. Claudia's maids had been dedicating their every effort since last night to prepare her for his arrival. Helen was usually the one who woke Claudia in the mornings, but there had been a different maid attending to her today. She relayed the news that Helen was detained and would be late. Since she helped Claudia prepare for the day instead, there had been no real problems.

"That said, isn't it about time you tell me what's been going on with you?" Claudia said with a tilt of her head.

When Helen had attempted to come clean about what was disrupting her sleep, their conversation was interrupted. She hadn't broached the subject since. Claudia had avoided asking, as there was nothing to suggest a mental crisis and all of Helen's requests for schedule adjustments had thus far been reasonable; she didn't want to butt into Helen's private life unnecessarily. Still, Claudia sensed Helen was willing to share the truth with her, so she opted to address it.

"Yes, you're right." Helen finally lifted her head. The skirt of her maid outfit rippled with the movement. It caught Claudia's attention, and when she looked, her eyes flew wide open. Clinging desperately to the fabric lest she fall was a bundle of fluffy white fur.

"How adorable!" Claudia chirped.

"Wha—?!" Helen dropped her gaze to see what Claudia was looking at and quickly scooped the little creature into her arms. "Ack! Candy! I am so terribly sorry about this, my lady. I will return her to my room promptly."

"Hold on! Let me get a closer look first!"

The little ball of fur that Helen referred to as Candy was a three-month-old kitten. She was outgoing, socialized well enough that she didn't struggle even when Helen passed her over. Being young and energetic, she couldn't stay still, though. Claudia had to hurriedly match her movements to Candy's to keep the kitten from falling.

"My goodness, she is so fluffy!"

"You like cats, my lady?"

Claudia nodded. "I do! I've never thought about keeping one myself, but... Oh, she's so tiny, it's almost criminal!"

Candy was a long-haired cat, hence why she was so smooth and silky. The lack of loose fur on her body suggested Helen was dutifully brushing and maintaining her coat. Peering through the cottony tufts of fur were two perfectly round, orange eyes that looked just like her namesake. The way they gazed up at Claudia was irresistibly cute.

"Is she yours, Helen?"

"I am the one who took her in, but she basically belongs to everyone in the servants' quarters. She's the reason I was late today."

Helen explained that when she awoke, she found that Candy had shredded the blouse she was supposed to wear for today. In an unfortunate stroke of luck, all of her other clothes were dirty.

"I put it on the back of a chair thinking she wouldn't be able to reach it, but lately, she has gotten more muscle in her legs and can jump higher. It was careless of me."

Claudia could see her rationale. Helen started looking after Candy shortly

after she was born, and her ability to get around had been much more limited then. Lured into a false sense of security, Helen hadn't taken into account how quickly kittens developed.

"My roommate and I are of the same height, so I tried borrowing one of her blouses, but..." Embarrassed, Helen averted her gaze. "I, um, made one of the buttons fly off."

Helen had bigger breasts than the average woman by about two cup sizes. The incident had created some hostility with her roommate—which, as she explained, was why she'd been delayed.

Upon scrutinizing Helen's apparel a little closer, Claudia noticed it was much too big for her around the shoulders.

"It sounds like you've had a whirlwind of a morning. Were you able to resolve the situation with your roommate?" Claudia asked.

"Yes. I offered to treat her to cake on our next day off."

"That's good to hear. Your uniforms are all tailored, which does make it difficult to find a suitable replacement. Perhaps that's something we need to look into," Claudia said pensively.

The Lindsays provided their servants with their uniforms. In Helen's case, the premade outfit didn't quite fit her figure properly, so they'd had to specially request adjustments.

"Your family has provided me with several sets of my uniform, so it normally wouldn't be an issue," Helen hastened to reply. "Unfortunately, it's been so overcast lately that I haven't been able to dry what I've washed."

"So the weather's the problem." Claudia turned her gaze on the kitten. "Listen here, little one—you mustn't trouble your mommy, understand?"

Candy stared innocently back at her. Claudia could practically see her reflection in those adorable orange eyes. She squealed in delight. "Goodness, but you are so cute!" She glanced at Helen. "Would it be all right for her to stay

in my room for today?"

"She wouldn't be an inconvenience?"

"Not at all, as long as you are willing to look after her when Syl comes."

Claudia gently set Candy down on the sofa. The kitten took that as an indication that she was free to explore to her heart's content, and she started sniffing about. Watching her restlessly totter around was enough to soothe the soul.

"I take it Candy is the reason you haven't gotten much sleep, then?" said Claudia.

Helen nodded. "Yes, she was much younger when I first took her in. She required milk every three hours. While the other maids would help out, I felt bad asking them to pitch in during the night when they were supposed to be sleeping, so I did it myself." That explained her lack of sleep. "She needed to be under constant supervision back then. Not that she doesn't now, but her health was much more fragile, and she could have passed away without proper sustenance. She's much bigger and more resilient these days."

"Well, we do have a veterinarian who visits regularly," Claudia recalled.

The Lindsay estate had horses in the stables and hounds for hunting, so the veterinarian came by frequently to check up on them.

"There are cats in the stables too, so the vet had no problem answering my questions and providing advice," Helen said.

"Really, there are?!"

"Yes. Your family keeps them out there to prevent mice from getting into the horse fodder. Once Candy is big enough, I plan to send her either to the stables or the granary. Where she goes will depend on how well she gets along with the veteran cats there, so nothing is set in stone yet."

Claudia remembered seeing felines in the gardens before. She had always assumed they were strays, not pets her family had kept for hunting vermin.

"Unlike Lord Virgil, you don't often visit the stables, so it makes sense you wouldn't know about them."

Horseback riding was a pastime for noble lords like her brother. Granted, there were some ladies who learned how to ride by themselves, but Claudia always had assistance when she rode a horse. Whatever the reason, she didn't feel it was right that she didn't even know the faces of the very felines her family was keeping. She was determined to rectify the issue, though her true motivation was that she simply wanted to fuss over the cats.

"Sometime soon, I will have my elder brother take me to the stables," she decided.

Helen smiled encouragingly. "I think that's a wonderful idea. Your brother will be delighted."

According to Helen, Virgil loved nothing more than when Claudia turned to him for help, no matter how trivial it was. She was skeptical he'd find any delight in showing her around the stables, though.

When she expressed as much, Helen told her, "Lord Virgil adores you with every fiber of his being. Of course it will delight him."

Claudia's mouth twitched. "I do appreciate how much he dotes on me," she admitted, though something about this whole conversation weighed on her.

Just what did Virgil tell Helen when the two spoke privately for her to know this much? Claudia was half-tempted to ask for details, but she also feared it'd be kicking the hornet's nest. Besides, she spotted Candy attempting to jump off the sofa, and that was enough to draw her attention away from the subject.

Claudia had some extra ribbon lying about and was using that to play with the kitten when a voice suddenly boomed through the room: "Seems you aren't the least bit lonely without me, Dia."

"Syl?!" Claudia scrambled to her feet. His visit had come out of the blue;

normally, when the royal carriage arrived at their gate, a maid would come to inform her that the prince was here.

"I wanted to surprise you, so I had everyone keep quiet—but this isn't what I anticipated. You have a kitten now?"

"This little one belongs to Helen, actually. I just met her for the first time today," Claudia explained as she passed Candy off to Helen.

Cradling the kitten in her arms, Helen retreated into Sylvester's periphery, taking her place by the wall. He moved to take a seat on the sofa, but Claudia quickly stopped him.

"Wait!" The kitten had been playing there this whole time. She wasn't shedding much, to be sure, but that didn't mean the sofa was free of fur. She motioned to a table with two chairs, one for each of them. "You will be having tea with me, won't you? Let's sit over here."

"Is there something wrong with the sofa?"

"The kitten has been there this whole time. If you sit there, you'll get fur all over you," she said.

Sylvester gave her a look. "Aha, so you're saying you had so much fun playing with her that you completely forgot about me."

"I did no such thing!"

Claudia had been temporarily taken in by the kitten's cuteness, but she hadn't forgotten him. She fully intended to go out to greet him as soon as she received word of his arrival. This was their first time seeing each other in a while. She'd desperately yearned for this day. She had to admit, Candy *had* briefly stolen her affections away, but he was still her priority.

"Pfft..." He snickered in her face. "I was only teasing. It was adorable seeing how innocently you were playing with that kitten."

"You're incorrigible!"

Sylvester grinned at her and caressed her cheek.

How long has it been since I've felt his touch? she wondered. Their casual back-and-forth made her happier than words could express. Her heart swelled with fondness for him while her cheeks flooded with color. And as she flashed a smile back at him, her vision darkened. Not because of an overcast sky, but because his light touch had sent a spark through her—one that brought a lingering memory of the last time their lips met.

"Syl, we can't do this," she insisted, her voice sounding huskier than intended.

This is bad. Heat was building deep inside of her. His golden eyes were so captivating that she had no choice but to wrench her body away to dodge their spell.

"Dia," her fiancé whispered, voice heavy with desire.

Claudia retreated a step, sensing it would be too dangerous to meet his gaze—but there was no way for her to duck out of his arms as they wrapped around her. No, she had to be honest with herself: she didn't want to duck out of them. Claudia ached to be with him, to feel a deeper connection with him.

"Oh, Dia... My beloved Dia." His breath was hot against her face. They stood so close that his hair tickled her cheek as he leaned in.

I know we shouldn't be doing this. I know that, but...

Her body burned with a desperate, unfulfilled longing. When his arms looped around her waist, strong and muscular, she wanted to fall into them completely.

"Syl," she gasped. Her eyes had grown so dewy that she couldn't see anything but him.

"Syl," another voice cut in, low and cold as the ice caps. "Get away from Dee. Now."

"Elder Brother!" Claudia cried out. She instinctively shoved away from Sylvester, and Virgil stomped over and grabbed her by the arm.

The prince refused to release her even then. "I don't remember requesting

your presence, future brother-in-law," he said.

"You have some nerve, taking that attitude with the man who came here expressly to keep you from losing control. Now, release my sister."

"No."

Since they were taller, they glared at one another over Claudia's head. Caught in the middle of their standoff, Claudia clapped her hands over her face. *I can't believe myself. What was I doing in front of Helen and all the other maids?!*

Aside from Helen, the other maids were also standing near the wall, keeping a low profile. They weren't the couple's only audience either; Sylvester's bodyguards were hanging back as well. If not for Virgil's timely intervention, Claudia could only imagine where things might have led. And her imagination was creative enough for her to go red as a tomato.

"Elder Brother, thank you so much for stepping in," she said.

"See, Dee understands why I did it." Again, he glowered at the prince. "You heard her. Let go already!"

"Dia..." Sylvester muttered mournfully, the hurt of her betrayal plain on his face.

Claudia wasn't about to compromise her values to appease him, though. As crown prince, he probably thought nothing of the servants—they were no different than air to him—but Claudia considered Helen her soul sister. This wasn't something she could so easily change her viewpoint on.

Having lost the only ally who mattered, Sylvester reluctantly loosened his embrace and stepped back. He caught her by the fingertips as he put a little more space between them, as if pleading with her to allow him at least this much contact.

Virgil's eyes darted toward her. "Dee, I don't mind joining you two for tea," he offered.

"No, that won't be necessary. You may leave." Although she had momentarily

lost her composure and was grateful to him for stepping in, Claudia didn't want Virgil impeding on her private time with Sylvester.

"If you're sure..." Virgil's face fell. She'd left no room for argument or interpretation. Disappointed as he was, he could read her well enough to know what she wanted. He didn't want to push the issue and upset her.

After watching her brother bow and take his leave, Claudia sat at the table with the prince. This was a much better setup. With the table between them, there would be no more potential for them to get carried away. Sylvester seemed to sense the passionate moment between them had completely passed and obediently took his seat across from her. He'd kept a firm hold on her fingers this entire time—but Claudia missed the heat of his body.

"Helen..." Claudia began, then shook her head. Helen was cradling Candy to her chest to keep the mischievous fluffball from causing havoc. "I suppose your hands are occupied. Could someone else brew us a cup of tea? Something to clear our heads, preferably." She was hoping for a particularly astringent blend to help wash away the feverish desire still simmering inside her.

"Dia, let's have the marriage ceremony right away."

She shot the prince a look. "Please don't ask for the impossible."

No matter how imploringly he looked at her with those golden eyes, there was nothing she could do for him. Not in this regard.

Sylvester released his grip on her fingertips, instead threading their fingers together. "We should just forget tradition," he insisted.

"If the royal faction overheard you, you would lose their support," Claudia reminded him.

"At the very least, shouldn't there be an exception? Perhaps we need reformation."

She smiled despite herself. "As wonderful and ambitious as that idea is, your motivations are anything but pure." Besides, they had already been given an

exception by virtue of their engagement being unofficially recognized by both families. The one-year waiting period after graduation had also been limited.

Sylvester frowned. "I thought you, at least, would understand me."

"I do understand where you're coming from, but..." She hesitated. "If you're struggling to restrain yourself, shall I call my elder brother back to join us?"

"No. That's not necessary." The haze of desire lifted from his eyes, and she found herself suppressing a grin. Claudia enjoyed how much he wanted her, but right now, they both needed to be composed and rational.

"How did your inspection go?"

Sylvester sighed. As reluctant as he was to move on, he must've seen merit in her change of subject because he soon answered, "I wish I could tell you it went off without a hitch, but..."

She waited anxiously for him to finish his sentence.

After mulling it over, he squeezed her hand in his. "I think it would be a shock for a lady such as yourself."

"I can handle it."

This wasn't her first lifetime. Claudia was confident that little would rattle her at this point. She'd already reflected on how ill-prepared for her role she'd been before he left.

I want to share everything with Syl.

Claudia wanted to be someone who could support him, which gave her the determination to be his rock. Having steeled her resolve, she nodded and urged him to continue. No matter how shocking the revelations that awaited her, she would recover.

Sylvester saw the conviction in her eyes, and his gaze softened. "You can tell me if you feel scared afterward. I'll be here to comfort you, so there's no need for you to suppress your emotions." "I know," she said with a smile. "I will definitely have you comfort me if I need it."

His kindness and attentiveness made her love him even more fiercely. It sparked a heat in her chest that spread all the way to her cheeks and the tips of her ears.

I love you so much. Claudia didn't express it, but her affections seemed to reach him, for his porcelain cheeks colored. It wasn't the sort of heat produced by the raging flame of desire; it was tender, like a crackling fireplace gently enveloping her in its warmth.

Oh, how she wished this moment could last forever.

No sooner did she think that than Sylvester cleared his throat and straightened his posture. "As much as I wish we could continue gazing longingly into one another's eyes, our conversation will never get anywhere." With that out of the way, he said, "We apprehended the culprit, but he drank poison and avoided our questioning."

The mention of poison brought memories of that sex worker's suicide rushing to the forefront of her mind, along with the deep regret she'd carried at not being able to save her.

"By which, I assume, you mean he's passed on?" Claudia clarified.

"He didn't die immediately, but the doctors had no idea what sort of antidote would be effective since we didn't know the nature of the poison."

A possibility popped into her head, one she couldn't easily voice.

If it was the same poison as the one that sex worker drank, I know of an antidote. If she said as much, Sylvester was bound to ask her where she'd learned of it. That was a question she couldn't answer. Besides, there was no assurance the culprit was from Bari and had used the same poison.

"However, we did locate his hideout." Sylvester paused and glanced at their audience—Claudia's maids and his bodyguards. "Leave us."

Whatever information he planned to share with her next was so confidential, he couldn't risk it getting out. It wasn't considered appropriate for a man and his fiancée to be left alone together before marriage, but exceptions could be made depending on the circumstances, and if it was only for a limited time. Helen understood as much and slipped out, leaving the door ajar behind her.

Once everyone had left, Sylvester continued, "What we found there was a royal order signed by Raul."

"Wha...? I beg your pardon?!" Claudia's brain didn't immediately register the meaning. Although she had a hard time connecting Raul himself to this incident, a Barian culprit meant the antidote she knew of was likely the key to combating whatever poison they'd used. "That's impossible!"

Why would a foreign operative continue carrying his instructions after reading them anyway? For posterity? Even Claudia, who wasn't necessarily well versed in undercover operations, knew how dangerous leaving evidence like that behind could be. More importantly...

"Prince Raul would never do such a thing!"

Claudia knew how much he abhorred violence. Even if his king had ordered him to do it, he would have found some other way to handle the situation, surely. She couldn't bring herself to believe he would ever sign an order knowing that it could lead to war.

Her denial of Raul's guilt had been instinctive, indignant—and because of it, Sylvester's gaze turned ice-cold.

"How can you be so certain? Or so I'd like to ask, but considering what I know of his personality, I can see where you are coming from," he said.

Hesitating, Claudia quickly added, "I'm sorry for losing my composure."

He waved her apology away. "I don't mind. You were trying to console me, weren't you? I heard all the tea parties went off without a hitch. Yours was an especially big hit. If you two have grown close enough to call him by name, then

you must know what kind of person he is." As much as it seemed like he was praising her, there was something resentful in his tone. It was little wonder why. Even Sylvester realized how bitter he sounded. He heaved a long sigh and added, "I am being jealous, as usual. No need to pay it any heed. I have no intention of getting distracted from the main topic to visit my personal feelings."

"I couldn't possibly ignore your feelings!" Claudia leaned forward in her seat, squeezing his hand. "There is only one man in the world whom I love, and that is you, Syl."

"Right." He grinned. "I'll have you reaffirm that later. For now, I have more to tell you."

Later? Something about that sounded ominous to her, but she was more interested in what else he had to share. Claudia met his gaze, urging him to continue.

Sylvester nodded and said, "There is an extremely high chance this royal order is a forgery."

"As in, you don't think Prince Raul actually signed it?"

"Indeed. Ordinarily, a foreign operative would read any order given to them, then promptly burn it. I was skeptical of its authenticity to begin with, but think for a moment: who would benefit from this?"

If it was indeed a forgery, as he suspected, then it would cement Raul's innocence.

"If this were made public, most people would proclaim this forgery to be part of a plot to bring down Prince Raul, no doubt," said Claudia.

"In which case, His Royal Majesty would lose even more of the people's goodwill. It seems a little *too* convenient, don't you think?"

The person who stood to benefit most from a crime was most often the perpetrator. Though Claudia initially thought this would prove Raul's innocence,

further contemplation made him seem the more likely culprit. It left her mind in knots trying to unravel this mystery. Claudia massaged her temples.

"So, ultimately, you do think he is the one responsible?" she asked.

"It's less Raul I suspect than the faction supporting him," Sylvester clarified. "They're running out of time. That said, I'm sure the crown prince's faction is feeling quite impatient as well."

Claudia furrowed her brow. Raul had been driven out of his own homeland, but at least the people were sympathetic toward him. To her, it seemed the odds were in his favor. "What do you mean? Why would Prince Raul's faction feel any pressure? The crown prince's faction I can understand, since they've earned the ire of the people."

"If Raul continues bouncing from neighboring country to neighboring country, then what do you think will happen back home as the years pass? The people's indignation on his behalf is righteous, but easily forgotten."

It was said that a rumor's lifespan was seventy-five days. No matter how sensational a piece of news was, its impact declined over time.

"This is especially true since His Royal Majesty's reign has brought the kingdom stability," Sylvester went on. "If their peaceful, mundane days continue, then it doesn't matter how much the people value blood ties. Their anger toward the king will eventually wane."

Claudia nodded thoughtfully, finally seeing the picture he was painting. "And as their ire subsides, so too will the fervent voices speaking up in support of Prince Raul."

"Precisely. He may have incurred more of the people's wrath than he bargained for, but for His Royal Majesty, the longer this draws out, the bigger his advantage. It's the opposite for the faction backing Raul's claim: if they don't bring things to a swift close while Raul still has the impassioned support of the people, their chances of success will gradually decline."

She shook her head. "But Prince Raul—"

"Has no intention of bringing things to a close at all," Sylvester finished for her. "I know. That's precisely why those following him will stop at nothing to win. As someone who has now been dragged into this unwillingly, it's incredibly annoying." His voice betrayed no emotion on its own, but the air around him grew increasingly tense. The way his tone lowered to a threatening growl was enough to make Claudia shrink back.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't intend to frighten you."

"It's quite all right. Our people will be the ones paying the price for their indiscretion, so you are perfectly justified in your anger."

Claudia couldn't abide by what Raul's faction was doing either. Why were they dragging in perfectly innocent people with no stake in this? She couldn't fathom what they were thinking, ignoring Raul's feelings.

Is pursuing their own agenda all they care about? Claudia leaned back in her chair, gaze shifting to the ceiling. Why is this happening?

Based on what Sylvester said, it sounded as if Raul couldn't rein in his own supporters anymore. Raul couldn't even bring himself to recognize his own negative emotions. He'd dedicated years of his life assuming he would one day take the throne, and this was how he was rewarded for all that? It was heartbreaking.

Claudia looked back down, meeting Sylvester's gaze once more. He was graciously waiting for her to digest this new information before they continued.

"What does the royal family plan to do with this forgery evidence?" she asked, having regained some semblance of composure.

"We're still trying to decide. If we make it public, then we would be openly backing Raul and his faction."

"Is there no way we can remain neutral?" Claudia asked, then the realization hit her. "Oh."

On one hand, remaining a bystander and refusing to support either side would have no political benefits. On the other hand, making the evidence public would put Raul's faction in their debt—a debt he would be expected to pay once he inherited his brother's crown.

Sensing that Claudia had arrived at the answer on her own, Sylvester said, "If we sweep it under the rug and pretend we never found anything, that will maintain the status quo. Personally, I want to make the people who dragged us into this pay for their audacity."

They could wait to see which way the wind blew or make a preemptive move. There was also the option of forcing the crown prince's faction to buy this piece of evidence from them rather than burying it altogether. Either way, the palace was still debating which faction to align itself with.

"It's much harder to decide considering the type of man Raul is and the surprisingly advantageous position his faction is in," said Sylvester.

Harland had its own spies operating within Bari. Their intel suggested the people were even more incensed with their king than Harland could've imagined. Protesters marched to the palace daily, and those in charge were becoming increasingly fatigued trying to handle the fallout.

"His Royal Majesty prioritizes logic over emotion." With his free hand, Sylvester stroked his chin. "I'll bet the only ones really panicked about the situation are those in the crown prince's faction and the rest of the aristocracy. The king himself probably isn't paying it any mind."

The longer the matter dragged out, the more the crown prince's faction benefited. The people's indignation was fleeting. It didn't surprise Claudia that the king would be unbothered by it. Still, the fact that Harland couldn't make a clear call as to who to support suggested it was an alarming situation for the king as well. If Harland decided to align themselves with Raul and make this forgery public, it could seriously threaten Bari's order of succession.

"His Royal Majesty isn't altogether wrong, but his biggest fault is that he

underestimates the people's emotions," Sylvester added.

Once they wrapped up the more confidential part of their conversation, Claudia summoned her maids back to the room.

"Now then," Sylvester said, squeezing her hand, "tell me how things were here with you."

"There's actually something I wanted to consult you about. But first, I heard a very curious rumor."

She'd heard it from Brian only days ago. Along with the moisturizer, he'd brought her an intriguing bit of information—a small detail he'd happened to notice.

"Apparently, there are Barian aristocrats donning disguises and accompanying merchants into Harland."

A crease formed in Sylvester's forehead as he took in this information. "They're hiding their identity and sneaking into Harland? How was anybody able to see through their disguises, then?"

"Their shoes. For people posing as merchants, their shoes had no scuffing."

Although Brian was part of the aristocracy himself, he often assisted with the nitty-gritty business side of things, which was how he'd picked up on this discrepancy.

"When you leave, take a peek at our butler's shoes and compare them to my elder brother's. You'll notice the surface of the leather on the butler's shoes has worn away and has deep creases."

Shoes naturally showed more wear and tear with frequent use, especially with all the demanding tasks servants—and, in this case, merchants—had to deal with. By contrast, aristocrats weren't expected to do anything strenuous, so their shoes tended to look pristine.

"All right. I will check in with the palace and see if our people are aware of this."

Claudia nodded. There had to be a reason Barian aristocrats were secretly stowing away and slipping into Harland. Given the tense standoff between the factions, it wasn't something Harland could afford to ignore.

"And? What was it you wanted to consult me about?" Sylvester asked.

She explained the strange hiccups that happened at each of the tea parties.

By the time she was finished, Sylvester's gaze had wandered, his expression pensive. "Lady Lestea, hmm?"

"I can't help but think she's up to something." Claudia was even more suspicious of her after Sylvester mentioned that Raul's faction was running out of time. Her mind traveled back to the moment when Lestea requested she spend more time with Raul. With the benefit of hindsight, it was conceivable that such a favor was born of a sense of urgency.

Still, I do need an opportunity to speak with Prince Raul, Claudia thought. She had questions. Unfortunately, she couldn't bring them up in public. More to the point, would I even be able to coax answers out of him?

Raul had shown her considerable favor, but they hadn't spent nearly as much time together in this lifetime as when she had been a sex worker. Even if the odds were stacked against her, she couldn't simply stand by and do nothing.

Why, in her brothel days, had Raul been ejected from the royal family and reduced to a mere aristocrat? It had been bothering her for a while now. If she could only figure out the reason, she was sure it would help Harland come to an informed decision.

"Syl, I'm going to be a villainess."

Ever since Sylvester left for his inspection, Claudia had been thinking hard about the definition of evil—of villainy. It had come as a shock that someone had incited the people to rebel, but Bari wasn't the only nation engaging in covert operations; Harland had its own spy network. They might be willing to cause discord in a foreign country if it meant protecting their own.

Ideals alone couldn't protect a nation.

Her half-sister came to mind as well. To Claudia, Fermina was evil, and to Fermina, Claudia was evil. This became even more pronounced when viewed between countries: good and evil were so subjective that what was considered just by some could easily be considered unjust by others.

It was easy enough to deem a crime "evil," but wasn't there room to consider extenuating circumstances? The world wasn't such a simple place that everything could be painted in black and white.

Calling me a perfect lady is just as subjective. What is just to me could be evil to someone else.

Right and wrong were two sides of the same coin. All that mattered was one's approach. To that end, Claudia decided she would be a perfect villainess—one who didn't make the same choices as Fermina.

"You're giving up being the perfect lady?" Sylvester said.

She shook her head. "No, no. To Harland, I will still be the perfect lady, just the same as before."

Those golden eyes stared her down. "Hold on. What's going through your head?"

Claudia smiled and replied, "Please create an opportunity for me to speak with Prince Raul alone."

"Absolutely not! Dia, I will not allow it!" Sylvester roared, looking much like a cat hissing with its hackles raised. She could see the anger clouding his eyes. As intimidating as it was, she refused to back down.

"Don't mistake me. I do not wish for us to be alone together in a secluded room or anything of that sort. I simply want an opportunity to speak to him without any third party overhearing us."

"No."

She gave him an entreating look. "Syl, I might be able to get information out

of him."

"No." Sylvester shook his head, silver hair swaying against his forehead and catching the light. "There is no need for you to do anything."

Although he was refusing her, his open show of emotion warmed her heart.

"We will only talk," she promised him. "There will be no touching."

"It doesn't matter. Why does it have to be you? Why not someone else?"

"Because Raul feels uncomfortable with women."

Sylvester's jaw dropped. "What...?"

For as perceptive as he was, even he hadn't noticed that. In his surprise, all the anger in him dissipated like a snuffed flame.

I'm sorry for being such a terrible friend, Prince Raul, Claudia apologized inwardly, feeling guilty for sharing his secret without permission. But she had no choice. If she didn't tell Sylvester the truth, he would have used a woman who looked like her to try to wheedle information from Raul, thinking the other prince favored her only for her looks. That would be an exercise in futility—not to mention, it could further traumatize Raul.

"That's why using another woman to try to seduce him won't work," Claudia continued. "But he seems to feel some measure of comfort with me."

"Dia, I am begging you, please don't do this to my heart." The look in his eyes communicated what he hadn't yet said openly: Sylvester could sense Raul had feelings for her. His face puckered. "You are so enchanting. It wouldn't surprise me at all if you were the one exception to the rule for him. Knowing that, how can you expect me to let you two be alone together?"

"Because this is something only I can do. Let me turn the question back on you, Syl. Why are you so against this?"

"I love you. I don't want you spending private time with another man."

She stared him down, unblinking. "Is that really the only reason?"

Claudia didn't buy that jealousy was his only motivation. Sylvester knew how valuable this information could be.

After a moment of hesitation, Sylvester admitted, "I don't want to drag you into national politics."

He didn't want to use her as a tool. That, she suspected, was his *true* motivation.

"Once I become the crown princess, you won't be able to protect me anymore."

"No, I'll still protect you. I will not be like Bari's king!" His voice was thin, almost strained, as he forced those words out.

Before she realized it, Claudia was out of her chair and cradling his head to her chest, her fingers gliding through the silken strands of his silver hair. It meant the world to her that he cared so much. His deep love and protectiveness amplified the same feelings in her.

"I know, beloved," she cooed. "But this is my own selfish request. I want to be useful to you." Not only to Sylvester but to Harland in general. Claudia was proud to call herself a citizen of this country. "However much you treasure me, remember that I am a duke's daughter. I was prepared from a young age to be a political tool."

In fact, she had anticipated a loveless political marriage. That was a natural facet of being an aristocratic lady. The whole reason she and other women her age strove to be perfect flowers was because of the political advantage it would then afford their families.

Sylvester knew this already. Extracting information from foreign royalty was ordinarily outside a lady's purview, however, hence why he was so adamantly against it. That wasn't about to stop Claudia, though.

"All we will do is talk," she said. "Trust me."

Claudia would continue being the perfect lady to Harland, while also

becoming a villainess to Bari. Her convictions were steadfast.

"I can never win against you." At the same moment he capitulated, he snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her closer, drawing her onto his lap.

"Syl?!" she squeaked in dismay. "I'm heavy."

"You're not. Dia, tell me that you love me."

It seemed this was what he meant earlier when he said he would "reaffirm that later."

When Claudia lifted her gaze, she found herself reflected in those golden eyes, framed by silver lashes. For a moment, she was too captivated to do anything but stare. *He's so beautiful*. The way his hair fell across his forehead resembled moonlight. His skin was smooth as porcelain, as if an artisan had carefully crafted it, but blood flowed beneath it. Sylvester was as human as anyone else. It made her yearn to feel his touch and explore his body.

Not right now. Claudia had to control herself. It was only by upholding her own sense of justice that she could become the villainess she desired. And for her, that meant maintaining proper decorum. Not that I sound very convincing to myself when I'm already sitting on his lap.

His body heat seeped through his clothing and hers. Leaning into it, she told him, "You are the only man I love, Syl."

"Again."

"You are the only man I love, Syl."

He hungrily repeated his demands again and again, and each time, she diligently responded. It went on for so long she found herself almost slurring her words.

"I love you too, Dia," he said finally, planting a chaste kiss on her forehead. Next his lips went to her hair, and then her cheek. They would have soon gone to her mouth, had she not lifted a hand to block him. "What's the problem? You said you were going to be a villainess." "A villainess as far as Bari is concerned," she corrected him.

"Couldn't you afford to be a bit of a villainess with me too?" His gaze slid discreetly to her chest. Evidently, the feel of her breasts against his head from a moment ago hadn't yet left his mind.

Was I being too reckless? It was only once she found his eyes drawn to her chest that she remembered her dress left her collarbone completely exposed. It was modest enough to keep her cleavage hidden, but with their proximity, it was easy enough for his mind to paint a picture of what she looked like beneath her gown.

"A gentleman shouldn't stare so openly at a woman's chest," she scolded.

"If my gaze seemed crude, then I must apologize." Sylvester paused for a moment, eyes moving back to hers. "I will have Virgil accompany you for this little rendezvous, then. Knowing him, he won't feel the least bit intimidated by Raul."

The conversation had taken a sudden jump back to the original topic, but Claudia had no trouble following. She eagerly nodded. "Of course. Thank you so much for humoring me!"

"Well, it's not something I can decide completely on my own. There's no immediate danger to your person, so I doubt Father will oppose it—but I won't go out of my way to persuade your family. Understand?"

"Urgh..." She winced. "Yes, of course, I understand."

Claudia had overcome the most challenging hurdle by convincing Sylvester, but she'd forgotten that it would be almost as difficult to win over her family. Surely my elder brother will see the merit in my idea, won't he?

She wanted to believe he would, at least. Just to be on the safe side, she would enlist Helen to help her devise a way to persuade him. At least she had breached the first barrier. That was one step toward her goal.

As Claudia took solace in her small success, Sylvester ran his fingers through

her hair. She glanced at him and said, "I want to speak to Prince Raul directly, to find out how he feels about all this."

There was much she could deduce from the circumstances, but only Raul knew what was really in his heart.

"Indeed. I'm curious to hear what's going through his head too. He's a pretty decent guy." Sylvester sighed. "If he weren't interested in you, I would've been happy to give him my support."

"Oh? You two are closer than I thought, hmm?"

"Right now, I want to drive him out of the country," he grumbled.

"Let's try to keep a cool head here."

Claudia couldn't risk Sylvester letting his personal feelings get the best of him. He'd wind up doing the same thing Bari's king had done. Eager to find a different subject, Claudia thought of Lestea. She was the one who'd been so eager to get Claudia and Raul together so that they could talk, even if her motives were entirely different from Claudia's.

"What about Lady Lestea's invitation?" she asked.

"The tea party she plans to hold in the girls' dormitory?" Sylvester's eyes narrowed. "I do wonder what her aim is, limiting guests from Harland to one person per party. But given the venue, I see no harm in you attending."

That being the case, whatever opportunity they created for Claudia and Raul's private conversation could change how she approached Lestea's invitation. It was better to leave Lestea to her own devices for now and just keep an eye on her.

"Would you mind letting me down soon?"

Sylvester tilted his head. "I see no issue with you remaining here on my lap."

"My legs are going numb."

"It's the price you pay for getting your way."

"Oh, honestly..." Claudia said, though she couldn't help but smile at how transparent he was being. The desire still burned hot in his eyes.

The sentiment is mutual, which is what makes it so hard to rebuff him. As much as she longed to stay in his arms forever, she had her reputation to uphold. Just a little longer and then I'll have to get up.

No sooner had she decided that than Helen's shrill cry split the air. "Candy, no!"

The kitten had behaved herself this entire time, but she had grown tired of being held and sprung into action. Claudia had played with her until Sylvester's arrival, so the exhaustion was probably all that had kept her quiet until now. Once she had wriggled free of Helen's grasp, Candy ran straight toward Claudia. She leaped into the empty chair Claudia had left behind, scampered across the table, and flew right into Claudia's chest in the span of a few seconds.

Since Claudia hadn't anticipated this, she wasn't able to catch the poor kitten in her arms. With no proper foothold, Candy began to slip.

"Eek!"

As the kitten slid down Claudia's chest, she panicked, unsheathing her claws and catching the front of Claudia's dress. For better or worse, Candy avoided a catastrophic fall by pure virtue of how lightweight she was, but her flustered scratching had yanked down the fabric of Claudia's gown, leaving her cleavage almost entirely exposed.

"Don't look!" Claudia cried, slapping a hand over Sylvester's eyes.

This shouldn't be so embarrassing for me!

Her whole face was piping hot. Knowing Sylvester might have seen sent her composure right out the window. Just thinking that his beautiful golden eyes might have glimpsed more than they were supposed to made her heart nearly jump out of her chest.

"I think you should be more concerned about covering up than whether I saw

or not!" Sylvester complained, probably thinking of his bodyguards catching a glimpse.

With her only free hand, she cradled the kitten against her. "As long as you keep your back turned, no one else will be able to see!"

The feel of the kitten's silky fur against her skin was soothing enough to help her recompose herself.

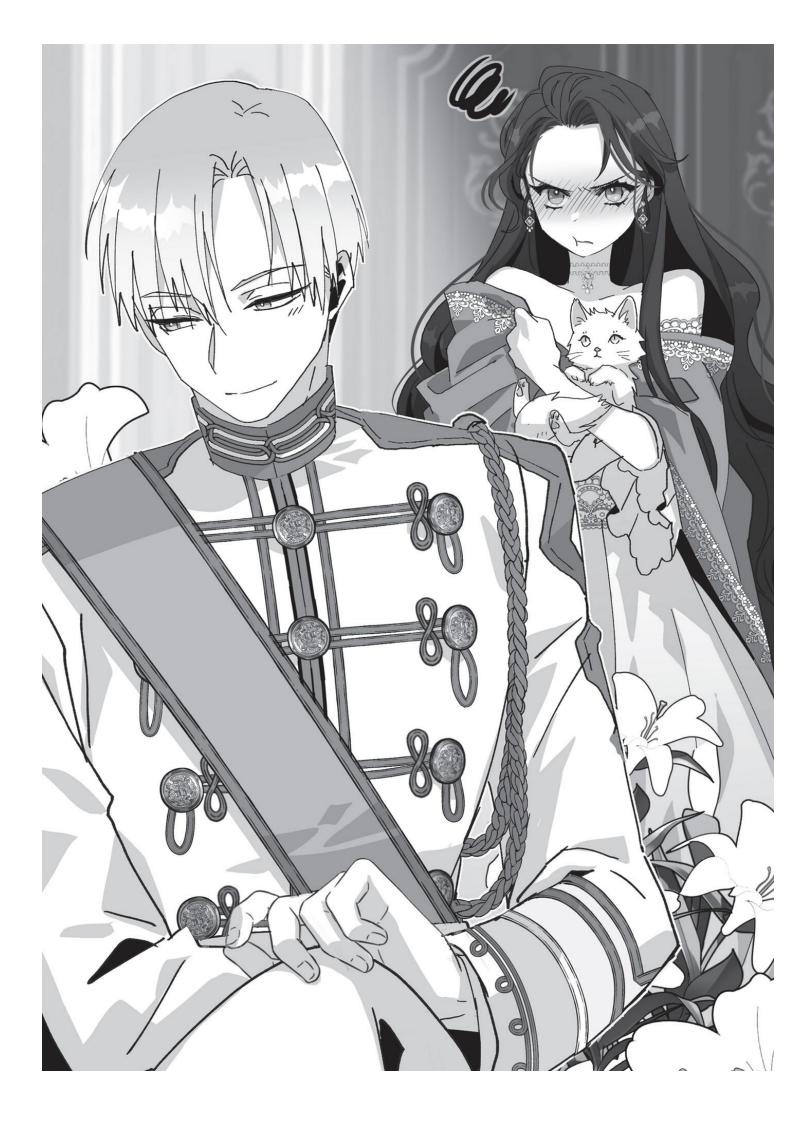
"Oh no," Claudia muttered as she inspected the damage. "She stretched out the fabric." No matter how she tried to readjust her collar, her cleavage was readily visible.

"My deepest apologies!" Helen was in tears as she raced over, head bowed.

Claudia handed Candy back to her and asked one of the other maids to retrieve a shawl. She was the one who had insisted the kitten stay here rather than go back to the servants' quarters, so she didn't want Helen blaming herself.

"She surprised me, but there's no need to worry. She didn't catch my skin."

Helen had warned her that the kitten had grown more athletic as of late. It was Claudia's own fault for being taken in by the little fluffball's cuteness.



"Could you remove your hand from my eyes?" Sylvester asked.

"No, please wait until my shawl is here."

Fortunately, while they were having that exchange, her maid rushed in with said shawl in hand. Claudia appreciated how capable the woman was, having located a shawl that matched her dress perfectly from color to fabric.

"There, you can look now," Claudia said, removing her hands once she had the shawl fastened around her shoulders.

"Sadly, I feel as though I missed out on something riveting while my eyes were covered." Sylvester gazed at her ruefully, and all Claudia could do was force a bitter smile. "As punishment, I think we should feed this kitten fish every day."

Her face fell. "You saw, didn't you?" Even though she'd covered his eyes almost instantly, there was enough of a time lapse for him to catch a glimpse.

Sylvester plastered his usual tepid smile on his face. "I have no earthly idea what you mean. I merely passed judgment on the little creature."

He'd played dumb then, but when top-quality fish arrived for the kitten from the palace days later, Claudia was certain he *had* seen.

Chapter 17:

The Crown Prince Reminisces

 ${}^{\prime\prime}\mathbf{R}_{\text{AUL... RAUL, HMM..."}}$ Sylvester's fingers drummed against the desk in a steady rhythm. The sound echoed pleasantly in the otherwise silent room. "I don't like it."

A crease threatened to form in his brow. Was he so irritated because Raul had developed feelings for Claudia?

No. This isn't the first time someone has fallen for Dia. Romance aside, there was a veritable mountain of men who lusted after her gorgeous body. No matter how petty Sylvester was, even he couldn't afford to concern himself with every sap who fell for her.

Then was it because Claudia was sympathetic toward him?

That's not it either. In Harland, most people feel for Raul and what he's going through, even though they don't place as much importance on blood ties as the Barians do.

Raul's charm and amiability were widely appreciated among Harland's aristocracy. For as much as he seemed like a ladies' man on the surface, people knew he would never act frivolously out of lust.

I never imagined that was because he's uncomfortable with women. Sylvester hadn't picked up on that part, despite the fact that he prided himself on being just as sensitive to people's expressions and emotions as Claudia. Guess that means I still have a long way to go.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. A nostalgic memory popped into his mind.

"Do you understand, Your Highness? Bari Kingdom may be an ally, but you

mustn't forget that they are also a potential enemy."

"I know."

"Whatever you do, you mustn't allow them to sense what's really in your heart."

"I know."

"That means none of that running around like wild animals you do at the palace." Sylvester's tutor was referring to an earlier incident just days ago when he, Tristan, and Virgil raced around together.

"Enough already," he snapped, glaring at the man. "I understand there's a time and place for things!"

The palace was where the royal family lived. He knew he could let loose there. There was no need for this lengthy lecture.

"You mustn't act obstinate either."

"I know, I know!"

"Nor must you brush people off as you are now."

Sylvester caught his bottom lip between his teeth. His mind was preoccupied with thoughts of how best to shut his tutor up. By the time they arrived at their destination, he was convinced that tuning the man out and not responding was the best choice.

"Don't forget to keep a warm smile on your face."

Alas, even ignoring his tutor hadn't been enough to convince the man to keep quiet because this trip was pivotal; it would reveal whether his lessons had paid off or not. Sylvester understood that, so he could see why his tutor was being so insistent—but it didn't make the man any less insufferable.

Their trip had brought them to Port Brenach, a city in the region directly under the royal family's control. There was to be a meeting between Bari and Harland.

When Sylvester stepped out and felt the sea breeze on his skin, he was refreshed. This place wasn't at all like the capital.

Not only was this Sylvester's first time meeting foreign royalty, but it was his first time meeting a foreign royal his own age. The current heir to the throne was just ten years old. He was determined not to lose face in front of the other boy.

"Okay, Sylvester. Let's race each other to that tree!"

"Pardon?"

Raul betrayed his expectations spectacularly. From the first moment they met, he wore a great big smile on his face and insisted they chase each other in the garden of the estate where they were staying. This, despite Sylvester's tutor insisting he not run around like a wild animal. But Sylvester wasn't about to let himself lose on account of that.

"Whoa!" Raul exclaimed with genuine surprise. "You're faster than you look! But what about climbing that tree?"

"You said we'd only race to the tree!"

The two were neck-and-neck before the goal line, and to Sylvester's dismay, Raul wanted to set the bar even higher.

"What? You're telling me a prince of Harland can't climb trees?"

"Ngh!"

Sylvester had no experience climbing trees, but he managed to mimic Raul's movements and shimmy up the tree. One of the maids shrieked in horror behind him, but he ignored her.

Next I just have to reach for... Wait, I can't reach? Whereas Raul had already experienced a growth spurt, Sylvester's arms and legs were still considerably short. If he only were a bit taller, he could grab the thick branch where Raul was standing. As he struggled to figure out another way up, a brown hand reached toward him.

"Here," Raul said. "Grab on and get up here."

"I thought this was a race?"

"It was, to the tree. Climbing it was just...for fun, I guess?"

You're just making up the rules as you go, Sylvester thought bitterly, but he accepted Raul's hand and pulled himself up onto the topmost branch.

"The view from here is incredible, isn't it?"

When Sylvester looked down, he spotted maids hurriedly throwing down pillows and hay to provide a soft spot for the boys if they fell. It wasn't until he glanced up that he saw what Raul was actually referring to: the sky, painted in evening hues. In the far distance, he could even see the ocean stretching out toward the horizon. The sea breeze ruffled his hair.

Raul plopped himself down beside Sylvester, his own fluffy shock of hair windblown. "With this, we're officially friends!"

"We can't be."

Their respective countries were on good terms now, but there was no telling when that might change.

"Why not?!" Raul demanded, cheeks puffed out in indignation.

Sylvester broke into unrestrained laughter. For that moment, he decided to forget the rules his tutor had drilled into him and that he'd be in trouble for it later. This, he swore to himself, was the last time he would openly express emotions in front of others.

When the following day arrived and he plastered that perfect mask on his face, Raul grumbled that he'd "become boring," but such was the way Harland royalty conducted themselves. It was not without good reason, which Sylvester understood.

Each occasion they met after that, Raul always had an affable smile on his face, even when they reunited under less auspicious circumstances in the present.

"He hasn't changed a bit." Sylvester's fingers continued to drum out a consistent rhythm. "Nor has the fact that we could easily be enemies under the right conditions."

By the time he opened his eyes again, one of his personal Shadows had entered the room. The rhythm Sylvester had been tapping on the desk was a secret code for summoning them.

"Prepare a female Shadow," he ordered. "Father has given his approval."

"As you command, Your Highness."

The king had bestowed some measure of authority upon his son when he agreed to Claudia's plan. He'd commanded Sylvester to make a decision regarding what to do with the forgery they had obtained. This was yet another task to measure his worthiness, much like when his father had sent him to Glacester to give that speech. The king hadn't missed the opportunity to bring up the past, saying, "After all, you and Raul were close enough to climb a tree together."

I suppose it was Father's way of being considerate.

A monarch couldn't account for personal feelings when public interest was at stake, but that didn't mean one should entirely divorce their political decisions from all emotion. So then, what was the best route for him to take here?

Once the Shadow disappeared to carry out his order, Sylvester closed his eyes again, turning that question over in his head.

Chapter 18:

The Villainess's Plot

ALTHOUGH SYLVESTER had graciously agreed to let Claudia speak with Raul, there was still one more tough hurdle that she had to overcome before she could put her plan into action. After seeing the prince off, she dropped by Virgil's room. She had Helen return the kitten to the dorm after the earlier mishap; she couldn't possibly bring Candy with her.

When first she broached the topic with Virgil, he furrowed his brow. But compared to Sylvester, he offered his support much more readily. Curiously, he did so only after repeating the same phrase she'd heard from Sylvester earlier: "I can't win against you, Dee."

"Are you also opposed to me getting involved with politics?" Claudia had to ask.

He caressed her cheek. "We're aristocrats. Of course I'm not opposed. Even women dip their hands into the political sphere, if only indirectly. All I'm worried about is *you*, Dee."

Claudia peered up at him. Virgil had the same tapered eyes that she did, but as he gazed at her now, they were soft and full of affection.

"I know your engagement has been unofficially recognized, but there is no need for you to push yourself to get so involved," he said.

"I am not pushing myself. All we'll be doing is talking."

"You're trying to extract information from him, right? There's no two ways about it—that's intelligence work. The guilt isn't eating you up, is it?"

Claudia couldn't confidently say it wasn't, but she also thought he and Sylvester were a bit too protective. *Not that I can blame them. Neither of them know about my time in the brothel.*

Sex workers used their bodies to earn money. Remembering the daily mental toll that had taken made this seem insignificant in comparison. Even so, the gentleness of his touch warmed her heart. It was touching to know Virgil worried about her.

If only we could resolve all this in a win-win. How she wished she could keep everyone from getting hurt or having their heart broken, but reality wasn't so kind. Claudia understood that painfully well, so the best she could do was pick the path of minimum casualties.

My hands are too small. But at least there are people who will hold them.

Although there was only so much she herself could do, she at least had people she could rely on. When Claudia closed her eyes, several faces came to mind. By the time she opened them again, she found eyes the same azure blue as her own staring back.

"I will be all right because I have you with me, Elder Brother."

The most heartening part of all this was knowing she wasn't alone.

The backdrop for Claudia's meeting with Raul was the academy, which was still on break. Their cover story was that the royal family had charged Claudia and her brother with giving the Barians a grand tour of the grounds and facilities. No one could complain about Claudia being chosen, since her tea party had been the most resounding success. Besides, Raul wasn't the only one in attendance; all the lords and ladies from Bari had been invited.

The group was alive with excitement and anticipation as they stood at the front entrance of the academy. Lestea was among them. Claudia and Virgil arrived together to welcome their foreign guests.

"Hola and welcome," she said, electing for a more personal greeting since this wasn't a formal event.

The Barians responded in kind with their country's greeting, bringing a smile

to her face. It was strange how such a short, simple word made her feel that much closer to them. The feeling seemed to be mutual, if Raul's grin was anything to go by.

"Hola," he said. "Even wearing the same school uniform as everyone else, you still look like a rose in full bloom. Be honest—you're actually a flower fairy in disguise, aren't you? Won't you invite me alone to your personal garden?"

"You honor me with your words. You look quite handsome in our uniform yourself, Prince Raul."

Everyone had donned the academy's uniforms to make the school experience tour feel more authentic.

Claudia couldn't let herself be distracted by Raul's honeyed words. After all, he tended to compliment all women this way. Which is why there's no need for you to let it bother you so, Elder Brother.

Virgil was standing beside her with an icy look on his face that said, *Don't you* dare sweet-talk my baby sister.

Fortunately, any hostility he felt toward Raul melted away when the foreign prince spoke his next words.

"Standing beside your older brother, you two look as pretty as a painting. I can see the strong bond between you. It shines like a gem."

"As much as I deeply appreciate your gracious praise, I fear I'm unworthy," Virgil responded.

"There's no need for you to be so humble," Raul assured him with a smile.

"The academy endorses equality in its halls between all students, regardless of their status outside."

"Alas, I have already graduated."

"That doesn't change the fact that you are still older and more experienced than me. Besides, I don't feel comfortable with all that formality. Please, feel free to call me Raul."

"In that case, you may call me Virgil. You'd better not regret this decision later. I tend to be a real nag, apparently."

I'm willing to bet Tristan is the one who told him that, Claudia thought, her red-haired classmate immediately popping into her head. She wondered if he'd gotten in touch with Louise since returning to the capital.

Having convinced Virgil to speak more openly around him, Raul was grinning from ear to ear, his eyes alight. *That smile of his is infectious*. This was especially true since he was being entirely genuine when interacting with members of the same sex; unlike with women, there was no need for Raul to put up his guard. Where Sylvester kept a lukewarm smile permanently plastered on his face, Raul's expression was ever-changing, transparently conveying whatever emotions he was feeling. That wasn't to say he never put on an act, but by and large, Raul was very straightforward.

"If you *are* planning to nag him, please do. He never listens to a word I say," Lestea cut in, dipping her head toward Virgil. Her short, aqua-blue hair shifted forward, spilling across her forehead. The male uniform she'd donned suited her so perfectly, it was nearly impossible to judge her as anything other than a young nobleman.

"Very well," said Virgil.

"I hope you're only saying that to be polite and you don't intend to put it into practice," Raul teased. Their banter had already dissolved any tension in the air, making the atmosphere more peaceful and lighthearted.

As soon as the tour began, Virgil was in his element.

"I can see why your brother was the student council president," Raul said. "Sylvester will be taking over that position this next term, I assume?"

Claudia nodded. "He will be, yes, though the president was originally supposed to be a third-year student."

Last year, they conducted an election to determine the next president, but

with the sudden announcement that Raul would be studying here, the results became irrelevant.

"Ah," Raul said, catching on. "I assume things changed because of me?"

"The candidate who was supposed to take the position happily yielded it. No matter how much the academy insists all students are equal, it takes no small amount of courage to sit in command over members of two different royal families. The student in question didn't feel comfortable with that."

Virgil was the only person she could think of who would readily command Sylvester without compunction.

"True," Raul replied, stroking his chin. "Trying to tell Sylvester what to do would be a real challenge."

As per their plan, Virgil led the rest of the Barian lords and ladies on ahead while Claudia lagged behind with Raul, gradually putting more and more distance between them and the party. Lestea remained glued to Raul's side until Claudia shot her a look, at which point she hurried on ahead to join the others. Since it was her idea for Claudia to speak privately with Raul, Claudia knew Lestea wouldn't be able to pass up this opportunity.

It didn't take long before it was just the two of them. There were some bodyguards trailing behind them, but they remained a respectable distance out of earshot.

Now I only need to be cautious of whatever Shadow Syl has watching us. I assume I'll be all right, so long as I keep my lips hidden from their view.

Sylvester had appointed a Shadow to keep an eye on her, even though he knew there was no real danger to her in this mission. Covert operations and intelligence gathering was their area of expertise, so they would have no trouble reading lips. Claudia had a card up her sleeve she didn't want Sylvester to know about. Namely, information from her days in the brothel.

Thank goodness for the matching fan Lou gave me. Since it was a gift, Claudia

had taken to frequently using the folding fan. It wouldn't seem the least bit strange if she covered her mouth as she spoke.

Claudia's gaze wandered to Raul, who was keeping pace beside her. He had to have noticed her slowed pace was intended to distance them from the rest of the group.

I need to sidle up closer to him. If she stretched out her arm fully, she might barely brush her fingers across his arm. They were too far away for a private conversation.

"To our right—oh, goodness, my apologies!" Pretending to point something out to Raul, she stepped closer, nearly colliding into him. She pulled herself back, putting half a step between them. Any other lady who was trying to seduce a man would've let their bodies bump against each other, expecting the man to catch her. "Is this too close?"

"N-no," he stammered. "I'm okay with you being this close. I should be the one apologizing for making you walk on eggshells." His dark-brown eyes shifted away from her. It was bashfulness she sensed from the gesture, though, not disgust.

Claudia flashed a smile. "Everyone has something they're uncomfortable with."

Raul disliked women who openly vied for his affections. Even though she knew he was fond of her, Claudia couldn't be too forward with him.

The push-and-pull dynamic is essential both physically and mentally. It was best to vacillate and wait for the other side to move in.

Another important principle was the sway of the body—just enough to draw a man's attention and reel him in. In the brothel, the veteran sex workers had taught her that just as many noblemen had hunting as a hobby, all men had a hunting instinct. Anything that moved caught their eye. Black, in particular, was the most eye-catching color of all. That was why soldiers avoided it when trying to conceal themselves.

Never have I been more grateful to my parents for blessing me with naturally wavy black hair.

Claudia carefully tucked a lock behind her ear, dragging her fingers through the silky strands to highlight the way it moved and caught the light. Her hair was carefully combed into a half-up style, with only part of it pinned by a long ribbon in back—a calculated move on her part.

I must be careful not to seem too obvious. Claudia had been trained in the art of psychological warfare at the brothel, and she was only just beginning to unveil some of her tricks. I have to say, I thought this would be much harder.

There was a palpable nervousness in the air, all stemming from Raul, and it washed away the tension inside Claudia.

Maybe it's because I'm so used to Syl. Compared to Sylvester, Raul's response was much easier to read—and much more innocent. He would glance at her sidelong, only to immediately avert his gaze out of fear she might notice. He's going to make me feel embarrassed.

Claudia was accustomed to the adult version of Raul. He was shrewder, more capable of keeping up a facade than this man before her. He still had a habit of averting his eyes when he was embarrassed, but not quite as openly as his younger counterpart. I suppose that's only natural, since he hasn't fully matured yet.

Raul looked like an adult, but his mind hadn't yet caught up with his body. Not that that was any surprise; even Sylvester made missteps when it came to romance.

Since Raul made no attempt to bridge the little gap left between them, Claudia decided to strike up conversation about a person they were both familiar with—primarily because she was curious to get his thoughts.

"Prince Raul, tell me—what do you think of Prince Sylvester?"

"What do I think of him? Well, when we first met, I thought he seemed like a

statue." He frowned. "I'd sure like to peel that mask off of him someday."

"What mask?" Claudia knew exactly what he meant, but Sylvester had a reputation for being a gentleman who always had a warm smile on his face. It was rare to hear someone say something like this about him.

"His expression never changes, does it? It bothers me. It's like he's wearing a mask."

"So that's what you mean. Yes, now that you mention it, I suppose he does always seem calm and composed."

She and Sylvester were more forthright with each other about their emotions now, but in the past, it had been like a game of cat-and-mouse between them.

"I would love to see a look of surprise on his face," Claudia admitted.

A mischievous smile played on Raul's lips. "Let's make that happen someday. We'll do it together."

Claudia giggled. "All right, let's."

It sounded entertaining. She wondered what they could possibly do to pull one over on him. *Oh, this isn't the time for that. I've nearly forgotten my role as Prince Raul's tour quide.*

Providing a tour was only an excuse, but it was still necessary to keep up pretense and accomplish her mission.

They were just passing a corridor leading out to the inner courtyard when she thought of making a detour to show him a nice spot to rest. Claudia lifted her gaze, about to communicate her intent, when a sudden gust of wind rushed over her, whipping through her hair. Long, black locks fluttered in front of her, blocking her vision. She nearly shivered from the chill when she glimpsed Raul's hand moving toward her. Presumably, he intended to help comb out her disheveled hair. He came close enough that she could even make out the length of his nails.

"Prince Raul, you mustn't!" Claudia shifted her fan in front of her face, proud

of herself for having the mind to stop him just in time.

As soon as his fingers bumped against the surface of her unfolded fan, shock registered on his face. "Sorry. I nearly did something inappropriate, didn't I?"

"Please be more careful," Claudia said curtly, combing her hands through her hair to fix it herself. Once finished, she snapped her fan closed and pointed it at Raul, much like Louise had once done with her. "I would ask that you please be more cognizant of our respective stations."

"Yes, I know. That was careless of me." Raul was openly remorseful, his shoulders sagging and his face crestfallen.

Claudia wasn't truly angry with him. In fact, seeing how distraught he was flooded her with guilt. She fanned herself and quietly added, "At times, our status feels more like a burden than a blessing."

If she were common-born, there would be no need for her to be so strict with him.

She stroked the back of his hand with her open fan, all the way to the tips of his fingers, the motion infused with an unspoken sadness at their inability to touch each other directly. I can only wonder if he'll pick up on that message.

Claudia wasn't going to use Sylvester's style of chasing any vulnerabilities he saw in the midst of conversation. No, she was taking a gentler approach, worming her way into Raul's good graces so she could extract information from him. She purposefully gave the impression she was angry, only to offer a glimpse of loneliness hidden beneath. Clients always adored how much she struggled to be forthright because there was an endearing dissonance between that side of her and how strong-willed she appeared on the surface.

When she attempted to draw her fan back, Raul caught it in his grasp. That was the answer Claudia was waiting for.

"You really..." he started to say, a scorching heat in those dark-brown eyes. She couldn't quite identify the emotion hidden beneath, but what Claudia knew for certain was that there was nothing innocent or sweet about it anymore. His grip was steadfast; any attempt to extract her fan was futile. This was the first time she'd seen him look so mature since she awoke in this lifetime as her younger self.

"Prince Raul," she murmured, staring into his eyes.

His eyes shuttered, face pinched with anguish. After expelling a long, pained sigh, he said, "Never mind. Forget I said anything, please." His strained voice sounded as conflicted as he must've been on the inside. It spoke to his affection for her.

He really does love me, doesn't he? That much was obvious to her now, but she had no way of measuring the depths of that emotion. Hard to believe he would wind up walking the same path in this lifetime. Who could have predicted that? Especially when the time they'd spent together in this lifetime was so limited. Or perhaps he fell just as quickly in my last one. It was possible she simply hadn't noticed.

There was no way for her to know either way now. This should be something to rejoice at, given her determination to be a villainess, yet the recurring heartbreak made her gaze waver.

What a hypocrite I am. Claudia inwardly scolded herself for being so negative.

She had made her decision. She was going to find her own path and become the ultimate villainess. *Besides, Prince Raul has no intention of doing anything with those feelings.*

The sweet words he offered when they first saw each other were a cliché template. He was more friendly with her than other people, perhaps, but there was a solid line between them that he had no intention of crossing. He wouldn't have told her to forget the moment they shared otherwise. They both knew Bari's king would never recognize any engagement with him. If his heart was set, then he'd be all the more tight-lipped. Things weren't going to go as easily as she'd hoped.

Regardless, I refuse to stay passive. Claudia stole a glance at the group ahead of them, which Lestea had joined. The last thing Claudia wanted was for this to go the way Lestea planned.

Breathing a long sigh, she cleared her mind of all unnecessary thoughts. The passion in Raul's eyes was fiercer than she'd anticipated, but the whole point of their private rendezvous here was for her to speak to him and, hopefully, hear his thoughts.

My brothel tricks helped endear me to the client and get close to them. It was time to go back to the basics, using the same techniques she'd employed when she first awoke in this lifetime and won over Virgil.

I won't be playing with his feelings. If she did, she would be playing right into Lestea's hand. It would be one thing to do that with someone she had genuine feelings for, but this was different.

"Nothing goes the way we want, does it?" Claudia said. She didn't specify what. It was for Raul to fill in that blank however he wished.

Raul had already released his hold on her fan.

Claudia smiled at him and resumed pointing out places of interest. "But," she continued after a long stretch, "if not for our stations, I would never have been able to meet you, Prince Raul."

She was searching for an opening; she wanted to know how Raul felt about Lestea.

"Indeed. I suppose you're right..." His voice trailed off, his gaze fixed on Lestea ahead.

Is this what Syl was talking about?

The way Raul watched her was like that of a parent worried for their child. His eyes didn't overflow with longing. If anything, he looked troubled, as if he couldn't help but keep tabs on her.

Something uneasy weighed on her heart. If I am going to bring her up, it's

now or never.

Raul beat her to the punch, blurting out, "Did Lestea put you up to this? Is that why you went out of your way to speak to me?" His face fell. The bitterness in his eyes reminded her of dark chocolate. When she didn't immediately respond, he added, "Don't listen to what she says. Don't trust her. In fact, for your own sake, stay away from her."

In contrast to the ominous words, his voice was light and airy, followed up with a carefree smile. Claudia assumed he was doing all this to avoid tipping anyone off about the content of their conversation. She plastered a similar smile on her face, which masked the shock she felt over this unexpected warning. Here I was about to bring her up, and he cut me off in a most spectacular fashion.

Unbeknownst to Raul, she and Sylvester were already wary of Lestea, especially since she was the head representative of Raul's faction.

"She'll be nothing but poison to you," Raul continued.

"You think she will do something to me?"

"There are times when she will go to any lengths to achieve her goal."

That he would say that made her wonder if Raul already knew about the secret operative in Port Brenach. Given his status, it wouldn't be surprising if he'd received a report. There was still a chance, however slim she believed it was, that he really had given the order. Granted, if he did hold the reins of his own faction, then he'd have accepted the favorable circumstances and not bothered to warn her off.

Claudia paused to consider what action Raul was likely to take, based on what she knew of him. He had a strong sense of responsibility. *Maybe he intends to use this as justification for stepping down from the royal family.*

It wasn't inconceivable. His own faction was so out of control that he couldn't keep them in check. Rather than reassert his control over them and face off

with his own older brother, Raul was the type to shoulder everything to his own detriment.

Of course. After all, he's a pacifist.

Bari's king would readily agree to it, since he was all too eager to reduce Raul's power and influence.

Claudia's mind raced. There was more information she needed, but how would she get it?

"Listen, Claudia," Raul said abruptly, interrupting her thoughts. "Imagine for a moment there is a carriage racing down a road, out of control. There is a fork in the path up ahead. On one, there is only one person, but on the other, there are five. If you had the power to influence the direction of the carriage, which would you lead it toward?"

Was he bringing up a hypothetical situation to confuse her? No. Raul had no way of knowing Claudia already suspected he was going to step down from his position. She quickly cleared her head so she could digest his question and see it from his perspective. She'd heard of that situation before. At its core, he was asking whether she thought sacrifices were appropriate if it meant saving others. There was no right or wrong answer; she'd been made to think critically the last time she'd faced a similar dilemma in conversation.

Unfortunately, this hypothetical question was rooted in reality, and reality always required answers.

When I fell ill, I made a choice to quarantine myself. Her mother had made the same decision. Those affected by the plague had neither medicine nor means of a cure. It was all they could do to stay away from their loved ones and prevent the spread. In the past, there were even villages that sealed away the infected and burned them alive. It was immoral, yes, but no one could deny it had minimized further casualties.

There were times when those in positions of power had to make life-or-death calls.

As far as Claudia was concerned, this question only had one answer: "As much as it pains me to see anyone sacrificed, better to lose one than to lose five. That is the path I would choose."

In such situations, it was better to sacrifice a few to save many.

Raul nodded. "My older brother wouldn't hesitate to make that call." Other than the current succession struggle, Bari was a relatively peaceful and stable nation. Raul attributed that to his brother's reign. "Thanks to his swift decision-making, casualties are always kept to a minimum. It's not something I could do myself."

He didn't openly say as much, but he was indicating that he didn't think he was fit for the crown.

That's not true at all. Claudia instinctively denied the notion.

She understood how things must look from Raul's perspective. Ever since he was a boy, he'd always watched his brother from the wings—and to him, Bari's king probably seemed like an unsurpassable giant.

The first thing that entered Claudia's mind, however, was the moment she shared with Sylvester only days ago, when he expressed concern over her and swore he wouldn't be like Bari's king. It had meant so much to her. She'd never felt his love more than she did then. If Raul was right and his brother was infallible, then Sylvester's concern was misplaced and unnecessary.

But I don't believe that for a minute.

Even if Sylvester acquiesced in the end, his hesitation had strengthened her faith in him. Could the same be said of the Barian king's administration? She doubted it. Otherwise, why would Raul's faction have grown so strong?

The hypothetical situation Raul offered required an authority figure to see people as numbers—but people weren't just numbers.

"Prince Raul, I don't believe there is any one right answer in the world," Claudia heard herself say. When she felt his gaze on her, she continued, "I

believe there is much to be learned from how rational His Royal Majesty can be. There is merit in using such pragmatism as a guiding principle, to be sure."

But what if those five people turned out to be enemies? What if by saving them, you incurred the wrath of those closest to you, triggering a revolt? There were an endless number of possibilities that could change the situation. Being rational and pragmatic only solved one aspect of the issue. It was a good guiding principle, but not a hard-and-fast rule.

"As political leaders of the past have done before us, we can approach issues solely concerned over the effects on our population. But who is to say that present or even future generations will appreciate such decisions?"

Sacrificing one to save many didn't necessarily guarantee that the people as a whole would be happier. Making decisions based purely on how they benefited national interests could still cause resentment and discontent.

"Isn't that why we're here, to feel the gravity of those decisions? To really weigh them and fumble around for what we feel is the best answer?"

There was no such thing as an infallible king. Even God was capricious.

Claudia wanted Raul to focus on the bigger picture rather than assume that a decision was right because it seemed the most rational. Bari's king had his own way of finding his answer to problems, and so did Raul.

"But I *did* make the wrong choice. There's no mistake about that," Raul insisted.

As badly as she wanted to probe him for further details, Claudia restrained herself. Her intuition told her that now wasn't the time to press him.

"If you made the wrong decision, then you simply need to rectify it," she said.

"Rectify it? Not take responsibility for it?"

Claudia was reminded of a similar conversation she'd had before.

"Everyone has moments of irrationality. Everyone makes mistakes," she said, reciting the words Sylvester had offered her before.

When she first awoke in this timeline, she was beset with a constant fear of screwing things up. Sylvester had taught her that any mistakes she made could be corrected.

"The important thing is that you realize when you've made a mistake and work to fix it. You are still responsible for your own decisions, so yes, there are times where you must hold yourself accountable for them."

Was accountability really all that mattered? Was it wise to apologize and let the mistake hang instead of trying to fix it?

His dark-brown eyes met hers.

"Prince Raul, you have the ability to correct your mistakes."

Claudia knew him well enough to say that with confidence. He was younger in this timeline, so perhaps there were some differences—but at his core, he was the same.

"For some reason, when you say that, I want to believe it."

She smiled. "That's because it's the truth. Or would you rather give up?"

Claudia had no way of knowing the nature of his mistake. It was obviously something significant to him if he thought he needed to take responsibility for it. Either way, rectifying a mistake was never easy. Claudia had found that out herself. It was especially true in a world full of gray areas, with no right or wrong answer, where one's sense of right and wrong directly contradicted someone else's.

It's vexing. At times, it annoyed her how much she floundered, unable to figure out what was right and wrong. Deciding to become the perfect villainess had given her some direction, at least. It was her way of upholding her own sense of righteousness. And that's why I won't give up.

Reality was merciless and unforgiving, which was precisely what motivated her to fight, to make the world a more enjoyable place, and to protect those she loved.

"I don't want to give up," Raul blurted.

It sent a ripple of emotion through her. His sincere gaze held hers, and her skin turned to gooseflesh.

I knew it. He is worthy of the crown.

Whatever window had been cracked open earlier was shut now. There should have been no breeze snaking its way through the halls, yet she felt one on her skin. It was the winds of change, a renewed vitality flowing out of Raul. It overwhelmed her. There was something familiar about it and not the least bit unpleasant. Claudia was reminded that even the same uniform could give a different impression depending on the person wearing it.

"Thank you," Raul said. "It's like the little window I was looking out opened wide to reveal a whole new world."

"All I did was offer my own viewpoint. Anyway, those words aren't my own. Someone else shared them with me."

His brows rose in surprise. Then he flashed an invigorating smile. "Really? Well, you're the one who shared them with me, so you're the one I'm going to thank."

Claudia's face fell as the realization hit her. *Did I just dig my own grave?* She was supposed to prod him for information to discern whether he was going to step down from the royal family. If so, Harland would sell the forgery to the crown prince's faction to benefit the realm.

But what if what I just said made him rethink his plans? If there's a mistake so critical he thinks he needs to take responsibility, it could only be that whole plot in Port Brenach, right?

From the way he spoke, she suspected Raul already knew his faction had spun out of control—and knowing him, he would try to shoulder the blame. What was I thinking, muddying the waters like this?

Now there was no telling whether he would step down. His decision was

more unpredictable for her interference.

As much as Claudia wanted to cradle her head in her hands, the bright and cheerful expression on Raul's face convinced her that maybe this was for the best. She had meant everything she said to him. All she could do now was report what she knew and trust Sylvester to make the best choice.

If he's exasperated with me, I'll just have to apologize and do better. Though she had a feeling he would only smile and tell her he'd expected as much.

There was only so much time left before the tour ended. Claudia couldn't afford to waste these precious minutes moping. *Plus, if he's grateful to me, that should make it easier to ask him questions.* There was one thing in particular that had been niggling at her.

"A bit of a change of topic, but is Lady Lestea free to do whatever she likes?"

If Raul put her under house arrest, there would be no need for him to caution Claudia the way he had.

Raul scratched his cheek as he considered her question. "As pitiful as it is for me to say this, confining one bird to a cage wouldn't accomplish anything. If only I could clip her wings for good."

"That makes sense. She's a very intelligent bird, after all," Claudia said, nodding thoughtfully.

Without concrete evidence, it would be impossible to bring her to account for her misdeeds. He would also need specific charges to levy against her if he wanted to convince the rest of the Barian aristocracy.

The same could be said for her and Sylvester. They shared Raul's suspicion that Lestea was up to something, but they let her continue unchecked. The royal family couldn't afford to bring unsubstantiated accusations against foreign nobility. The forged royal order only proved that there had been political maneuvering going on in Port Brenach, not who the real culprit behind it was.

It's so frustrating that I can't work with Prince Raul to resolve this. With her

status, that was impossible. It would look like an official political move if she got involved, both to Raul and to the public. Bari's king had people here keeping tabs on Raul, and they would be quick to report if she expressed support for him. Ultimately, the only option left to her was to treat him with the sort of aloof formality any other Harland noble would express with the Barian king's younger brother.

But the point is that even Prince Raul has his eyes set on Lady Lestea. She had to have done enough to rouse his suspicions. What's this bad feeling I'm getting, then? A knot of unease had been forming in her stomach ever since she saw the way Raul looked at Lestea. The more rational she tried to be, the more this disquiet grew.

There had been no hatred in Raul's eyes. Claudia had become accustomed to sensing people's enmity, thanks to how often she'd sensed it in Fermina. But there was none of that from Raul, only concern.

Why didn't he ever talk to me about her in our last lifetime? Lestea had been at his side for so long, and Raul treated her with the fondness of a parent for their unruly child.

At first, Claudia assumed he begrudged her for being the catalyst that led to his removal from the royal family, and that was why he'd never brought her up. If he hated her—loathed her to his core—then it made sense why he wouldn't want to talk about her.

But no, there had been no such emotions in his gaze.

Maybe that will change after events play out? Had something happened to make him hate her? Had she done something to stir that much anger in his heart?

As her stomach continued to flip-flop, Claudia pressed her fan over her mouth and said, "Since you expressed so much gratitude toward me a moment ago, might I ask you something?"

It didn't matter to her if he thought this came out of the blue. Her intuition

told her she had to ask him this question right now.

"What is it?" He offered her a winning smile. "You're welcome to ask me anything anytime you like."

Claudia casually leaned in toward him so she could whisper. She motioned toward the school building with her finger to give the impression to anyone else looking that she was still showing him around the academy. Behind her fan, her lips moved. This was a gamble.

Raul's eyes widened. Sadness flooded those dark-brown eyes as they stared hauntingly back at her.

The risk paid off. Claudia had won.

Chapter 19:

The King's Younger Brother Accepts the Truth

"H ow FOOLISH!"

Raul slammed his fist into the wall, the noise echoing in his deserted room. He already knew the crown prince's faction was scheming to strip him of power—and that the people's ire mounted more and more as each day passed.

"But for them to drag Harland into their treachery..."

Involving Harland was their way of escalating the severity of the matter, making it that much more difficult to ignore. Raul knew immediately that this wasn't his older brother's doing. After all, his brother had instructed him in the field of politics from an early age.

The king had silky-soft hair with slight waves, dark-brown eyes, earthy skin, and sensual features—much like Raul. They shared these unique characteristics, being born of the same mother and father even if decades removed.

The women of the Bari royal family found it increasingly difficult to conceive, perhaps because of years of inbreeding with the same bloodline. Thus, Raul's birth was a cause for great celebration.

And because his brother had already solidified his position as the next in line at that point, Raul never had any chance of being a political opponent to him.

While everyone else lavished Raul with love and attention, only Raul's older brother was mercilessly strict with him.

"Don't waste time."

His brother's tone was always flat when he spoke. Even when the young Raul ventured into his study, the older prince's gaze never left the stacks of documents he was tending to. Still, he was a constant presence to Raul in lieu of

their busy parents—and he never slacked on Raul's education, even if he could only see to it between his duties.

Raul admired his brother immensely. He remembered the most minor details about him, such as how long his hair was and how he looked when he ran his fingers through it.

He's so cool!

Part of what made his brother so blindingly brilliant was that he was far more mature than Raul, physically and mentally. It didn't matter that he always wore a gruff expression, that he wouldn't meet Raul's eyes, or that he kept everyone else walking on eggshells around him. The important thing was that he had never rebuffed Raul, which meant that he didn't hate him, at least.

"Doesn't it get exhausting working all the time?" Raul asked.

The older prince shook his head. "Emotion is nothing but background noise. Discard it."

"Discard it? How?"

"If you strive to think logically and rationally, you will understand in time."

Anytime Raul asked a question, his brother would always answer. The older prince stiffened if Raul tried to touch him, but he didn't smack Raul's hand away. He was a strict man, there was no mistake about that. He wouldn't yell, but the cold way he stared sent a chill down Raul's spine.

Raul wanted his brother's acknowledgment more than anyone else's.

Through the time they spent together, he had come to understand exactly how his brother thought: he valued pragmatism over all else.

"Why do they refuse to heed my older brother's stance?!"

The crown prince's faction had to know it was to their benefit for this conflict to drag on. No matter how passionate the emotion, it couldn't last forever. Not

even anger. There might be lingering dissatisfaction toward the king when all was said and done, but as the crown prince grew and the people looked forward to his reign, they would ignore the issues of his predecessor. It was natural for the people to be elated when the nation was on the cusp of change.

Raul's own faction stood as a negative example. All of them had anticipated Raul being the next to sit on the throne, and when the rug was pulled out from under him—and by extension, them—they were furious. Furious at the king, who gave Raul no authority. Furious at Raul for not trying to claim power for himself.

That was why Lestea had acted on her own.

"Why? Why won't you respect my feelings?"

He knew exactly why: they were dissatisfied with him.

Lestea was the head of his faction. She, along with House Degani, had long insisted that Raul should be the next king. But for all their support, Raul only shook his head and denied them. It was little wonder they were fed up. Their foolishness was an effort to push Raul into deciding once and for all.

"I knew. The truth is, I knew."

Yes, as much as he denied it, the truth was plain. His older brother, who had abandoned him at the first opportunity, hadn't changed a bit. Raul was the one who mistakenly believed his brother had listened to his suggestions in earnest—that he'd taken Raul's opinion into account because they were family. Brothers. He thought, erroneously, that his brother valued the blood connection they shared.

He didn't. The King of Bari only listened to his opinions because they were beneficial to him. Raul was a tool, and his brother was not the type to keep something that had the potential to obstruct him close at hand. His brother not hating him was irrelevant because his brother considered emotions useless in the first place.

Surely he won't feel the same way about his own child, though, will he?

The crown prince was his flesh and blood, the long-awaited heir. As far as Raul was concerned, the crown prince was his adorable baby nephew. He wanted to believe his brother would love the boy. He prayed he would, and he also hoped that his brother wouldn't treat his nephew like a disposable political tool—the way he had with Raul.

"That's all I want, to hope for the best for them and leave things be. Why must you get in the way?!"

There was no need to fight over the line of succession. What reason was there for Raul to strip his poor nephew of his birthright?

Besides, Raul knew better than anyone that his brother wasn't the emotional sort. If he could toss his own brother aside so easily, then none of the aristocracy was safe, no matter how high-ranking they were. The more people loudly proclaimed their support for Raul, the more his brother would take the situation seriously.

"None of you understand the core truth."

On one hand, if the king showed no compunction with Raul, then he wouldn't show mercy to anyone else who obstructed him. On the other hand, his brother was practical enough to appoint people to his administration based entirely on skill—with no regard for their political affiliation. If it proved more advantageous to him, he would ignore the crown prince's faction for the benefit of the country. That was just the kind of person he was.

"No," he muttered to himself, "I suppose there are those who understand."

Several lords and ladies of the aristocracy had accompanied Raul to Harland. They all hailed from accomplished houses, some of them important earldoms resting on the border—people who couldn't easily be replaced. They had means to escape retribution if things soured.

No one vulnerable had followed him. That made it easy for Raul to turn his

back on them. He had no obligation to abide by their selfishness.

"Why is Lestea the only one who's different?"

Unlike the rest, Lestea was putting everything on the line. She was the one who had brought him the intel about the opposition's scheme. If only he had assigned someone to keep an eye on her back then.

"I never dreamed she'd take advantage of their plot by herself."

Raul had no way of proving she was the one responsible. All he knew was that this foreign operative in Port Brenach had been instructed by someone within his faction. There was evidence this man had traveled on the same ship they had. Then, after his suspicious activity in Port Brenach, Sylvester returned there to give a speech to the people.

All Raul had to work with was bits and pieces of information, from which he'd deduced Lestea's involvement. She had it in her to manipulate the evidence and throw the opposition's plan right back in their face. Her actions had been openly suspicious too. The moment they arrived in Harland, she set off for the capital ahead of him.

"She must know I suspect her."

With such suspicion cast on her, it would be more difficult for her to make a move, even if she'd left behind no evidence.

"There's no coming back from this."

Lestea had crossed the line when she got Harland involved. Not even Raul could turn a blind eye anymore. He could already picture Sylvester, incandescent with rage at a foreign provocateur stirring unrest within his own borders—within his own family's lands.

He probably considers me an enemy now. Raul knew from the beginning that they were potential enemies in the making. Still, the time they'd spent laughing together was genuine.

"I guess it's time for me to pay the piper."

Raul could never have imagined Lestea would go this far. He'd obviously never had control of the reins. It was proof he wasn't suited to be a ruler.

"Things are turning out just the way my brother thought they would, I'm sure."

How was he going to prove Lestea's crimes? That was the real issue. It was possible Harland had dug up evidence in the course of their investigations. Would Sylvester admit it honestly if asked, though?

"No. There's no way he would."

If Raul wanted something from Sylvester, he had to offer something of equal value. Who in their right mind would agree to share intelligence with a man who planned on relinquishing his claim to the throne, and with it, his status as a royal? No, it was in Harland's best interest for Bari's internal unrest to continue —for Raul and the crown prince to fight over the crown.

"I know I don't have to be fully honest with him, but still..." It was scary to imagine the consequences if he wasn't. "Knowing him, he'd find the absolute worst way to get back at me, and do it with that unsettling lukewarm smile on his face."

It would be one thing if Raul were the only one to suffer, but he knew better than to believe it would end with him. Lestea's plot had endangered Harland's citizens, which was the number one thing Raul wanted to avoid. Even if she hadn't harmed innocents, if her actions negatively impacted Harland, its people would be the first to suffer.

"Feels like I'm boxed in from all sides."

It was like the path ahead was growing dimmer and dimmer.

Amid Raul's inner turmoil, a messenger from the Harland royal family arrived with an invitation to tour the academy.

said with a smile.

Raul eyed her warily. Lestea looked right at home in a male uniform, and something about it didn't sit right with him. Especially since she completely ignored the way he was glaring at her.

I can't let you get any closer to Claudia.

He'd thought Lestea couldn't possibly get up to too much trouble while they were abroad, but she had easily proved him wrong. The fact that he wasn't getting as much information as readily from his countrymen suggested there were people who prioritized Lestea over him. They probably thought she was a shortcut to achieving their interests.

I can't snub them all since there are some who genuinely support me. In fact, there were more who did than didn't. Some of them were doing their best to protect him in their own way, even if their methods didn't align with his values.

If only I could make decisions the way my brother does, without waffling back and forth. Life would be so much easier. But Raul wasn't able to abandon them just because their perspectives differed. He had every intention of being held accountable along with them, Lestea included. Though Raul doubted she was operating entirely for the benefit of her house.

Whatever the case, once Lestea left his side to join the other lords and ladies up ahead with Virgil, Raul resolved to warn Claudia. All he knew for certain was that Lestea was up to something.

Seems to me Claudia went out of her way to create this opportunity for us to speak.

Enough was enough. It was time to stop dreaming.

Any entertainment Harland provided was a chance for them to extract information out of him. That was all this was. Lestea had only given them a wide berth because it was Claudia at his side.

I'll bet she said something to Claudia. Raul had warned Lestea not to do

anything unnecessary, but it seemed she hadn't heeded his order. Like him, she had taken a liking to Claudia. The reason she wanted to pair the two together wasn't solely because she hoped for the Lindsays' political support.

No, Lestea wanted Claudia as an ally.

Instead of wasting time teasing me, why don't you wake up and realize your own feelings first? Raul thought begrudgingly.

Any resentment vanished when Claudia's blue eyes met his. Raul averted his gaze. Seeing her bashful expression would only strengthen his desire to draw her into his arms. He had to conjure an image of Sylvester's face to cool his desire. Imagining his own mother's body was equally effective at sobering him.

Ugh, but that really does a number on me mentally.

Even in the name of keeping a clear head, this was tough. Raul was happy to be able to spend some time with Claudia, whatever the circumstances. Knowing Lestea was scheming and that politics were involved somehow didn't stop his body from stirring in Claudia's presence. His eyes were glued to every little thing she did.

This is no time to be fantasizing, he told himself. Raul couldn't get her wrapped up in his problems. He would just have to imagine the beauty beside him was an illusion. That was the best route.

Out of nowhere, a gust of wind rushed through the hall, and somewhere in his mind, he feared it would carry her off with it. A gnawing anxiety gripped him. It was an irrational fear that she would turn into mist and disperse before his eyes, disappearing somewhere far beyond his reach.

"Prince Raul, you mustn't!"

It wasn't until his fingertips smacked into her folding fan that he realized what he had done. Panicked, he apologized.

What am I, a complete idiot?

Claudia was no illusion. She was a living, breathing human being. She was one

of Sylvester's bridal candidates, a woman who might one day be crown princess. More than that, she was a young woman. Regardless of his royal status and Bari's cordial relationship with Harland, it was completely inappropriate for him to touch her so recklessly. He was a man—a gentleman. And no, being royalty was even more reason he needed to show better discretion.

Don't forget you're a prince.

There were eyes watching him too.

Since he'd made up his mind not to involve Claudia, his own recourse was to shut out his feelings. He had no need of negative emotions, much less love. All those things were a hindrance in politics. He had to get rid of them. That was what his brother had taught him.

And he's actually accomplished it.

If his older brother could do it, so could Raul. That was what he kept telling himself, but it never seemed to work. Especially where other people were concerned. Raul always found himself wondering if there was another path aside from the one his brother chose.

It doesn't matter. My feelings for Claudia are my problem. Thus, he reasoned, he needed only discard his love for her like he had his negative emotions. It's fine. I can do it, just like I have before.

As Claudia scolded him—rightly—for his indiscretion, Raul pushed his feelings down and sealed them. Not that it lasted long. Claudia herself interrupted him by sliding her fan down the length of his hand. It gave the illusion that she was touching him directly. All the blood in his body shot to his head.

"You really..." he started to say.

Won't let me forget how I feel about you, will you?!

Raul wished she had left him well enough alone. He had hoped she would be disgusted by his thoughtlessness. If only she had shot him a cold look, the

raging fire in his body would've cooled. Instead, those blue eyes were filled with compassion. She wasn't angry at all, even when he seized her fan.

Don't be kind to me. It was selfish of him to think that, he knew.

His feverish desire was like boiling water, dissolving the last shreds of his reason. He had to metaphorically dump ice on it to maintain composure. Even that was an exercise in futility, but it provided him time to draw in a deep breath, at least. As he exhaled, he forced himself to peel his fingers from her folding fan. There was no way he'd be able to tamp down his desperate yearning for her if they were still physically connected, however indirectly.

The fire raging within him refused to fade. It was through sheer willpower that his reason remained in control.

"But if not for our stations, I would never have been able to meet you, Prince Raul," Claudia said.

"Indeed. I suppose you're right..."

Had he been of lower status, he would never have been able to meet her gaze, not when she was a duke's daughter. Relinquishing his claim to the throne would mean stepping down from the royal family entirely. Once Claudia officially became the crown princess, it would be difficult for him to ever meet with her, no matter how high-ranking an aristocratic title he had.

Still, perhaps holding myself accountable along with Lestea and the others is the best route, he thought, gaze wandering up ahead to where Lestea had joined the rest of their countrymen.

If there was a large discrepancy between his rank and Claudia's once the dust settled, then she would officially be out of his reach. Raul would have no choice but to give up on her. Then he could forget the desire still stirring within him. With that hope in mind, he gave Claudia his warning. He wanted her to stay clear of Lestea until he had her under control.

Claudia's eyes went round. A giggle slipped past her lips.

I never realized she could make expressions like this. Her surprised face was so adorable, it made his heart ache. Why must I be so attracted to you?

Raul wished he'd never realized his feelings for her—that he'd never put a name to them. But now it was too late. He couldn't ignore them.

I like Claudia. I like her more than words can express.

Sadly, knowing what his emotions were and labeling them changed nothing. He had no choice but to give up on her.

I like her so much. The feelings swelled stronger and stronger within him. I really do.

"Like" wasn't strong enough to describe it. He loved her.

As the sudden urge hit him to proclaim it aloud, Raul distracted himself by changing the subject.

Claudia showed no hint of being bothered by his sudden question. She drew her dainty, porcelain fingers across her chin as she contemplated her answer. Raul couldn't take his eyes off her.

It can never happen—we can never happen—but I love her so much. His thoughts were stuck in an endless loop, as if he'd lost all sense of reason.

Only after he'd thrown out his query did he realize how boring it was. Why did I bring up an out-of-control carriage, of all things?! There were so many other things I could have asked her about, like the academy, for one.

Oh, how he lamented his own foolishness. Girls didn't like discussing these sorts of ethical dilemmas. He knew that. Kind as she was to give him an answer, Claudia had to be shaking her head at him on the inside.

Why am I like this?

Was it because, somewhere deep down, Raul knew what a hopeless coward he was? Was that why he couldn't even put on a more debonair facade and instead let his pessimism fly right out of his mouth?

"It's not something I could do myself," Raul said, comparing himself to his older brother.

Come on, why would you say that? Women like a man who's overflowing with confidence! At least, all the women until now had preferred that. Why was he doing the exact opposite? And with the woman he had feelings for, of all people?

Logically, Raul knew he was making fatal misstep after fatal misstep, but he couldn't bring himself to act suave when he wasn't. His gaze fell to the floor, unable to meet Claudia's. His bangs fell before his eyes, and his lips stretched into a bitter half-smile. *There's only one answer: because I'm worthless.*

Raul couldn't compare because he let his emotions get the best of him. If only he were more like the king. If he could make logical judgments all the time, life would be so much easier. He wouldn't be showing such a vulnerable side of himself to Claudia right now.

Just smile, Raul told himself. If he put on a mask and joked about the situation, he could still salvage things. All he was doing was acting the part of the heart-stricken prince, the complete opposite of his normal self. That's right. None of this is real. I don't have any negative emotions.

"Prince Raul."

When she called his name, Raul resolved to look up at her with a smile—to give off the impression of a mischievous child, triumphant at having pulled one over on her.

"I don't believe there is any one right answer in the world."

He hadn't anticipated that answer.

What expression am I making right now? When his eyes met hers, he was almost blinded. Claudia was like the morning sun after waking up and drawing back the curtains. Her blue eyes were filled with sincerity but too blindingly bright to look at directly.

Raul's mind went blank.

All he could focus on was how radiant she was, burning a hole right into his retinas. As if to relieve him from the pain, tears welled in his eyes.

Since his thoughts still hadn't caught up with the situation, Raul could only bring himself to numbly respond, "But I *did* make the wrong choice. There's no mistake about that."

"If you made the wrong decision, then you simply need to rectify it," she said.

"Rectify it? Not take responsibility for it?"

How is it you're able to tell me exactly what I want to hear? The power of her words seeped into him. Like liquid fire, it entered his bloodstream and spread throughout his body, causing his heart to palpitate. Veins protruded on his tightly clenched fist. And why do I feel such acceptance and validation?

For so long, Raul had compared himself to his brother and felt inferior. There were times he followed his heart even when someone told him he was being foolish. He never knew whether that was the right answer. There was always that seed of doubt. No matter how much he tried to ignore his negative emotions and seal them away, they would always bubble back to the surface.

He felt nervous about the level of responsibility people wanted him to shoulder. Nervous that he might be making the wrong decisions, that being a pacifist was an excuse to run when he shouldn't, that his brother might hold enmity toward him, that he might struggle to adapt to this unfamiliar land he'd suddenly been sent off to.

These were all things he hadn't let himself acknowledge, but Claudia's words had resolved all those anxieties.

"For some reason, when you say that, I want to believe it," he said.

Was this what it was like to feel whole? It was like the aching void within him had been filled, and his heart was now bathing in the warm rays of the sun.

"That's because it's the truth. Or would you rather give up?" Claudia asked.

Raul blinked again and again, each instance capturing her face in full detail, searing it into his mind's eye. He carefully tucked each snapshot away in his memory.

Can I really do it? He couldn't help but doubt himself. Yet he didn't feel the familiar debilitating anxiety creep in when he did. At the very least, Claudia believed in him. She thinks I have the power to do it.

Then that was the answer.

"I don't want to give up," Raul blurted.

I don't want to give up on you, no matter how difficult the road may be.

The world opened up before him, as if he'd only been gazing at it through a tiny window with curtains half-drawn before. But that wasn't all. *I can move more freely now too*. Raul could throw open that window and leap outside, letting the sun bathe him in its warming light. *Yeah. Nothing beats freedom*. Especially for the heart—he could think whatever thoughts he wanted, love whomever he wanted, and no one could punish him for it.

"Thank you. It's like the little window I was looking out opened wide to reveal a whole new world."

"All I did was offer my own viewpoint. Anyway, those words aren't my own. Someone else shared them with me."

His brows lifted. "Really? Well, you're the one who shared them with me, so you're the one I'm going to thank." Yes, you. The woman I love.

There was still a mountain of problems waiting for him, with no guarantee that she would be the one beside him helping him face them. Raul could only hope for a little more time together. *No, I can't waste my time hoping. I need to take action.*

It wasn't over. Raul could still change things. I won't let it end like this.

After night fell, morning would come again. A new dawn would rise.

Don't count yourself out yet. Don't be pessimistic! If there was no path ahead,

he would just have to make one—forge his own!

Raul's gaze slid back to the group of his countrymen up ahead. Some were scheming to wrest more power for themselves by following him, while others simply doubted his brother's ability to rule. All of them had different motivations for being here, but there was one thing that bound them together.

They all believe in me.

If Raul had been completely incompetent, no one would have given him a second glance. None of them would have followed him all the way to Harland.

How have I been so blind this entire time? There were already plenty of people who respected and approved of him. He'd taken that for granted until Claudia reminded him of it. What did it matter if some were in it for their own self-interest? Sacrificing a little to appease them was a small price to pay if it meant getting their support.

I have a feeling Lestea will laugh at me for this. Raul could picture the grin on her handsome face. As much as it annoyed him, he decided to preoccupy himself with more pressing issues rather than dwell on it. What Lestea did in Port Brenach was grievous, but knowing her, it was in pursuit of his best interests.

I need to use anything I can to my advantage. I need to be more cunning, Raul told himself. It was time to see what hand life had dealt him and examine each card before playing them.

A voice, quiet but pleasant like a bell, filled his ear. "Since you expressed so much gratitude toward me a moment ago, might I ask you something?"

"What is it? You're welcome to ask me anything anytime you like."

Based on their conversation until this point, he knew she was doing this for political reasons. Whatever she wanted to ask, it didn't pertain to any subject she'd learned in school. Her query about Lestea was spurred on by something more than curiosity after he warned her to stay away. Being a duke's daughter,

she had access to more sensitive information than most women her age. Raul was genuinely curious to find out what was going through her head.

Her question was even more shocking than he'd anticipated.

Chapter 20:

The Villainess Gets Dolled Up

A CRINOLINE WAS A STIFF FRAME worn under the dress to give it more structure. It maintained a dome shape under the petticoat. That also meant it was donned directly over the underwear.

As Claudia gazed at herself in the mirror with it, to make sure everything looked right, she was struck by how boorish it looked without a gown over it.

It's definitely incomplete without the petticoat and skirts.

Her look for today involved emphasizing the volume of her skirts, so she wasn't putting on a corset. Claudia's daily exercises had toned her body enough that she had a good figure even without it. Plus, the crinoline did a sufficient job of naturally emphasizing the perfect lines of her body. The only problem was that it made her garments heavier than normal, which was why she opted out of wearing heels. Not that anyone would notice, since her skirts would hide her feet.

"Lady Claudia, are you sure you'll be all right going alone?" Helen asked.

"Don't worry. I will have bodyguards with me."

Claudia was getting ready to head out to Lestea's tea party. That was the whole reason she was dolling herself up, but Helen couldn't help fussing over her. Perhaps part of her concern was due to the crinoline, which would limit Claudia's movements. It would be nearly impossible to open or close doors without a maid there to help her. Still, if she had her bodyguards, they could take care of things on her behalf if the situation called for it.

"After consulting with Syl, I decided it's best to be considerate of the hostess," Claudia continued.

She had already managed to speak privately with Raul thanks to the academy

tour, but that didn't seem to be enough to appease Lestea. She'd still sent the invitation for Claudia to attend her private tea party. Of the invitees, Claudia was the only one from Harland. Deep down, she was nervous.

"Not bringing you or anyone else with me will help give the impression that I trust them completely."

The truth was just the opposite, but Claudia wasn't about to tell Helen that. She was being honest about wanting to convince Lestea of her trust, if only to lure Lestea into a false sense of security. Their plans would go all the smoother if Lestea gave her an opening. She's definitely up to something.

After wrapping up her preparations, Claudia turned toward the exit and her smile faltered. Normally, she only needed to open one of the double doors to leave her room, but that wasn't enough with the crinoline on. It took up a significant amount of space.

"Please, Lady Claudia, do be careful," Helen said.

"Of course. I'll be off, then. I hope you'll let me pet and cuddle Candy when I return."

At the mention of the kitten's name, Helen smiled. "Certainly. I'll be sure to brush her beforehand so she doesn't shed too much on you."

"Thank you, that would be wonderful!"

Claudia clambered into the carriage and took her seat, waiting for someone else to close the door for her. She peered through the window and offered Helen a wave. Shortly after, the carriage lurched forward.

"Now, I wonder what Lady Lestea plans to do?" Claudia muttered to herself as she reached for the present she and Sylvester had prepared.

Although her conversation with Raul had produced no tangible results, she reported everything she had gleaned from him to Sylvester. Namely, that Raul was also wary of Lestea and that he felt responsible for her actions. Sylvester wasn't as familiar with his personality as she was, given her two lifetimes' worth

of experience with him, but he knew Raul well enough that the intel she provided was useful.

Nonetheless, the situation was still developing, its trajectory less predictable now that Raul had declared he wasn't going to give up.

"This may be a turning point."

Her experiences with Fermina had taught her that being passive did nothing to change the situation. She could maintain the status quo, but that was it. If she wanted anything to happen, she had to act. As long as she didn't compromise who she was as a person, she would always have her loved ones' support.

"But what about you, Lestea?"

Lestea wasn't like Fermina. Fermina had acted out of her own sense of selfrighteousness, for her own benefit. That begged the question: what was so different about Lestea and Claudia?

While she contemplated the answer, her carriage rolled to a stop in front of the girls' dormitory. While the place was occupied by the Barians now, it had been an abandoned house beforehand. No, it was more than a house, really. The prior owner had been a member of the aristocracy, so it was sufficiently large enough to serve as a proper dormitory. It was the complete opposite of her own family's estate, which was as opulent as a palace. This timber-framed building was much more subdued. Most eye-catching, however, was its steeply sloped roof with a chimney jutting out of it.

It makes the place look a lot bigger than it is. Claudia could tell by the height of the windows that there were only two floors, but thanks to their wooden framing, the place was adorable and cheerful enough to serve well as a girls' dormitory, even if it was only a rental.

"Welcome!" Lestea greeted her at the entrance, dressed as ever like a handsome gentleman. Her silky, aqua-blue hair was carefully combed with not a strand out of place, her tailor-made suit complimenting her slender but toned form.

Claudia smiled. "Thank you ever so kindly for inviting me."

Lestea's clear, pale eyes slid to her own outstretched arm. Given the volume of Claudia's skirts with the crinoline, she couldn't actually take Lestea's proffered arm, but Lestea seemed accustomed to escorting women without the need for touch.

Out of the corner of her eye, Claudia noticed her bodyguards handing the present she had prepared to one of the servants.

"I see you didn't bring your maid with you," Lestea remarked.

"Indeed. She would only be a wall decoration anyway."

Lestea might have permitted Claudia to bring Helen if she wanted, but even if she had, maids weren't allowed to sit and partake with the rest of the party guests. She was a commoner where the rest of them were aristocrats. Bari was no different in drawing class lines than Harland.

"As for your bodyguards, please have them wait in this room over here," Lestea said, motioning toward it. One of the servants took up the task of seeing them inside.

Once they were gone, Lestea guided her to the room where she was hosting the tea party. A servant rushed forward to open the double doors for her. Claudia barely had a chance to drink in the interior—and knit her brows at it—before Lestea slipped away and something rammed into her back.

"Eek?!"

Claudia reached for her crinoline, trying to keep her balance, but it couldn't withstand her weight and crumpled beneath her as she pitched forward. She wound up on her hands and knees inside the room. Perhaps the one saving grace was that her crinoline had cushioned her fall, softening the impact enough that she avoided any injuries. Not wearing high heels had probably helped.

She managed to crane her neck to glance behind her. Her jaw dropped. "Don't tell me she locked me in here?" Claudia wasn't sure what she expected to see, but Lestea was gone. All that remained were two tightly sealed doors.

Pulling herself back to her feet, she yelled, "Lady Lestea!"

There was no response.

When she was falling forward, she had gotten a brief glimpse at a partitioning screen in the middle of the room, which instantly had her stomach in knots. What could be hiding behind it?

An eerie silence settled over the room. The only sound was her own breathing.

Claudia assessed her surroundings. In a cruel twist of irony, there was indeed a table in front of the partitioning screen, complete with a tea set and a cake stand decorated with a colorful array of cakes. There were only two chairs.

"I can assume one is meant for me. I suppose the other would be for Prince Raul?"

The party was supposed to be a pretense for her to speak with Raul, so that made the most sense. Only, Lestea had never mentioned that they would be speaking alone, much less that the door would be locked on her.

Claudia threw decorum to the wind and flattened her crinoline in front, which made it jut out obscenely from the back. This was the only way she could get close enough to the doorknob to turn it. As expected, it wouldn't budge.

"I can assume my bodyguards won't be any help here either, I'm sure."

If Lestea was making a move this bold, she would already have some measures in place to deal with Claudia's security.

Claudia quickly gave up calling for help and approached the partition. Since the room was absolutely silent save for the noises she made, there was no immediate danger there. If someone had been hiding and waiting to surprise her, they would've done it by now. She took a deep breath, composing herself. "I can't afford to panic. I can accomplish much more if I keep a cool head."

After giving herself that pep talk, she peeked behind the screen.

"Raul?!"

The first thing she saw was an enormous bed with a brown-skinned man sprawled out in the middle. A thin sheet clung to the outline of his body so perfectly that she could easily tell he was naked beneath it. The sight was so shocking she instinctively retreated a step, cutting her gaze away from the prone prince.

"Is she insane?!" Claudia wanted to grab Lestea by the collar and shake her.

There was no mistaking what Lestea's intentions were here: she wanted to establish a certain narrative.

Claudia had enough faith in Raul's restraint to believe he wouldn't take advantage of her even if he woke up, but if word got out the two had spent a prolonged period alone together with him naked, that would be enough. There was a stark difference between baseless gossip and rumors rooted in fact. As long as no one could provide them an alibi, the world would turn a deaf ear on Raul and Claudia's protests. Pressure would mount for Claudia to withdraw her name from Sylvester's list of bridal candidates, and Raul would try to shoulder the responsibility by wedding her, even though he'd never intended for this to happen.

"How shameless, doing this to the man to whom you owe your allegiance!"

Raul wasn't actively employing Lestea, but she was part of his inner circle, serving beneath him.

"How could you do something like this?"

There was no sign of Raul waking anytime soon. It was probably safe to assume he'd been drugged. The irony that he had been the one to warn her to stay away from Lestea only to be betrayed himself wasn't lost on Claudia—but

it didn't make the situation any less appalling.

"Does Lady Lestea think she's doing this for his sake too?"

It was the duty of a servant to sometimes offer frank advice and even admonish the person they served, even if that meant they would be exposing them to punishment in the process. But was that really what this was?

Claudia shut her eyes. "No. Lady Lestea and I are nothing alike."

At last, she had the answer to the question she had asked herself on the carriage ride here. Claudia would admonish Sylvester if needed, but at the end of the day, she respected his will. No matter how vehemently she disagreed, she would never put him in a state where he had no agency of his own.

"This is unconscionable—robbing him of the ability to decide for himself!"

Did Lestea not value Raul at all as a person? Did she have no respect for his feelings? Hypothetically, even if everything here went the way she planned, there was no guarantee that Raul wouldn't be emotionally devastated.

"And here you were the very person who begged *me* to help comfort him!"

Was that just an excuse to invite her here?

As upset as she was, there was no one to hear her remonstrations. The silence swallowed her words. Inside, Claudia's rage gave way to intense disappointment.

"I understand there is no clear right or wrong in this world, but I refuse to accept this," she swore. "If this is your version of righteousness, Lady Lestea, then all that's left is for me to uphold mine."

She tiptoed closer to get a better look at Raul's face, careful not to rouse him. Much to her relief, he had a healthy complexion. His face was relaxed, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. There were no signs at all that he was suffering.

If we were back at the brothel, I would have stroked his head. Since she couldn't touch him, Claudia instead tightly gripped her crinoline. The time we

spent together was enjoyable.

Her days at the brothel hadn't been easy at all. She'd had many painful experiences, and death was never far from her and her sisters there. But there had been fun times too—times when she had laughed with Helen and Raul.

Although it saddened her to have a different relationship in this timeline than they'd shared in the last, she didn't regret it. There were things she could do now precisely because she was a duke's daughter.

I won't hesitate here, not even if my version of justice is evil in your eyes.

Claudia began disassembling the crinoline, recovering the item she had hidden away within it. The presents she and Sylvester had prepared for Lestea were, by and large, not things they planned to hand over to her directly. In fact, while Claudia was in the private confines of the carriage, she had slipped on a pair of pants beneath her crinoline.

The hardest part was sneaking it out with me without Helen noticing. She had left Helen behind at her family's estate in part to keep her out of any danger, but also because she knew it would only worry Helen unnecessarily if she realized the risks involved in Claudia's visit. Risks, maybe, but no real danger.

Claudia and Sylvester had already formulated counteractions for any worstcase scenarios. Getting locked inside a room was actually one of the possibilities they had considered.

"I never would've imagined the chest-binding technique Lady Lestea taught me before would come in handy at a time like this." What kind of irony was that?

She wrapped the long bolt of cloth tightly around her chest. Next, all she needed to do was don the harness she'd brought with her. As if on cue, one of the ceiling tiles disappeared. The face that peeked out was that of a female Shadow Sylvester had enlisted for this very operation.

The house that was serving as the Barian ladies' dormitory had a special

secret. Since it had belonged to a nobleman with no heirs, the rights to the abandoned building fell to the national treasury. The royal family had the place thoroughly inspected after acquiring it, which was how they discovered the house's secret: there was a crawl space in the first-floor ceiling. For that reason, they left the house unoccupied until the Barians arrived—at which point they rented it to them for use as a girls' dormitory. This was why, when Claudia told Sylvester that Lestea's party would be held here, he saw no problem with it.

I can't believe it really has a crawl space people can enter. It was so well disguised that, had Sylvester not informed her beforehand, Claudia would've been none the wiser.

The crawl space had secret entrances throughout the ceilings of all the downstairs rooms and the floor of the upstairs rooms, but the openings were extremely narrow. The ceiling tile the Shadow had removed left just enough space for Claudia to squeeze through once she'd thoroughly flattened her breasts.

The Shadow didn't make a sound while she waited for Claudia to finish, then carefully lowered a rope for Claudia to attach to her harness. To be as stealthy as possible, Claudia leveraged herself against the wall as the Shadow pulled her up. The interior also had timber framing, which made it easy to find footholds. One could assume the architect had intended it to be used as a ladder when entering the secret crawl space, considering the entrance was positioned so close to the wall.

It makes me wonder if the former owner was involved in covert intelligence operations. Sadly, the dead couldn't answer questions, so the reason for this building's unique architecture would remain a mystery.

When at last she made it to the ceiling, Claudia paused to take a breath. If escape via this method had proven to be too difficult, they'd planned for the Shadow to reveal themselves and shoulder the burden of protecting her. In the case of an emergency, knights would storm the girls' dormitory under Sylvester's orders.

Regardless, this whole plan of Lady Lestea's was far too rash. Again, assuming everything went according to her plan, Lestea would still lose all of Raul's trust in her. She wouldn't be able to avoid punishment for her role either.

What is so important about establishing connections to the Lindsays that she's willing to sacrifice herself to accomplish it?

Even if Raul married Claudia, he would never be able to face her family after disgracing her like this. Not to mention the fact that Raul would likely maintain his status as a royal—no matter how difficult the circumstances became—for the sake of Claudia's reputation as well as that of her house. *Is she just doing it to prevent him from stepping down from the royal family?*

For Harland, it would be a scandal regardless of the truth if rumors spread about Claudia and Raul having relations while she was still one of the crown prince's bridal candidates—but they would bounce back from it. If anything, this would be an opportunity to make their support for Raul official. They might even try to push for him to be reinstated as first in line. Once Raul became King, Harland could use its connections with Claudia to exert true control over Bari.

Votes in the assembly favor Prince Raul's faction even now. The Barian people's disapproval of their king was spreading to Harland as well. It didn't matter that there were no land routes due to the mountain range that separated them. There was still a booming maritime trade between the two countries, and no matter how hard anyone tried, there was no stopping rumors.

The only reason the assembly had yet to come to a final decision was because Raul hadn't made up his mind on what he wanted to do. *If Raul agreed to receive Harland's support on the condition that they allow him to marry me, it would be no laughing matter.*

Even without the narrative Lestea orchestrated, members of the assembly might still try to feel her out to see whether she would be willing. Sylvester would block them as much as possible. Claudia would never agree to it, either, but politics were an ever-present aspect of marriage prospects for a duke's

daughter like herself.

It made sense—on a surface level, anyway. Perhaps if Raul's faction was willing to allow Harland to interfere in domestic politics just to get Raul on the throne, then Lestea's actions weren't so rash after all. She wouldn't be able to avoid the repercussions of her actions, but if Raul's faction respected her willingness to sacrifice herself, they might offer her their full support.

Hard to believe there's a realm where Lady Lestea's rash plan makes sense.

That didn't make it any less vile; the reality of the situation was different than those hypotheticals. If Lestea's plan failed, the assembly would have no way of knowing how Raul felt about Claudia.

Regardless, I won't let things go the way you want them to.

With the Shadow leading the way, she crept through the crawl space. Here, it became obvious that the building was made of stone. *The timber framing is all deceptive decoration.*

Thanks to the stone interior, there were no wooden beams creaking underneath her and giving their position away. But as with any crawl space, it was too narrow to stand or even stoop. She had no choice but to move forward on hands and knees.

I can already tell my muscles will be sore after this.

Claudia had decided to take the more difficult route to avoid further complicating an already precarious situation. If Raul was made accountable for all his faction's misdeeds, the only person that would serve was his brother, Bari's king. Harland had gone to painstaking lengths to apprehend their provocateur and, by extension, discover the forged royal order, which would only lose its value if Raul lost face here.

I can't let this fall on Prince Raul's shoulders. Claudia was certain the true mastermind behind it all was Lestea anyway. Given the circumstances, Lestea couldn't talk her way out of it, and Claudia wasn't about to let her dodge

responsibility either. Once they had concrete evidence, she was going to answer for her crimes in a way that would benefit Harland.

When at last the Shadow paused to remove a wooden ceiling tile, Claudia knew they had arrived at their destination. Down below, she found two golden eyes peering up at her.

As always, I can see you love being where the action is. She swallowed any terse words she had for Sylvester on account of all the bodyguards ensuring his safety. The prince had arrived at the dormitory under the pretense of discussing something with Lestea.

Scaling down from the ceiling was simple enough; it was just the reverse of how she managed to get up here in the first place. Yet Sylvester threw his arms wide open, waiting for her to drop down into them.

"Do you intend to catch me?" she asked.

He smiled. "I am ready whenever."

Claudia glanced at the Shadow and asked her to secure the rope and lower her. "If it's all the same to you, I will take my descent slowly, since I'm afraid I don't have the courage to leap."

"That's fine. Rest assured that even if you do fall somehow, you will be safe in my arms."

Fortunately, Sylvester prioritized her safety over all else and didn't command her to jump.

Claudia again used the timber framing on the wall as a foothold while the Shadow lowered her. Sylvester grabbed her by the knees once she was close enough to him, at which point she released her hold on the wooden frames. Thanks to the Shadow lowering her by her harness, it was a rather smooth trip toward Sylvester. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"Well done," he said.

"Thank you."

This was the first time he had ever held her like a princess in his arms. Their eyes met, and with so little space between them, both Claudia and Sylvester blushed—until a reverberating laugh interrupted the moment.

"Ah ha ha! Lady Claudia, you always manage to surpass my expectations so easily," Lestea said. "How could I ever have imagined you would pop out of the ceiling?"

It was impossible to see Lestea at first, with the wall of bodyguards around her and Sylvester, but judging by her voice, she was on the other side of the room. Through the narrow space between the guards, Claudia spotted Lestea seated primly on an armchair. There was no one else near her, not even a servant.

"Please forgive me for not showing proper respect by bowing, but I am afraid Prince Sylvester has ordered me to remain still."

Sylvester narrowed his eyes. "Be grateful I haven't had you tied up."

"Oh? You really don't plan to bind me?"

"That depends on how you answer our questions."

After alighting from Sylvester's arms, Claudia quickly slipped off the cloth binding her chest. It was so suffocating that she wouldn't be able to focus on their conversation otherwise.

Lestea's smile never faltered as she said, "So you plan to interrogate me."

"Good, it seems you understand the situation," said Sylvester. "If you have some sort of defense for yourself, let me hear it."

"Thank you, I appreciate your consideration. Let me start by making one thing clear: I did this entirely of my own volition. Raul had no part in it. I have all the evidence you need right here to establish my guilt." Lestea produced an envelope from her chest pocket.

"You prepared evidence of your own guilt?"

Lestea nodded. "I had to consider what would happen if I failed."

She intended to take the fall by herself. At last, all the strange incidents had a common thread. The final puzzle piece had clicked into place.

"You mean you purposefully drew suspicion to yourself?" Claudia asked, cutting into the conversation.

"Aha, so you did notice after all, huh?"

Without concrete evidence, Harland had no way of making Lestea answer for her crimes, but the circumstantial evidence pointed straight to her. The incidents at the tea parties had seemed obviously scripted.

"Remember the tea party I hosted? When you returned from the garden, you immediately mentioned you had warned the lords from Bari to be especially careful with how they treated women. The problem was that you hadn't actually seen what happened and had no way of knowing one of them had been disrespectful to Charlotte."

When it had happened, Lestea was out in the garden with a group of Harlander noble ladies. There had been a huge difference in temperature between the heated party venue and the chilly outside air, creating a thick film of condensation on the windows. It would've been impossible for Lestea to know what had transpired inside. Charlotte was already gone by the time she came in. All Lestea could see was Claudia speaking to one of the Barian noble lords. Under such circumstances, one would normally demand to know what was happening, but she hadn't.

"You are exactly right," Lestea admitted. "It was scripted. We purposefully stirred up drama to gauge the power balance between the prince's bridal candidates. Anyone who was dissatisfied with their current lot would be ripe for exploitation. Sadly, Lady Claudia, you obstructed us at every turn."

"So it was all part of your scheme."

Lestea had always left room for suspicion to fall on her, as a precautionary measure to ensure that none of her countrymen would be called to account for

their indiscretions.

A row of pearly white teeth peeked out from behind Lestea's lips as she smiled and said, "I didn't care how it happened. I wanted to form a link between Raul and House Lindsay."

She was likely referring to today's events, which meant that her motives were precisely as Claudia suspected.

"Do you not care at all about what Prince Raul wants?" Claudia demanded, her voice cracking with unrestrained anger. The words flew out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

"Raul will be the one laughing in the end. What does it matter?" Lestea replied.

Claudia's face hardened. "What basis do you have?! You should know him better than anyone else!"

"Basis? Let's not kid ourselves. He would have the woman he loves at his side and be closer to inheriting the throne than before. We aren't simply going to roll over and let Harland use us however you see fit, you know."

What was she saying? No, Claudia understood the words just fine—that wasn't the issue. In fact, if Claudia examined the situation from Lestea's perspective, she could see how Lestea had rationalized her actions.

"The issue I have is that nothing you say seems to take into account what Prince Raul wants at all," she said.

"Oh, but it will. Once he gets over the initial shock and has a clearer head, he will realize this was the most beneficial route for him."

Claudia's face pinched. "It seems I overestimated you this whole time." She had thought Lestea clever. Shrewd, even. Lestea had to know Raul better than anyone else. "Even if Prince Raul came to understand your rationale, he would never prioritize his interests over others."

Was it not because of his deep consideration for others that those of his

faction came to follow and support him? He wasn't the type to seek his own happiness at the expense of everyone else's.

"It seems you know him very well indeed, Lady Claudia." Lestea let out a long sigh. "It's a shame this didn't work out. Are you sure you won't consider becoming his bride?"

"No. My feelings lie elsewhere."

"You have someone you love already?"

She nodded. "I do." Right beside her, in fact. Lestea must have already inferred that.

"If he had met you sooner, would that have changed things?" Lestea asked.

"No."

Even if Claudia had met Raul first, as long as she eventually met Sylvester, she would have fallen in love with him. It had nothing to do with the order of their meeting. She was drawn to him as a person.

"That's unfortunate. If you won't be mine, then I have no other choice." Lestea's pale eyes crinkled as she smiled once more. There was something fleeting and fragile about it.

"Wait!" Claudia cried. Sensing something terrible was about to happen, she rushed forward, only to be impeded by the wall of her bodyguards.

"It's too dangerous to approach her."

"Remove yourself at once!" she barked back.

While Claudia was busy bickering with the guard, Lestea's body collapsed to the floor and convulsed violently.

"Did she drink poison?!" Sylvester shouted.

These were the exact same symptoms he'd seen in the provocateur before he died.

Chapter 21:

The Fleeting Thoughts of His Royal Highness's Retainer

FONLY WE HAD MET SOONER. If only I had been born into Harland...then I could have abandoned all other duties to serve at your side instead.

The first time Lestea laid eyes on Claudia was when she'd enlisted a diplomat to show her to a gentlemen's clothing boutique. She wanted to prepare formalwear that would adhere to the latest trends in Harland's capital. While she was there, she noticed a shift in the atmosphere, as if something bright and cheerful had suddenly infiltrated the boutique's subdued space. Surprised, Lestea surveyed her surroundings.

That was when she saw her: a woman with wavy black hair that rippled in her wake. Her facial features were angular and sharp in a way that hinted she was more willful than most young ladies her age. Despite that, the expression on her face was more akin to that of an innocent maiden bedazzled by a brand-new dress.

Most of the boutique's clientele were men, so by virtue of her gender, she should have seemed out of place and out of her element, and yet she commanded the floor as if she belonged here. Even from a fair distance, Lestea could swear she caught a rose-like fragrance in the air—that spoke to how impactful their first encounter was.

Although the woman's impressive presence warranted reverent kneeling, at least in Lestea's mind, the lady casually greeted the Barian diplomat as if the two were old acquaintances. For his part, the diplomat instantly smiled when he saw her, unable to hide his delight.

Lestea envied him. At the same time, she was grateful Claudia hadn't approached her instead, since she would have surely panicked.

So that's Duke Lindsay's daughter.

Once she managed to compose herself, she focused her efforts on studying the young woman. Claudia had stolen the attention of everyone in the shop, so it wouldn't be suspicious at all even if Lestea was caught ogling.

When Lestea had investigated members of Harland's aristocracy to search for promising connections, Claudia's name had come up most frequently. According to her intel, no one was more perfect than Claudia, although any of the girls chosen to be the crown prince's bridal candidates would be strong prospects.

It would be best if Raul could win her heart. But seeing her in person, Lestea knew that would be a tall order; Claudia didn't seem the type to fall for ordinary seduction techniques.

Raul is no less attractive than Prince Sylvester, but they appeal to entirely different crowds. Whereas Raul was like a warm ray of summer sun, blessing farmers with a bountiful harvest, Sylvester was akin to the life-saving warmth of a fireplace amid a freezing-cold winter. If a girl preferred a more cheerful, animated guy, they would go for Raul. If they preferred a quieter, more even-keeled fellow, Sylvester was their best bet. It was all a matter of preference. To Raul's credit, being friendly and amicable were beneficial qualities for a prince.

Still, the primary obstacle here is Raul himself. Raul's discomfort with women was the whole reason Lestea started dressing in men's clothing at first.

Unfortunately, he found women like Claudia to be the most difficult to be around. He will just have to get over it.

The Barian people were sympathetic toward Raul for now, but there was no telling when their stance would change. Fortunately, Claudia didn't seem the egotistical sort. If Raul spent a little time getting to know her, Lestea was confident that his discomfort would ease.

Lestea kept a careful watch on Claudia until she left the boutique. However, as Claudia was climbing into her carriage, she paused to glance back over her shoulder.

Shocked, Lestea sucked in a breath. She hid herself instantly in the shadows, unable to shake the feeling their eyes had met. Unlike the elderly owner, Lestea's gaze had been furtive and subtle. It was as if Claudia had managed to sense she was being watched.

A heat spread throughout Lestea's body, her pulse quickening.

It must be my imagination, right? Even if their eyes had met, the two had yet to be introduced. There was no reason why Lestea would have caught her attention—at least, she didn't think so. Claudia hadn't noticed her in the true sense of the word, but the encounter had proved her innate powers of perception.

Incredible, simply incredible! There is no other way to describe it!

Later, a party was held for the academy's graduating students at the palace. Once it ended, Lestea returned to her private quarters, but the excitement thrumming inside her refused to subside. It had been impressive enough the way Claudia noticed she wasn't actually a man—but even the way she'd handled Raul had been nothing short of flawless. The latter was what really stunned her.

Dressing in men's clothing was initially a last resort she'd opted for out of pure necessity—a defiant way to position herself in Raul's inner circle despite his distaste for women. Lestea prided herself on being cleverer than most, but even she couldn't come up with any other approaches to the problem. Admittedly, she always found dresses insufferable, so seizing an excuse to get out of them had made it a sort of two-birds-one-stone situation. The whole reason she was continuing to cross-dress even now was really for her own sake.

It was only later that Lestea would realize this was the moment she developed a deep love and respect for Claudia. She was perfect, the embodiment of the ideal woman.

Lestea's feelings for her only grew stronger after Claudia sought her assistance in tackling Charlotte's complex. Charlotte was a rival—a fellow bridal

candidate—but Claudia approached her problems with sincerity and compassion. She did everything she could to help Charlotte conquer her demons.

The way Charlotte affectionately referred to Claudia as "Big Sister" filled Lestea with jealousy. That green monster reared its ugly head in the form of a raging flame inside her, surprising even herself. I never knew I had such emotion within me.

Lestea liked Raul. If she had to pick someone to serve under, she far preferred him over the reigning Barian king. She'd developed a deep affection for him and a genuine belief that he was the best person to inherit the throne. Yet even with him, her emotions had never been so turbulent.

If only I were born a lady of Harland, then I bet Lady Claudia would have offered me the same kind of tender care.

Though, come to think of it, neither she nor Sylvester were surprised to see her wearing men's formalwear everywhere. They merely accepted that it was part of her nature. In high society, however, Lestea's clothing choice was considered odd. Outlandish, even. More and more young ladies came to adore her as time passed, but there was still no shortage of distasteful looks from other aristocrats.

That was probably inevitable. Raul himself hadn't looked too kindly upon her decision to continue cross-dressing even in Harland.

I wonder if I was just born into the wrong nation. Her eyes fell to her pale hands. Most of the people in Bari had brown skin. From the moment she was old enough to realize that, she knew she didn't fit in. Lestea never got along with the noisy, squealing noble ladies her age. It was more comfortable to be alone. Raul was the only person on the same wavelength, and Lestea could actually enjoy conversations with him.

Raul was her first close friend, hence why she decided to serve under him. From that day on, she spent her time thinking about what would benefit Raul

most and making it a reality. Politics were enjoyable for her, and she spared no effort in maneuvering behind the scenes.

This, she told herself, was how her life was going to be.

But no one like you exists in Bari, Lady Claudia. The only choice was to bring Claudia along, then. It made perfect sense, given that Raul had developed feelings for her too. As long as you're with us, everything will go smoothly.

Lestea had been doing what she considered necessary dirty work since well before she arrived in Harland. It didn't weigh on her conscience. Moreover, it was the perfect way to make the rest of Raul's faction feel indebted to her. She had intentionally taken up the mantle of the sacrificial pawn this time around. The accompanying lords and ladies of Bari were so impressed by her self-sacrifice that they had promised their support. Even if she lost her position as Raul's right hand, she could still find some way to be of use to Claudia once she was at Raul's side.

"I wonder if she'll notice..."

Lestea had left breadcrumbs behind. Barely perceptible ones that would be easily missed by anyone else. They were like a love letter to Claudia.

The moment Sylvester appeared at the girls' dormitory, she knew her plan had failed. He wouldn't show up with such conspicuous timing if he weren't here to swoop in and save Claudia.

And now that I think about it, he's impeded my plans quite a bit too. Claudia wasn't the only one who had thwarted her.

Despondent, Lestea threw her head back as she sat on the couch. She wasn't the only one looking up. Sylvester was surrounded by a platoon of bodyguards as he stared at the ceiling, as if waiting for something to happen. And who would happen to pop out but Claudia herself?

"Ah ha ha! Lady Claudia, you always manage to surpass my expectations so easily."

Lestea couldn't help but fall for Claudia all over again. The way that curtain of raven-black hair bounced around her shoulders was mesmerizing. Lestea only lamented that she wasn't the one catching Claudia in her arms. And not only could she not touch her, but she couldn't even be at her side.

Not all was bleak; seeing the bolt of cloth wrapped around Claudia's chest made Lestea's heart soar. She was happy to see Claudia using the very technique that she had taught her.

"You mean you purposefully drew suspicion to yourself?" Claudia asked, cutting into Lestea's exchange with Sylvester.

A small chuckle escaped Lestea's lips. "Aha, so you did notice after all, huh?" The muscles in her face threatened to soften into a smile, but she kept them stiff, not wanting to reveal how pleased she was.

Their conversation continued, until Claudia at last snapped, "What basis do you have?! You should know him better than anyone else!" The way her eyes narrowed, conveying the depths of her anger, was absolutely beautiful.

Claudia didn't seem to understand her own value.

Oh, if only I could be with you. There's nothing in this world I'd wish for.

Could Claudia not see the satisfaction in Sylvester's eyes? A satisfaction that only Claudia herself could provide?

"If he had met you sooner, would that have changed things?" Lestea asked.

"No."

The moment Lestea's plans failed, all hope inside her died. There was no point in entertaining what-ifs. I'm glad I was able to have one last conversation with you, at least.

Living in a world without Claudia was akin to a death sentence.

Besides, no matter how much I apologize to Raul, it will never be enough.

The two were best friends. She was supposed to serve Raul—to be loyal to

him—yet she had betrayed him. Claudia had unwittingly stolen her heart.

As Lestea's consciousness faded and her vision darkened, she made out Claudia rushing toward her. She looked as stunning as ever, even now.

Chapter 22:

The Villainess Makes Up Her Mind

The Way Lestea Collapsed to the ground and shook was all too familiar. It brought back haunting memories of a similar encounter during Claudia's brothel days.

"No... No!"

The tips of her fingers and toes grew numb, but she desperately willed her legs forward. Confused as they were by the situation, the bodyguards didn't try to impede her again. She managed to make her way straight to Lestea.

How much time had it taken? Each second felt impossibly long.

At this point, it wasn't Lestea's entire body convulsing—only her arms and legs were experiencing uncontrollable tremors—but it was a matter of time until the poison spread.

This is no time to be sweating the details! Claudia told herself.

After slipping into unconsciousness, Lestea's face retained no trace of the spark of life it had moments earlier. Her cheeks were pale, and her entire body had grown limp. It amplified Claudia's worst fears that she was already too late.

She shook her head. This was no time to be weak.

Unfortunately, as she held the vial of antidote, her hands shook uncontrollably.

Get it together! Lestea's survival is resting on you! Claudia scolded herself.

Back at the academy, the question she'd asked Raul pertained to the reagents needed to concoct an antidote for this specific poison. Claudia already knew what they were, since he had imparted that knowledge to her back in her brothel days, but it would arouse too much suspicion if she were to come up with it unprompted. She had hinted to Raul the possibility that Lestea might try to end her life via poison. Then he had given her the answer she needed.

This was the only reason Claudia could come up with for why Raul had never brought up Lestea with her at the brothel. There was also the fact that Raul had gone out of his way back then to tell her how to make an antidote for a specific poison, which was an odd tidbit to share with a random sex worker. It was possible that he had shared the information out of concern. After all, a fellow sex worker had died of the same poison before. It wasn't inconceivable that Claudia or someone else at the brothel might ingest it.

The more she thought about it, though, the less that seemed likely. Sure, he probably was worried about Claudia—but what if Lestea had killed herself by taking poison? How might Raul grieve her death? How would he feel, knowing he could have prevented it?

Claudia had gambled on that possibility, trusting that Raul's sentimental desire to help others would trump all else and that he would give her the answer she needed.

But I can't administer it like this. She needed to make Lestea drink the antidote, but that wasn't possible when she couldn't still her hands. With no other option left to her, Claudia snatched up a nearby pitcher and used it to dump the antidote into her own mouth.

Sylvester was yelling something beside her, but in her panicked state, Claudia couldn't make out his words. With a mixture of water and antidote filling her mouth, she grasped Lestea's cheeks with both hands.

Please, drink this for me.

Their lips met. She used her tongue to guide the medicine into Lestea's throat.

Lestea reflexively swallowed the liquid.

"Live!" Claudia commanded. She adjusted Lestea's mouth so that her air passage was open, then began performing chest compressions for Lestea's weakening heart. She'd learned this technique from a doctor. When Helen had taken ill in her brothel days, Claudia mastered this skill in case the situation ever

called for it.

I don't know if this is technically the right call, but...

"Live! Stay alive and atone for what you've done!"

Whether it was right or not, Claudia wasn't about to let Lestea die.

Her body soon protested its exhaustion, since she didn't normally move around this vigorously. As weary as her arms were, threatening to bend when she needed them to remain straight, she made them hold out through sheer frantic willpower.

"Live! I won't allow you to die in front of me!"

A bead of sweat rolled down her chin. Her face was so covered in perspiration that her hair clung uncomfortably to her cheek. Claudia was growing increasingly annoyed with how unruly it was, blocking her vision of Lestea, but she didn't stop the chest compressions.



Please. I don't want this. I don't want to watch anyone die!

Death had always been a close companion at the brothel. Claudia was all too aware of how easily people died.

Even if you consider this world a living hell, I still want you in it. Her thoughts were muddled by her exhaustion, but that one desire came through clear as crystal.

Lestea was a criminal. Living in hell was a proper punishment for what she'd done, the same way the brothel had been an apt place for Claudia's atonement.

Her mind wandered to that one fellow sex worker, to the warmth of the entertainment room where she'd drawn her last breath. Claudia didn't think the woman had taken her life because she was shouldering sin, but whatever her motivations were, it didn't change Claudia's convictions.

Even if you try to die by your own hand in this world, I will be there to stop you.

She had every chance of intervening. Even if the woman she saved cursed her for it, Claudia couldn't stop herself.

If you hate this world and think of it as purgatory, then I will change it for you, she swore.

Claudia wasn't a sex worker anymore. She was a duke's daughter. She had the power to change her surroundings. To change the world. Perhaps her attempts would be haphazard at first because she hadn't really thought things through, but Claudia wanted to make this a world where everyone could live.

So please, give me a chance.

It was a selfish desire. Egoistical, she knew. This would be no easy path. Some would even criticize her behind her back.

Negative thoughts churned through her mind, but they did nothing to dim the flame of determination within her heart. What began as a single flame was gradually morphing into a blaze.

I've made up my mind. Lestea...you have to live! My sense of righteousness demands it!

Claudia's blue eyes were like the ocean: deep in color with raging waves that swallowed all in their path. When sunlight spilled across the sea, the depths became transparent, amber rays stretching through the dark and lighting the way. There were times when the ocean took on an emerald hue, and it was that ever-changing, fickle nature which spoke to all manner of possibilities.

Lestea choked and sputtered, indicating she was breathing again. Color returned to her face.

Claudia's body sagged. She collapsed backward, where two strong arms caught her.

"Let's leave the rest to the doctor," Sylvester whispered in her ear, his voice calm and reassuring.

She glanced up to see a doctor had indeed arrived at the scene. Now it made sense why Sylvester was yelling earlier; he'd been barking orders for someone to summon a doctor.

Soon, Claudia felt the rhythmic drumming of Sylvester's heart against her back. Awash with relief, she let her eyes shutter.

Sylvester had Lestea carted off to the palace's infirmary under the pretense that she had suddenly taken ill and needed care. Raul's name was left out of the reports. As far as the official story was concerned, Lestea had been guiding Claudia to the drawing room when Sylvester dropped by for a visit. The tea party was suspended in favor of the trio sitting down for a chat. Since Lestea had shouldered the blame for everything, the other lords and ladies of Bari were content to keep their silence and support Sylvester's version of events.

"You surprised me yet again. I wonder how many times this makes?" Sylvester stroked his chin.

Claudia shot him a beleaguered look. "Are we going to revisit this subject again?"

A messenger came bearing word that Lestea was awake and able to sit up, so Claudia had made her way to the palace to pay her a visit. One of the servants guided her to the drawing room, where she was presently sitting in Sylvester's company.

They were going to visit Lestea together. It was framed as a sympathy visit for their ill foreign guest, but in truth, they were going to be handing Lestea her sentence.

Thanks to Claudia's quick response, Lestea had survived her attempted suicide. Yet there was something about it that continued to niggle at Sylvester.

Claudia glanced to her side, where he was seated. Those golden eyes stared down at her.

"Even now, I cannot believe you put those enchanting lips to someone else's," he said.

"I did it to save her life," Claudia reminded him. "Besides, Lady Lestea is a woman, if you'll remember." In truth, she thought a person's sex was irrelevant when it came to saving their life, but if she didn't emphasize Lestea's womanhood, Sylvester wasn't likely to let the matter die.

"Couldn't you have enlisted someone else to do it?"

"There was no time to explain to anyone there what they needed to do. It was an emergency. Every second counted. You understand that, don't you?" His fingers mournfully brushed her lips.

Claudia knew she had been a little reckless, but it was all necessary. "I was so frantic then. I didn't have the luxury of considering other options," she explained.

Sylvester nodded, albeit reluctantly. "I understand that, really I do. It's just that sometimes the image of you kissing her floats into my mind, and I am taken

with this urge to end Lady Lestea myself."

"Seriously, Syl?!"

After a moment of hesitation, he said, "That was inconsiderate of me, wasn't it? Especially after all you did to save her life." He leaned his head against hers. "But I hope you understand where I'm coming from."

The way he nuzzled against her so affectionately drained her of any momentary anger she had felt.

"I suppose," she muttered, finding it impossible not to forgive him. However, when his lips grazed her earlobe, her voice dropped low. "Syl," she growled in warning.

"This doesn't get a pass?"

"Of course it doesn't. You know better." She pinched the back of his hand and stood. It was time to carry out her original objective in coming here.

When they arrived at Lestea's infirmary room, they found her sitting up in bed, staring blankly forward. The shadows in her pale-blue eyes had turned them a lifeless gray. She was obviously far from being fully recovered.

Even with the poison out of her system, that doesn't mean her mental wounds are healed.

Claudia had no idea what had brought Lestea to the point of suicide. Perhaps she had always intended to take her life, considering she had even prepared documents to substantiate her guilt.

But even if she failed, she had to have known the others in Raul's faction. There were still avenues open to her even after she lost Raul's trust.

It was pointless to speculate. Only Lestea held the true answer to that question.

Still, I wonder if she has the wherewithal to understand the sentence we'll

hand down.

The doctor had assured them she was recovering, but he could only comment on her physical health.

Conflicted, Claudia made to face Sylvester, but she froze when her eyes accidentally met Lestea's.

Huh? She couldn't help but doubt what she was seeing. The moment Lestea's gaze met hers, it was as if the spark of life had reentered her. Blood rushed to her cheeks, and she smiled as beautifully as a rose bursting into bloom.

"You came all the way to see me?!" Lestea's body pitched forward, her voice cracking with excitement.

Claudia was dumbfounded. Lestea was like a dog frantically wagging its tail. There was something familiar about this situation. She'd experienced the same thing before with Brian, who sometimes acted as if he worshipped her like a goddess.

Sylvester advanced a step, moving in front of Claudia to block her from Lestea's sight. "It looks like your recovery is proceeding apace," he said.

Lestea cocked her head to the side. "So what brings you here today?"

It sounded as if the two were communicating, but Lestea wasn't even looking at Sylvester's face. She was staring straight through him to Claudia, as if he didn't exist at all.

"Is there something you want to know regarding Raul's faction?" Lestea persisted. "Whatever it is, please, ask away."

"We aren't here for pleasantries," Claudia said, even though Lestea was already offering to get to the point.

"Yes, I'm sure you aren't. What will it be, then? Do you want to know about the faction's hidden finances? Or shall I tell you about the aristocrats of our faction who have infiltrated the opposition's ranks?"

Shockingly, Lestea was being an open book. It was difficult to tell whether she

was trying to curry favor by being compliant or if this was her way of taking the offensive. Whatever her motivation, there was something clearly abnormal about her.

Could this be a side effect of the poison?

Lestea didn't *seem* to be acting. In fact, she more closely resembled a child who was so eager to speak they could hardly sit still.

"There are hidden finances?" Sylvester cut in. "I want to hear the details on that, but first, we will pass judgment on you."

"Being able to see you again is beyond what I could have ever hoped, Lady Claudia!"

Sylvester ignored her and continued, "We will turn a blind eye to all your clandestine activities, including that of deploying a provocateur to Port Brenach—but in exchange, you will operate as a double agent for Harland Kingdom henceforth. Should you refuse to comply, we will make public the evidence we have against you and convict you of the crimes of which you stand accused."

"Please order me to do whatever you want. I will be your loyal dog," Lestea professed earnestly.

As much as he tried, Sylvester wasn't having any luck getting her to respond to his words, and it made the atmosphere uncomfortable. Even he was growing dubious about whether Lestea was in her right mind.

Claudia reached forward, tugging on his sleeve. "Let me try talking to her."

"Are you sure?"

"She won't lunge at me, surely."

There was also a knight standing watch at Lestea's bedside. If they ignored how bizarre she was acting, she didn't pose any real danger.

"Lady Lestea," Claudia began.

"Oh, there's no need to add titles to my name! I'm not worthy of the honor.

Please, call me by my name. Or if you prefer, call me Dog or even Garbage if that suits you."

Claudia's face pinched peevishly, but she pressed on. "Lestea, then. Did you understand what His Highness just said to you?"

In contrast to Claudia, Lestea's expression softened. She spoke with all sincerity as she said, "Lady Claudia—no, my liege—if comprehending his offer is what you ask of me, I shall see it done." Lestea held her hand over her chest, head bowed like a reverent retainer.

"Why are you being so respectful with me?" Claudia asked. She couldn't understand why, of all things, Lestea would refer to her as "my liege." The two had been equals up until Lestea ingested the poison.

"Because you are my savior, my liege. As my life teetered on the edge, I glimpsed your beautiful visage, and I could not erase it from my mind if I tried. Please, allow me to dedicate my sword to you."

Claudia had thought Lestea was fully unconscious for all that, but she'd evidently retained some awareness. Still, Lestea's intense devotion was exaggerated, especially since she was like a knight vowing lifelong loyalty.

While Claudia scrunched her brow in dismay, Lestea continued, "From the moment I met you, my liege, my heart had already betrayed Raul. All I have longed for since then is to serve you."

"I don't remember you showing any indication of that."

"Those weren't acceptable desires for a citizen of Bari to possess, but I couldn't fool my heart. There was no point in living if I couldn't serve you."

She was referring to her reason for ingesting poison; she'd done it because all her plans had fallen to ruin, and the path she'd hoped for where Claudia and Raul came together was gone.

Frankly, Claudia had a hard time accepting her rationale. Whether Lestea was telling the truth would be revealed by how she acted in the future. Someone

would be assigned to keep a constant eye on her even after she returned to Bari. The sentence they'd handed her only stood so long as she benefited Harland. If she didn't, they would dispose of her.

"Then listen well," Claudia said, knowing what was at stake. "Your crimes will not be acknowledged publicly at this time, but you have already lost Prince Raul's trust. Can you still follow orders even under these circumstances?"

"I will do as you wish. If that is your command, I will see it done."

Claudia folded her arms over her chest. "Words are cheap."

"Then as proof of my capabilities, I will return to Raul's side. Even if I cannot regain his trust, I can stay near him."

At present, Raul was highly suspicious of Lestea, but he had no proof that she'd drugged him. He hadn't even forced her to return home to Bari despite harboring doubts about her for so long. Which means there's still a chance she could wiggle her way back into his good graces. Although, all things considered, that would be a tough hurdle to overcome.

Claudia traded looks with Sylvester, who seemed to be of the same mind. He nodded, urging her to continue. So she did.

"This should go without saying, but don't forget you will be under constant observation."

"I understand that," said Lestea. "I won't do anything that would give you reason to doubt me, my liege."

"Bear in mind that you will have to rescue as many lives as you have harmed. That is how you will atone," Claudia finished.

"Yes. I will engrave your words into my heart and never forget them!"

It wasn't unheard of for members of one government to switch allegiances and act as a double agent, even among professional spies. Claudia didn't fully trust Lestea, but her intuition told her that Lestea wasn't trying to deceive her, at the very least.

Once Lestea's body had fully recovered, she was released from the palace's infirmary and transferred to the one in the Barian embassy. Raul didn't have her returned to the girls' dormitory, likely because he wanted to keep an eye on her. Incidentally, inspections had been performed by both nations during the construction of the Barian embassy, and it held no secret passageways like the girls' dormitory.

When Raul had Lestea transferred, he also took the opportunity to invite Sylvester and Claudia to the embassy. The moment they arrived, Raul was there to greet them.

"Glad to see you both could make it. First, I hope you will forgive me for taking so long to express my gratitude to the two of you."

Sylvester held up a hand. "There's no need for that. You already expressed it plenty in your letter."

As far as the public knew, they had helped Lestea when she collapsed. Raul had sent a letter of gratitude to each of them, but he still wanted to convey how thankful he was in person.

"I am especially grateful to you, Claudia, for saving Lestea's life. Let's continue this conversation in the drawing room."

There was no hiding the fact that Lestea had ingested poison, not when Claudia had hinted the possibility to Raul beforehand. Raul's aim in inviting them obviously didn't end at extending his gratitude; he wanted specific details on the situation.

Once a maid finished serving them tea in the drawing room, she excused herself, leaving only the three of them. Time had come at last for them to visit more confidential matters.

Raul's countenance lacked its usual cheerfulness. He knew Lestea had drugged him. His sudden onset of drowsiness couldn't be explained any other

way. And while he didn't know the specific reason she'd done it, he probably had his guesses.

According to the report given by one of the Shadows hidden in the dormitory, they dressed Raul and administered medicine to rouse him from his slumber.

"I can more or less guess what happened based on Sylvester's sudden appearance at the party despite not being invited," Raul said. "Please help me fill in the rest of the blanks."

At his request, Sylvester obliged and launched into an explanation of events: Lestea had daringly tried to set up a scandal to force Raul and Claudia together. Suspecting that was her end goal, Sylvester intervened to put a stop to her schemes. Then, sensing that there was no other way out, Lestea drank poison. Raul silently nodded along as Sylvester laid out the sequence of events in order.

"How does it feel being betrayed by someone so close to you?" Sylvester asked pointedly. "Especially when you were actively suspicious of her."

Raul leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and his fingers threaded together. His expression was tinged with sorrow. "I completely underestimated the situation. I don't even know how to begin apologizing to Claudia for getting her wrapped up in this."

Given his strong sense of responsibility, he probably blamed himself for everything that had happened.

Claudia shook her head. "I know you're a victim in this too. Besides, it was thanks to your forewarning that I was able to consult Syl and plan for things going awry."

"Indeed," her fiancé agreed. "The only person who didn't have any plan in place was you, Raul."

Sylvester wasn't letting up on the foreign prince at all. In fact, he was sneering at Raul, purposefully antagonizing him. His gentle and composed demeanor was nowhere to be seen, having disappeared the moment they entered the drawing

room.

Raul, meanwhile, was despondent. It was bad enough he couldn't prevent Lestea's schemes, but he'd also failed to stop her suicide attempt. Having no evidence of her crimes only compounded how powerless he felt, leaving him awash with despair. What circumstantial evidence he did have only came from Claudia and Sylvester's witness statements.

"There's nothing I can say in my defense," Raul said. "In the end, I couldn't do a thing."

Sylvester bristled. "Can you look Dia in the eye and say that honestly? It's not that you couldn't stop it. It's that you *didn't*." His tone was sharp, his words thorns.

Claudia didn't contest it; she sensed his anger was genuine. She kept quiet and let him speak.

Raul's lips flattened into a thin line. He dropped his gaze to the floor.

"Tsk, pathetic!" Sylvester huffed at him. "You may not be *first* in line anymore, but you are still in line to inherit the throne. With the way you're acting now, I have no choice but to say Bari's king made the right call with you."

After a brief silence, Raul said, "I plan to relinquish any claim I have to the throne to take responsibility for everything that has transpired."

So this is how it ends?

Back at the academy, it had appeared to Claudia that Raul had changed his mind about going this route. Lestea was still alive. Was Raul still going to make the same decision in the end, despite that?

Well, I suppose I still don't know what happened to make him step down last time. There was no way for her to know exactly. Not anymore. All she could do was speculate based on what she knew of Raul.

"Do you understand the gravity of declaring that in front of me?" Sylvester asked. It was less of a question and more of a statement.

"You have proof of what happened, don't you? I'll lose my position regardless. I won't take it to heart if you turn your back on me."

"Prince Raul..." His name tumbled out of Claudia's mouth unbidden. It wasn't until she spoke that he finally faced her. Raul's dark-brown eyes were full of self-condemnation.

"After we spoke, I did what I could to change, but it seems it was already too late by then," Raul said. He averted his gaze.

Sylvester rose from his seat. "Have you already considered what will happen?"

"Once I relinquish my claim to the throne, my older brother will ask me to step down from the royal family, I'm sure."

"Then I suppose this will be our last meeting together, won't it?"

As soon as Raul was no longer a member of the royal family, he would become an ordinary citizen. The circumstances being what they were, even if he earned himself a ducal title, this would still be their last time seeing each other. After all the trouble his faction had caused Harland, Raul would never be permitted to see Sylvester again.

Sylvester stepped away from the sofa where he and Claudia had been sitting and moved toward the door. Panicked, Claudia hovered halfway off the cushions, wondering if she should follow him out. Raul was the only one who remained motionless, hanging his head. Sylvester kept moving as if he was going to walk right past Raul, but he stopped short.

"I have had just about enough of you ridiculing me!" Sylvester suddenly snatched Raul by the collar of his shirt, his voice booming through the room.

Both Raul and Claudia were so taken aback that they froze. After blinking several times, Raul finally managed a strangled reply. "I-I haven't ridiculed you "

[&]quot;Yes, you have! You're the one who said it before, remember?!"

"What are you—"

"Why won't you rely on your own friend?!" Behind those words, Claudia sensed Sylvester's true meaning: "Why won't you rely on me?"

Dumbstruck, Raul gawked up at the other man.

Sylvester had been furious this entire time. Yes, it rankled him that there had been a foreign agent stirring up dissent in his family's region and that it had put innocent lives at risk—but he was also offended that his own friend wouldn't turn to him for help. Claudia was the only person to whom he'd shown those emotions prior to their visit to the embassy. He'd even shared his memory of climbing a tree with Raul.

Lestea's tea party was a trap they had stepped into willingly for their own purposes, and only because they had prepared ahead of time to corner Lestea. There was never any real danger to Claudia. What really fueled Sylvester's fury was Raul's continued refusal to lean on him.

"Of course I can't do that!" Raul argued. "Our countries are potential enemies, aren't they?"

Sylvester sniffed at him. "Naturally. Depending on the circumstances, we could be. I never said I would offer you help for free, did I?"

"What the hell...?" For as exasperated as Raul sounded, his voice cracked, as if he was on the verge of tears. Claudia would pretend she hadn't heard it, for his sake.

"You should have come to me for help to begin with. I would have happily offered you aid at high interest," Sylvester said.

"Who in their right mind would ask for help knowing it came with a high interest rate?! You're just anxious to take advantage of me at the first opportunity, aren't you?"

Sylvester shrugged. "I am the crown prince of Harland. It's my duty to prioritize my country's best interests. Having said that, I am *not* like a certain

nation's king. It's not as if I'm heartless."

At that, Raul was speechless.

"If you get on your knees and cry and beg, I may be willing to be a little bit more generous."

Raul scowled. "If you're trying to convince me *not* to ask you for help, you're doing a great job." At long last, he smacked Sylvester's hands away. He pulled himself up to his feet and smoothed his collar.

Sylvester jutted his chin and held his head high, staring down his nose at Raul.

A wry smile tugged at the edge of Raul's lips, but his mirth was short-lived as the conversation took a more serious turn. "Sylvester, I want your help. I don't want to lose my position."

"Are you prepared to go toe-to-toe with Bari's king?"

Raul nodded. "I am, but only in the way I see fit." He kept his head up this time. There was no more staring at the floor.

Claudia was moved to see Raul's confidence restored—to see them meeting each other's gazes once more.

I'm so glad I was able to be here for this. She had a feeling this was a historical moment. Part of her worried whether she deserved to be present for something so profound, but she was also too uplifted to care. Syl and Raul are both lucky not to have lost a valuable friend.

It had been impossible for her to predict how things would play out. If Raul hadn't gotten to his feet on his own and had kept up that self-defeating attitude, Sylvester might really have turned his back on the man. Had that happened, Lestea would've been forced to join the crown prince's faction instead, since part of her sentence required her to be in a political position which granted her access to as much information as possible.

Will Lady Lestea really be able to act as a correspondent between our nations? Either way, she would be bound by invisible shackles from now on. Perhaps that

was what Lestea wanted, but it wasn't the least bit humane. If she didn't change her ways, she would find herself walking a tragic path eventually. Sadly, I have a feeling redressing her twisted way of thinking will be no easy feat.

Frankly, Claudia would've preferred not to get involved with Lestea at all, even if the whole carrot-and-stick method would work easily with her. I suppose I have no choice but to make sure she does her job the way she's supposed to.

Sylvester returned to his seat and began discussing how he wanted to proceed with Raul. If not for Lestea's schemes, Raul had originally intended to negotiate with Sylvester. Things would have been very different without her interference.

Once Sylvester was satisfied with their discussion, they agreed to iron out the details in a few days' time. Claudia couldn't help but smile, seeing how content they were by the end of their conversation. She could already imagine them fighting tooth and nail for their respective countries' benefit when next they met. Sadly, Claudia wouldn't be able to join them since she wasn't yet officially married to Sylvester. It was enough for her to picture how it would go.

"Sorry for this, but would you mind giving me a bit of your time before you leave?" Raul asked her as she and Sylvester were about to step out of the drawing room. "I realize how much trouble I have caused you, and for that reason as well, I would like to make things clear between us."

"Pardon?"

At first, she thought he was bowing his head, but then his whole body sank as he took a knee in front of her.

As the sun entered through a nearby window, it cast shadows across the carpet. There was an unmistakable fire hidden within Raul's dark-brown eyes.

"Lady Claudia Lindsay, would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

Her mind screeched to a halt. She never imagined he would propose like this.

Does that mean the dream I had before was prophetic? What she saw in her

dreams before the graduation party matched perfectly with what was happening right now. At the time, she couldn't comprehend what the dream was about.

Sylvester made no move to intervene. Perhaps he realized that Raul was prepared for rejection—that he needed it so he could give up on her.

Before offering her response, Claudia closed her eyes for a moment. *This isn't just for his sake. It's for mine as well.* Back in her brothel days, she'd never been able to give him a proper answer after he offered to buy her freedom, since she had passed away before his next visit. Thinking about it brought back those feelings of loneliness and isolation as she sat in her sickbed, waiting for the end.



If Claudia had any regrets from her previous lifetime, it was that she never got the opportunity to give him a response.

He fell in love with me twice. Not that Raul knew it, but it made her lips tremble with inexpressible heartache. If she opened her eyes now, she feared they would well up with tears. Perhaps this, too, was at the direction of the Capricious God.

I must make sure I have no regrets this time. Claudia drew in a deep breath. Once she'd composed herself, she opened her eyes and gazed down at him. There were no tears like there had been in her dream. Instead, her blue eyes shone with her strong will.

"I refuse."

That was always going to be her answer. As much as her heart throbbed with bittersweet nostalgia, she was steadfast in her conviction.

Raul smiled. "Thank you. With this, I can move forward."

"I certainly hope so. How much trouble do you intend to cause Dia before you're satisfied?" Sylvester complained, arms crossed.

"I can say nothing in my defense. If there's anything you want, you need only say the word," Raul said, turning his gaze back toward Claudia.

"Let's begin with some maritime concessions, then," Sylvester said.

Raul frowned. "I wasn't asking you."

"But you want that too, right, Dia?"

Since Sylvester was looking at her expectantly, she paused to consider it. The Lindsays' territory was inland, so they'd never had access to a sea trade route. If, through maritime concessions, they could transport crops at a low tax rate and export them, nothing would please her more.

Despite that, she shook her head. "Please don't drag me into your little squabbles."

"Oh, Claudia, I see that unlike some people I won't mention, you're a woman of impeccable character," Raul said.

Sylvester smirked. "Yes, she is far classier than some people we know who propose marriage with full knowledge they don't stand a chance."

"She's definitely far more compassionate than a man who tries to overcharge his friends at high interest for the help he's offered."

"And more pleasant company than a man who's incapable of relying on his friends and decides to stew in his own misery."

Claudia's gaze hardened the more the two traded barbs. They had finally brought their discussions to a close, but since each man refused to let the other get the last word, it seemed she'd never be able to go home.

"Excuse me! I refuse to continue listening to this drivel," she snapped at them, marching toward the door.

"Wait, Dia! Don't leave without me!" Sylvester cried.

"Yeah, let me see you off!"

Before she could open the door herself, Sylvester caught her by the arm. Raul's hand snatched the doorknob before he had the chance.

"It's not like I was ignoring you," Sylvester tried to assure her in a sweet voice.

Raul nodded. "It's simply hard to part with you."

Is it my imagination or do you two seem to be perfectly—and needlessly—in tune right now?

Although Raul and Sylvester were well acquainted, there were only so many opportunities for them to meet. For the sake of their friendship, Claudia decided to allow Sylvester to escort her and Raul to see them off.

Chapter 23:

The Villainess Gazes at the Heavens Once Again

The WINTER SKY was often overcast as of late, but today was a rare exception, with the full force of the sun bathing the land in its light.

It's almost as if the very sun is celebrating Prince Raul's departure.

It was still frigid outside—to the point that Claudia's breath came out in visible puffs of white—but there was something refreshing about the clear air that filled her lungs.

Claudia wasn't sure if she had the warmth of the sun to thank or the fluffy furs she'd donned to combat the cold, but either way, the low temperature didn't bother her. Perhaps that was because spring was just on the horizon.

Raul was returning to Bari ahead of the academy's looming entrance ceremony. He had Harland's support, so he was going to meet with his older brother and settle things. Although he was still adamant about not using force to compel the king, Harland was sending a platoon of bodyguards to accompany him for his own safety.

All the high-ranking aristocratic houses had gathered at the palace to participate in a sendoff ceremony for Raul and their knights. The formal portion of the event ended rather quickly, and all that remained afterward was for everyone to stand by and watch Raul and his crew depart.

Before the ceremony kicked off, Charlotte was monopolizing everyone's attention.

Raul was the focus of the ceremony, but prior to his arrival, everyone's eyes had been on Charlotte. And how could they not be? Her dress, with its built-in optical illusion, was a show-stopper. Other ladies, young and old, who were concerned about their more curvaceous figures were quick to interrogate Charlotte about her gown. It warmed Claudia's heart to see how eagerly

Charlotte fielded their questions. Her presence had eased the tension in the air too.

In her periphery, Claudia noticed Charlotte with a group of young ladies in whom she'd found kindred spirits. She'd enjoyed a lively time herself earlier with Louise and the others, but she'd retired to a spot specially reserved for her where she was getting some much-needed downtime.

Claudia let out a happy sigh, watching the tower of white mist that rose from her lips. Sylvester sat beside her, similarly wrapped in furs.

"I'd like to see your family's territory," he said.

Perhaps all the cheer and boisterous noise of the Barians as they prepared to leave had influenced him. Alternatively, this might have been Sylvester's way of distracting himself from the loneliness he felt at a dear friend leaving.

"Our lands are quiet and inactive in the winter, but it's nice and tranquil. Have you ever seen a flat horizon where the land stretches on forever?"

The countryside was markedly different than the capital with all its clamor and crowded streets. With no tall buildings to obstruct one's view, one could stare off into the horizon, and time seemed to slow down.

"I have seen the sea stretch on forever, but not the land," said Sylvester.

She smiled. "Then I think you'll be in for a surprise. It's hard to understand how majestic those vast stretches of open field can be until you see them for yourself."

Claudia hesitated after she said that. Perhaps the same could be said of the sea's horizon.

Her family's territory contained an enormous lake. She had been out on a boat there before, but she had never crossed the ocean. Unlike Sylvester, she'd never seen what the horizon looked like at sea.

"Once you get far enough out, the sea is all you see for miles and miles around except your own ship. It challenges your very way of thinking." Sylvester

made a sweeping motion through the air as he spoke.

"It's a little terrifying, picturing it like that." Claudia imagined herself with nothing solid to stand on, being left to the waves.

Sylvester snorted. "You have me with you. What's there for you to be afraid of?"

"Now that you mention it, I suppose you're right."

If she was going to give him the grand tour of her family's rural lands, he could do the same for her at sea. Plus, if the crown prince was venturing out, they would have a number of escort ships along to provide adequate security for him. Even Raul had come here with quite an entourage.

"We'll probably have an opportunity after our wedding, once we're involved in international policy-making. Whether that's sooner or later will depend, of course."

"Depend on what?" she asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

"Well, if you're expecting, you won't be able to go."

"Expecting?" Claudia stilled as the realization hit her.

He was referring to pregnancy.

Thanks to all the groundwork Sylvester had laid, they would be able to marry as soon as they graduated. However, the mere mention of a child suggested the passionate acts that preceded its creation. Claudia was so flustered, she started furiously fanning herself.

"Dia?"

"I-I didn't see Lady Lestea, you know," she blurted, quickly changing the subject. As confident as Lestea had acted, it seemed returning to Raul's side wasn't as simple as she thought. "If she's not able to recover, she risks losing her position entirely, doesn't she?"

Harland had opted to support Raul, so Lestea's ability to integrate into his

faction was pivotal. It was her only lifeline, really.

"She's grown even more twisted, but in an amusing way. I never expected much from her to begin with, so there's no need for you to worry about her." He paused. "Dia, your ears are bright red."

"Eek!" She flinched when Sylvester suddenly caressed the shell of her ear, causing a strangled cry to escape her throat. Fortunately, no one around them seemed to notice, but there was a sinister gleam in Sylvester's golden eyes. Claudia felt like a deer caught in a wolf's sights. She retreated a step.

"Why are you backing away from me?"

"Because," she said quickly, "my instincts are screaming, 'Danger!'"

Sylvester smirked. "Oh? What could you have been imagining in your head for you to think that?"

"Don't pin this on me!"

"No need to worry. I'll be gentle," he assured her in a soft, sweet voice.

Claudia didn't believe him for a second. She scanned her surroundings, trying to throw anyone nearby a pleading look—hoping they might rescue her. At a time like this, she wouldn't mind even if it were her father.

"Unfortunately for you, I sent the duke and Virgil elsewhere. I didn't want them to interrupt us, you understand."

It was then that she noticed Tristan was absent as well, and he was always following Sylvester like a shadow.

"Syl, people are watching," she warned him.

"The banners here will provide plenty of cover from prying eyes."

A special spot had been reserved for Sylvester and Claudia to see their foreign guests off. It was a makeshift tent that provided overhead cover, shielding the sofa that had been brought out for them. Instead of cloth walls, they had rows of bodyguards shielding them from the outside. An enormous banner was

erected near the front of the tent where Claudia and Sylvester were standing, with the royal family's emblem displayed prominently for their departing guests.

Sylvester grabbed the edge of the flag, which had been freely fluttering in the wind, and pulled it in front of them.

"Syl!" she gasped, but no other form of protest made it past her lips.

As Sylvester promised, no one was able to witness the way their shadows overlapped for that moment. Claudia's knees gave out from under her. She flopped back against the sofa.

"So, they're finally making their appearance, hmm?" Sylvester's voice rang out from above.

Claudia lifted her gaze. The piercing sound of a trumpet broke through the air, indicating Raul and his crew had finished their preparations. Her eyes followed Raul as he made his way toward an extravagant carriage. Gone were the shadows that haunted his face before; he walked with dignity.

Just before Raul climbed inside the carriage, he paused and glanced in her direction. Their eyes met. He waved at her, mouthing farewell. Unlike the ceremony, which had dragged on a little, the departure itself was short and sweet.

I wonder when we'll next meet, she thought to herself.

Raul took with him the forgery discovered in Port Brenach, as well as one other card he planned to play against his older brother: information about Barian aristocrats masquerading as merchants to sneak into Harland. With the combined intel Raul's faction provided, they discovered these aristocrats all belonged to the crown prince's faction. It would have been impossible to uncover the full details if Sylvester and Raul hadn't joined forces.

The crown prince's faction had been trying to entice disgruntled Harlander aristocrats into siding with Raul in an attempt to cause further division among

Harland's ranks. In exchange for their services there, they would be welcomed into Bari and awarded aristocratic titles. Thankfully, none of the Harlander aristocrats bought into this scam, but Harland couldn't overlook such egregious political machinations. They collected all the evidence they could as proof of the crown prince's faction's misdeeds. After all that, Harland couldn't have had a worse impression of that faction.

This points to there being cracks in the king's rule.

In fact, the crown prince's faction had been in such a rush to gain a foothold that they'd repeatedly made mistakes with no forethought about the repercussions. Raul, along with the rest of his faction, had acted as the country's shield to prevent its less savory politicians from making such terrible decisions. From the moment their king sent him away and incurred the wrath of the people, his remaining retainers revealed just how incompetent they really were.

The crown prince's faction had also exerted public pressure on Harland, but obviously their strategies were ineffective.

I suppose Prince Raul's influence was just too enormous for them to ignore.

They were too preoccupied with him. It spoke to how much of a threat he was that they went to such bold lengths to try and drag him down.

All I can do now is hope his talks with his brother go off without a hitch. The chances of things turning violent were practically nil, but life was full of the unpredictable.

Claudia stayed in her spot, watching until the very last carriage in Raul's caravan disappeared in the distance.

"Big Sister Claudia!"

"Char...lotte..." Claudia stuttered back as Charlotte slammed into her and pulled her into a tight hug. "How nice to see you." It wasn't necessarily painful,

but Charlotte's ample chest was pressing quite uncomfortably into her own.

I doubt she's doing it on purpose, but still!

"Lady Charlotte, this is entirely inappropriate!" Louise snapped, fanning herself. "Lady Clau—ahem, I mean, Dee—looks like she can barely breathe!"

The awkward way Louise corrected herself, remembering to use her nickname, made Claudia's heart flutter. For Louise's sake, she would pretend she didn't see the blush creeping across her face, but she was nonetheless hit with the urge to throw her arms around Louise.

"Sorry!" Charlotte squeaked. "I couldn't help myself. I am just so happy to be attending the same academy as you, Big Sis!"

Today was their entrance ceremony. Claudia was lined up in the audience with the rest of the students because, unlike Sylvester, she wouldn't be standing at the podium this time. Charlotte had launched this little surprise attack while everyone was still waiting for the ceremony to kick off.

"Unfortunately, I doubt we will see much of each other since we're in different years. But I am glad to be attending with you as well," Claudia said with a smile.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear it!" Charlotte released Claudia and stepped back.

Touched by her enthusiasm, Claudia affectionately stroked Charlotte's head, and a strange murmur of satisfaction spilled out of Charlotte's mouth, her whole face relaxing. There was something about her expression that, while difficult to describe, made Claudia yank her hand back.

It was about time for Charlotte to return to her spot with the rest of her classmates, so Claudia sent her off with a friend who'd come to retrieve her.

"You have her dancing in the palm of your hand," Louise commented. She breathed a small sigh. "I do hope you remember that you're a bridal candidate yourself."

Claudia couldn't argue the point with her. It was touching how much

Charlotte adored her, but she never dreamed the younger girl would be quite this attached.

"Still, I can understand how she feels, longing for an older sister figure," said Claudia.

It was comforting to have a bond with someone you didn't have to walk on eggshells around and who would have your back. Claudia had experienced both joys with Helen. Perhaps having such a close example in her own life was what made her relate to Charlotte's own intense fondness.

It wasn't long before the orchestra started up, their performance marking the start of the ceremony. The moment Sylvester appeared onstage, everyone was entranced. All eyes were glued to him. Each strand of hair that bounced as he moved seemed to glimmer in the light. His radiant features were relaxed into a gentle smile, and an aura of dignity and grace surrounded him. Everyone was moved by the sight of their future king...save for one person.

Did something happen? Claudia was sure that if Tristan or Virgil had been with her, they would've muttered the same thing. Yes, he wore a gentle expression, but it was concealing something. What, she couldn't say for sure, but she knew this wasn't normal for Sylvester.

"With those initial remarks out of the way, I would like to introduce you all to someone. I hope you'll be surprised," Sylvester said as he made a sweeping motion, urging someone from the wings to come up on stage.

"Hola! I have already met the second-and third-years at the graduation party earlier this year, but I look forward to our time together at the academy." A young man with earthy brown skin stepped out, wearing a cheerful smile on his face.

Claudia stared at him, flabbergasted. When their eyes met, he winked.

Her reunion with Raul came much sooner than she'd anticipated.

Even after the ceremony ended and she rendezvoused with Sylvester, Claudia still couldn't properly digest the situation. She was in for another shock when she saw the pale, handsome woman in men's clothes at Raul's side. Unlike the rest of their peers, she and Tristan were dressed in formal attire rather than their school uniforms. As Sylvester explained it, this was all for optics—to emphasize that both countries had a member of their respective royal families attending the academy and that they had a strong bond between them.

"Were you surprised?" Raul asked with a triumphant grin, looking like a mischievous child excited to have pulled one over on her. "Oh man, it was tough sneaking in here."

Apparently, he had kept his return secret even from Sylvester, which was what made it all the harder for Claudia to accept he was here. Dazed as she was, she felt the hostility emanating from her fiancé, thinly veiled behind his usual smile.

"When did you arrive in the capital?" Claudia asked.

"Two days ago. I was really sweating it on the ship over, wondering whether we'd make it in time for the entrance ceremony."

News had already arrived ahead of time about how his talks with his brother went. Publicly, the king admitted his wrongdoing and patched up his relationship with his brother. It was practically unheard of for a king to apologize to anyone personally, even if they were his own flesh and blood.

There was also an official announcement that Raul would oversee the crown prince's education. In exchange for accepting his new position in the line of succession, he would be granted a position of great influence over the crown prince. It was a somewhat predictable outcome given Raul's pacifism, but those were just the outward results of their bargaining.

The crown prince's faction lost all power thanks to Harland's dogged investigation into their underhanded maneuvering. Even their own countrymen were disgusted with them. With their dismissal, Raul's faction swept in to fill

the void they left behind in the country's power structure. Their presence ensured the king would no longer be able to make decisions on his own. A monarch only held power because his aristocrats supported him. With public support having waned so drastically, the king had essentially lost all ground to stand on.

Despite the advantages this gave him, Prince Raul still didn't try to take the crown for himself.

The mercy he'd shown his brother was not out of brotherly consideration but rather a genuine concern for the feelings of the people. Bari valued blood ties above all else. This importance of family was the whole reason they were so disgusted with the king for sending Raul away. By publicly supporting his brother, Raul would earn even more support from the people and be the one with the real authority.

After being thrown out, gaining allies abroad, and returning to reason with his older brother, Raul looked like a hero in the eyes of the people.

With all this, I don't see how he has the freedom to come piddle away time here in Harland. Claudia eyed him suspiciously, but his smile never faltered. In fact, he grabbed her hand and pressed his lips to the back.

"I wouldn't be where I am now if not for your sound advice. Please, won't you consider returning to Bari with me?" he said.

Those words sounded awfully familiar. They were the same ones he'd spoken to her when he offered to buy her freedom.

Since Claudia was too shocked to respond, Sylvester slipped between them, knocking Raul's hand away from hers.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, a deep crease in his brow.

Raul smirked. "Shouldn't you be more careful, Sylvester? Your mask is slipping."

At Raul's reminder, Sylvester schooled his expression. His hand wandered to

his hip.

"Whoa! Call me crazy, but were you just trying to reach for a sword to cut me down?"

Sylvester sighed. "Sadly, I forgot to equip one." He seemed genuinely disappointed that his usual scabbard wasn't at his side. It was a rule of the academy that no one, regardless of status, was allowed to carry a weapon with them. "Tristan?"

"Don't look at me! I don't have one either. And even if I did, I sure wouldn't let you have it!"

He clicked his tongue. "You're useless to me."

Oh, could this be what I think it is? Prince Raul mentioned before that he'd like to tear Syl's mask off. Is that what he was doing? Claudia recalled the conversation they had when she was giving him the grand tour of the academy. They had conspired together to pull one over on Sylvester, but perhaps Raul had seized the opportunity to make it a one-man show.

"You're merciless, aren't you?!" Raul craned his neck to look at Claudia over Sylvester's shoulder. "Claudia, I think your life would be much calmer with me as your partner instead of this nut."

"Silence," Sylvester hissed back at him, pointing a finger. "She already turned you down once. Don't you think acting so persistent is rather unbecoming of you?"

"Hey, I never said I was giving up! It's still possible she might have a change of heart," Raul said with a shrug.

"She won't."

"I didn't ask for *your* opinion. Besides, it's not as if you're engaged. She's only a potential bride, right?"

In truth, they were engaged. It just wasn't public yet. Something about the way Raul emphasized his words, however, gave her a bad feeling. It didn't help

that he had a devious grin on his face.

Sylvester's brows hit his hairline. He seemed to share Claudia's discomfort.

"And," Raul went on, "you'll still have to wait a year after graduation to marry anyway, correct? You have no right to chase me away in the meantime, not even if I make open advances on her."

"Oh? I think it would be nothing short of a scandal for a foreign prince to make passes at someone else's betrothed."

Raul dramatically clapped his hands over his heart. "As much as I hate to break this to you, I have a lot of support back home. Everyone heard about my tragic, unrequited love." As he explained it, the rumors had taken on some dramatic twists. Moved by what they'd heard, the people sided with Raul, opening up the opportunity for him to return to Harland on exchange. It probably helped that his own faction was the one in power now.

Claudia glanced at Lestea, who flashed a charming smile back at her. She would need to press Lestea for details later.

"There's no need for you to worry. I won't be asking Harland for permission for her hand in marriage. I respect her feelings and her right to choose. I just bought some more time for myself."

Sylvester's eyes narrowed. "Time? Don't tell me..."

"You may have arranged things behind the scenes, but you should know how politics works. Things can change in an instant."

Only a select few were aware of their secret engagement, even if many more already predicted that it was the inevitable outcome. The only thing Raul could possibly be hinting at was all the strings Sylvester had pulled so they could marry immediately after graduation instead of having to wait the standard year.

Now that's been overturned? Raul had literally said he'd "bought time." He hadn't annulled the engagement between them, but he'd obviously bought off some of Harland's nobility.

Sylvester's expression soured. "I should have turned my back on you!"

"Oh, please. You have every intention of milking all the benefits out of our deal!"

"Of course! That's why I supported you!"

Raul nodded. "Exactly. Compared to the harsh hand of friendship you extended to me, my actions seem pretty harmless in comparison."

Oh dear, things have certainly taken a turn.

It wasn't necessarily a problem. Claudia had originally anticipated having an extra year before they were married, so the situation had just reverted to what was already customary for the crown prince and his future bride. However, seeing how much this got under Sylvester's skin gave her the sense that it would have unpredictable repercussions.

In the distant future, one historian would claim Claudia was a villainess who cajoled neighboring princes and had them dancing in the palm of her hand. Further research corroborated this claim, as she was proven to be a peerless beauty in her time.

Bonus Chapter:

The Villainess Develops New Ties with Her Former Sisters

As unexpected and shocking as Raul's appearance at the entrance ceremony had been, Claudia's school life afterward had proven relatively peaceful. The student council would be holding their yearly event soon. Claudia could only hope nothing unforeseen happened in the meantime.

Syl seems to be enjoying himself, despite the circumstances.

He maintained his usual tepid smile as he thwarted Raul's advances. There were times when the two grew heated with each other, but thanks to their public reputations, no one ever construed it as a political falling-out.

Although if our classmates were privy to the specifics of their bickering, their eyes would bug out.

It was never anything too serious. They would debate things like Claudia's preferences and such. Frankly, Claudia rather wished they wouldn't make her their main focus all the time, but it was heartwarming how they fussed.

There aren't many people Syl can stand on equal footing with.

Or, for that matter, people he could honestly call his friends. Raul was really the standout person on that list. Even though Tristan and Virgil could be counted as well, they wouldn't resort to exchanging fisticuffs with him. Actually, Virgil might if it involved Claudia, but that was an entirely separate matter.

As much as he throws barbs Raul's way, he's always in good spirits as he does it. It's such an adorable side of him I never got to see before.

For once, Sylvester was acting his age. Claudia couldn't help but smile each time she saw him struggling to be honest about his feelings with his friend, even if she wished they'd leave her out of their squabbles.

"Lady Claudia, you're ready to go."

"Thank you. This turned out quite nicely."

While her idle thoughts wandered to life at the academy, Helen had finished tidying up her appearance. Claudia had opted for very different attire than she normally wore for the occasion, so she quickly checked herself in the mirror.

"You look stunning even in men's clothes," Helen said sincerely.

The other maids who had assisted her eagerly nodded in agreement.

"I'm not quite sure they qualify as men's clothes so much as a ladies' pantsuit," she responded.

Claudia had flattened her chest with a bolt of cloth, but unlike Lestea, one could still tell at a glance that she was a woman. Her tailor-made suit was all black with nothing particularly colorful about it, but it was decorated with lace here and there, making it notably distinct from men's clothing. Still, her maids had always known her as the perfect lady, so this change in attire was more than enough for them to shower her with compliments.

"Putting your hair up and changing your makeup has made you look all the more dapper!"

"I absolutely agree! The whole black pantsuit look gives you this kind of sexy and dangerous air!"

The sparkle in their eyes didn't lie. All the praise they were heaping on her was genuine. If they were pleased with how she looked, then it was time to add the finishing touch.

"Thank you. I shall be off, then," she said, making her voice lower and richer. Instead of the usual folding fan she'd grown accustomed to carrying around, she reached for a cane that she'd prepared to complete her disguise.

Squeals echoed behind her.

It was the weekend, which meant no classes. Claudia had made up her mind to visit an old haunt that was near and dear to her heart. The curtain of

darkness was already falling across the sky when Helen followed Claudia out to see her off in her carriage. The maid looked even more concerned about her than usual, but perhaps that was Claudia's mind playing tricks on her—a consequence of her guilty conscience at deceiving Helen about where she was going.

Guilty or not, I can't possibly take her with me. Unlike their previous lifetime, this Helen had managed to escape entering the brothel. Claudia hoped that her good fortunes would continue and she would never have to know that life again. After all, behind the brothel was a crime syndicate. Even if they rarely show themselves in public, it doesn't make them any less dangerous.

In general, the crime syndicate's only interest was getting a portion of the profits. They normally kept a low profile, especially at the brothel Claudia had lived in, since they so frequently had aristocrats as their clientele. The last thing criminals wanted was to make an enemy of their country's elite. If they did, it spelled the end for them.

Claudia's cover story for tonight's outing was dinner with Lestea, which helped make her choice of attire seem more like entertainment than an actual disguise. She'd been sure to coordinate her story with Lestea so none would be the wiser as to her true intentions. Lestea was actually preparing a formal dinner to help substantiate their cover.

Thankfully, Lestea had prepared everything else Claudia required for the occasion as well. The plan was for Claudia to visit the girls' dormitory before moving on to her true destination. All the bodyguards with her were aware of her intentions; when she informed them she wanted to visit a brothel, they agreed to keep her secret.

A brothel was no place for a young noblewoman. It wasn't hard to imagine how scandalous such news could be. Her bodyguards knew their wisest course of action was to give it no additional thought and just keep quiet as they'd been asked.

That said, I'm sure they would push back if I said I wanted to visit one outside the high-end district. One needed only to set one foot outside the high-end district for their surroundings to take a drastic change. The further one traveled from there, the less one could expect the hand of the law to keep them safe.

Claudia's bodyguards would never have agreed to let her venture somewhere dangerous. They would've reported it to her father had she tried. Even they had a line they were unwilling to cross.

She had kept today's little trip a secret from Sylvester too. If I told him, I just know he would want to come along with me. That would make it impossible for me to accomplish anything.

Her plan was to visit the brothel as a customer to get a better idea of how conditions were there at present. The fewer people along for the ride, the better.

It's not that I'm leaving Syl behind because I think the sex workers might steal him away. Not at all. Claudia knew all too well what incredible people those women were. She had no issue introducing them to Sylvester. Or at least she wanted to think she didn't. Still, by virtue of their line of work, they're professionals at seduction.

Sylvester wasn't the type to be easily cajoled, but there was no guarantee he could completely resist their temptations.

I am the one forcing him to wait. If he asked for permission to get pleasure elsewhere, I... No. I already decided I wouldn't bring him with me. There's no point in giving it any further thought!

Entertaining what-ifs was hardly productive.

Claudia knew from personal experience what the brothel was like, even without observing it for herself, but she wanted a glimpse of the current conditions. *In my previous life, I was only just starting to get used to living in the brothel around this time.*

Helen and the other veteran sex workers had drilled into her the secrets of success in the field. She owed a debt of gratitude to all of them, not just Helen. It would be so much easier if I could just outright buy the brothel. Unfortunately, even as a duke's daughter, she didn't have access to the kind of finances required to make that sort of purchase. Not yet, anyway.

Given my relationship with Brian, I may have the sort of money to do that eventually if I can be patient. That's almost an unnerving thought. The Evans Company had faithfully held to their contract with her; in exchange for her promoting their beauty products, they promised her a share of the profits.

Helen had been absolutely correct when she predicted how quickly the Evans's cosmetics would fly off the shelf once people knew they were Claudia's preferred brand. Their products sold out almost as quickly as they were restocked. Profits were so impressive that Brian's father had even suggested erecting a statue of Claudia in front of their store entrance. She refused, but it had been an impressive display of their abilities to see how much she'd earned from their deal.

Thanks to Brian and his family's company, even if she couldn't quite afford to buy the brothel, she did have enough funds to provide a personal contribution. Aside from the money they funneled to her, her father also provided her with a sum far too handsome to be considered an allowance each year.

Anyway, even if I could purchase the brothel outright, it wouldn't solve the fundamental issues. What Claudia wanted to change—to improve—was a more foundational issue in the sex industry. Buying one brothel was a drop in the bucket, a ripple in the water that would soon disappear and be forgotten.

I can do more now that I've kept my status as a duke's daughter. Even if she had limitations, she had much more power now than she ever did at the brothel. Her future contained countless possibilities to grow her influence too. That would be especially true once she became crown princess.

Claudia wanted to improve the living conditions for those struggling at the

bottom of society. Although she had double the experience of a normal lady her age, there was still so much she didn't know about the world. First, she wanted to make a foothold of the one brothel she was familiar with.

Since Raul was keeping Lestea under observation, she lived at the embassy with him rather than the girls' dormitory. She had managed to return to his side, but she hadn't regained any of his trust.

Harland requires her to provide regular reports as well. It must be a suffocating position to be in, Claudia thought.

Despite it all, Claudia was impressed at Lestea's skill in setting up today's masquerade. The embassy couldn't be used for private gatherings, so she had invited Claudia to the girls' dormitory for dinner instead. The Barian noble ladies had gone home with Raul initially, but when he returned to attend the academy, they followed him back to Harland. They were being as cooperative with Lestea as ever. Instead of trying to win over Raul directly, Lestea had taken the route of getting those around him on her side first.

When Claudia arrived at the girls' dormitory, Lestea was there to greet her with a great big smile. "My liege, I have been anxiously awaiting your arrival. I've already had another carriage prepared for your convenience."

When their gazes met, something passionate and fiery bloomed in Lestea's pale eyes. It made the air between them awkward, but Claudia was grateful for her help.

"Thank you. I hope you'll keep up the pretense while I am away."

"Of course. I am at your service." Lestea politely took her hand, escorting her to an unmarked carriage.

The bodyguards accompanying her removed their cloaks, each emblazoned with her family's crest. They also traded their plate suits for less conspicuous boiled leather armor. Wearing the Lindsay crest so prominently was a way of

deterring any would-be attackers from targeting them, but there was no need for it tonight. If the necessity arose, they had short swords engraved with the Lindsay crest. That would be enough.

"Tonight, my liege, you look like the Night Queen. I only regret that I cannot accompany you," Lestea said with a sad shake of her head.

"If you will remember, you have a duty of your own to attend to."

"Yes, you are absolutely correct. I will do my utmost to meet your expectations."

Claudia nodded, satisfied. "Then I'll be on my way."

"Have a safe trip." Lestea bowed low after helping her into the carriage.

A servant shut the door, and the driver snapped the reins, urging his horse into motion. As the carriage trundled along down the bumpy road, the emotion Claudia had tucked away came swelling to the surface.

I'll see them all again in just a few minutes.

Given the year and season, she could already narrow down what familiar faces would be there to greet her. The more she let herself indulge in the memories, the more her heart thrummed with excitement.

Calm down, she told herself. This is our first time meeting as far as they're concerned.

That had been the case with Raul as well, but now she had the benefit of knowing ahead of time that she was about to be reunited with people from her past. Her reunion with Raul had been a complete surprise.

The brothel wasn't far from the girls' dormitory. She forced herself to relax, letting the tension drain from her shoulders and the rest of her body fall limp against the cushioned seats. While the carriage swayed around her, the last rays of sunlight were swallowed by the darkness outside. The moon was a sliver of silver on the blanket of night, smiling ominously down on the capital.

The red-light district was tucked away in the back streets of the high-end

district, hidden away from the buttoned-up parts of society. Lights flickered on in the various storefronts they passed, as if the proprietors and their employees were only just waking up to begin their nightly services. It seemed she would arrive just as they were opening.

Claudia's destination sat at the very end of the street. Its aged brick exterior brought memories rushing back.

It was often mistaken for a hotel.

It was the owner's own personal preference not to place a signboard out front. The interior was gaudy in comparison. She could vividly remember the blinding brightness of it even now.

Before alighting, Claudia secured a hat on her head. It was a fascinator—rimless black felt with black netting that acted like a curtain, obscuring her beautiful face. Tightly gripping her cane in hand, she announced to the doorman that she would be going inside.

As soon as an aristocrat made their societal debut, they were considered adult enough to venture into a brothel if they so wished. Each brothel had different processes with their customers. For instance, this one, which was called Flower Bed, required an introduction from a current customer or an entrance fee before someone was allowed in. Since they served aristocrats, they wanted to maintain a certain level of quality in their clientele.

Claudia paid the necessary fee for herself and all her bodyguards before she entered her former home. The bright lighting wasn't quite so blinding since she knew what to expect and had her hat to shield her a little. Behind her, the bodyguards were momentarily awestruck.

"Welcome to the Flower Bed," the owner said eagerly. She gave him a nod of acknowledgment, and he continued, "I see it's your first time here with us. Are you aware of the process here at our establishment?"

Although there was nothing odd about their interaction with one another, she was shocked he managed to recognize her status so quickly; the owner never

personally welcomed people unless their introduction to the brothel was from a high-ranking aristocrat.

Perhaps he was able to infer it because of my bodyguards.

Careful to keep her tone of voice low and androgynous, she said, "As I understand it, once a client decides on a lady, she will be their permanent partner."

"Yes, precisely. Since you already understand how this works, allow me to bring you someone who suits your preferences."

A permanent partner, as the term implied, meant that a client could never switch to anyone else. This was a preventative measure to avoid the spread of disease. STDs and STIs were a headache for the clients and workers both. Moreover, this permanent system helped inhibit competition and reduced conflict between the workers themselves.

"All right. I will entrust the decision to you," she said.

"Are you sure?" the owner asked.

Claudia nodded. "Yes, you seem to have a good sense for these things."

She knew this answer was always the most stressful, but she left the choice up to him anyway. If the owner was troubled by it, he didn't let it show.

"Very well, then. Please wait over here in the meantime."

The brothel had several waiting rooms, divided by quality. He took her to one of their best ones. Where there would normally be a door, there was no wall at all, leaving the room completely exposed to the connecting hallway. A partition screen was set up there instead to offer the customer some measure of privacy. Customers didn't spend long here; it was only for the purpose of choosing which sex worker would be their permanent partner.

Things haven't changed at all.

It was the same as she remembered, almost detestably so. That had to mean the parts of it she wanted to improve were no better than before. Claudia plopped herself on a spacious sofa, large enough to accommodate five people. Her bodyguards filed in and stood at the wall, as they usually did when guarding her. With nothing better to do, she let her gaze wander to the chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

Everything about this place is garish. The owner would be better off matching the interior to the exterior instead. Even the cushions she was sitting on were all red. It was the most frequently used color since red was supposed to stimulate the senses. Perhaps that made it inevitable for the interior to seem unnecessarily flashy. During her brothel days, Claudia had an entire floor of the building to herself. She'd completely changed the interior of her room.

A male server came by to take her drink order. She asked for black tea. The unremarkable-looking young man politely dipped his head and hurried off to fetch her drink. He was yet another familiar sight. I forgot he was here back then!

To most, the young man looked like a low-ranking employee who took care of trivial errands around the brothel, but he was constantly watching and gathering information about the customers. Claudia couldn't even remember how many times his intel had come in handy.

As much as it filled her with emotion to see him again, she locked away those feelings. Tears threatened to well in her eyes if she didn't dodge her own sentimentality. Fortunately, her nostalgia was soon chased away by two startlingly familiar voices.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Mirage."

"And I am Marianne."

Miss Mirage! Miss Marianne! These were two of the senior sex workers who had offered her comfort alongside Helen. The two were always extremely popular, ranking second and third respectively in sales. As a newbie, Claudia had been rebellious at first, and they had looked after her like older sisters.

Mirage was the eldest worker at Flower Bed, wearing a wine-red dress that emphasized her cleavage. She claimed she wasn't even thirty yet, but no one believed her. Long waves of emerald-green hair framed her curvaceous body. Many of the other sex workers referred to her as "Mom."

She always got angry if we called her that. She preferred "Big Sis" instead.

Marianne was similarly a veteran at the brothel, but her appearance contrasted starkly with Mirage's. Her platinum-blonde hair was perfectly straight, the ends dancing along her exposed clavicle and emphasizing her delicate, slender shoulders. She was much more petite, charming customers not with a voluptuous form as Mirage did but with her supple skin and ephemeral beauty.

The two women settled on either side of the couch, sandwiching Claudia between them.

Bowing, the owner announced, "There's one other I plan to introduce to you. Please enjoy the company of these ladies in the meantime before you make your decision."

Given that he's already brought out two of his top sellers, I can assume the last one must be Miss Kayla. She was the reigning number one around this period. The brothel had only just opened for the night, so Kayla was probably still preparing. He's brought me all his most expensive women. Does he take me for a fool, thinking he can suck me dry?

As tempted as she was to dissect the owner's motives, it was more likely that he'd chosen them because they were more accustomed to dealing with high-ranking aristocratic clients. The moment he saw Claudia, he probably sensed that he couldn't risk offending her.

Mirage leaned forward a little, drawing her arms in to push out her cleavage. "So, sweet customer, by what name might we call you?"

"Rose," Claudia answered. It was an alias she had come up with ahead of time.

A bewitching smile spread across Mirage's lips. "My, what a gorgeous name! Hee hee. Your arrival here has all the girls in a tizzy. See there?" She pointed to where several younger women were peeking in on them, hiding either behind the wall or other furnishings. The moment they realized they'd been spotted, they ducked.

Marianne knit her brows. Dismayed though she was, she didn't forget to use the opportunity to sidle closer to Claudia. "How disgraceful. I'll have to scold them later."

"I don't mind," Claudia quickly assured her. "I'm sure customers like me are quite rare here."

The words almost didn't make it out of her mouth, but she somehow managed to force them out and seem composed. It was a struggle; the whole time, the two women had surreptitiously closed any distance between them and her. The air around them was charged with sexual tension.

I guess I should have expected this much from them. Before she knew it, Mirage's soft breasts were pressing against her arm. As a veteran, Mirage knew exactly how to entice a person, and she was showing no mercy.

"Yes, it's unfortunate how few female customers we have. But what's really gotten their attention is how elegant and dignified you are, Lady Rose."

All the consternation disappeared from Marianne's face as her cheeks flushed. "You took the words right out of my mouth," she said. "I can tell how amazing you are from the way you conduct yourself, Lady Rose."

The way her pale skin transformed to a rosier color made her words sound even more genuine. Who would ever guess this was a part of her technique?

But, according to Miss Marianne, it's not an act. She always explained it to Claudia as convincing herself that whatever client she was with was her lover. It was no easy feat to truly trick the brain into believing such a lie. Claudia knew that from experience. This technique of Marianne's worked for some people but not for others. Sadly, Claudia fell into the latter category. If I had to pick

between them, I would say Miss Marianne's techniques were a better point of reference for me.

Being with them now felt like a refresher course in the art of seduction. It wasn't in Claudia's nature to remain passive, though. It was well past time she took the reins. She began by turning toward Mirage, gently tucking a lock of her long, emerald-green hair behind her ear.

"Please," she said entreatingly, "don't tempt me so much with your bodies. It makes it difficult to think."

Her fingers brushed against Mirage's earlobe, then trailed down her neck. When she reached Mirage's clavicle, she doubled back, letting her fingers dance across the sensitive skin of Mirage's nape. Her eyes glazed over slightly. After enjoying the deliciously sweet look in Mirage's eyes, she turned next toward Marianne.

"Is it too soon for me to pepper your sweet skin with kisses?" Claudia asked teasingly.

She was allowed light caresses, but any further physical contact was limited until she made her official selection for a permanent partner. Beneath the flowery words, her unspoken sentiments were made clear: she wanted them to tone down their overtures.

Claudia's hand went to Marianne's exposed collarbone, lingering for only a moment before wandering to the side of her stomach, where the fabric of her dress was thinnest. Marianne's reaction was much less subtle than Mirage's. Her body gave a small shudder. She caught Claudia's mischievous hand with her own, threading their fingers to keep her from continuing any further.

Since they had all lived together for so long, Claudia knew exactly where they were most sensitive.

Marianne pushed out her bottom lip into a cute pout. "How cruel. Are you trying to make me want you more?"

"Oh? You're welcome to back out if you like."

It was like a game between them, reining one another in, but at least the two women slid back a bit. Apparently, they'd picked up on her hints, even though the atmosphere between them proved how serious they were getting about it. It unnerved Claudia a little.

Ladies, there is no need to take this all the way!

Claudia's true objective was to get a better idea on the present conditions at the brothel. There was no need to take anyone to bed. Still, she couldn't risk the owner suspecting her, so she planned to recruit whatever permanent partner she selected to act as her informant.

Kayla still hadn't arrived, but Claudia was growing anxious about picking someone quickly. Claudia's gaze wandered back to the ceiling as she hemmed and hawed over whether to make her call now or keep waiting.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a booming voice from the neighboring room.

"Do you have any idea how expensive this is, you idiot?!"

"My apologies!"

Apparently one of the girls had made a mistake when serving a customer.

Mirage quickly pressed her hands over Claudia's. "I'm sorry if that startled you. Would you mind if I excuse myself to go check on things?"

Claudia shook her head and watched as Mirage hopped off the couch and disappeared around the corner. Alas, Claudia couldn't keep silent and sit here waiting forever. The voice she had heard was all too familiar, and it was followed by a hollow smack of skin connecting with skin.

"Lady Rose, please wait!" Panicked, Marianne tried to dissuade her, but Claudia was already on her feet and moving in the direction Mirage had gone. As she crossed the threshold into the hallway, the owner threw himself in her path. "I deeply apologize for this disruption, my lady, but I swear to you we will see it dealt with. Please return to your seat."

His message was clear: Don't interfere.

The fact that Mirage had immediately left her seat to attend to the situation suggested the owner had anticipated this exact situation. Veteran that Mirage was, there were few customers who wouldn't settle down once she appeared. Brothels couldn't afford for clients to intervene based on their own sense of self-righteousness. It would only sow chaos. Nothing good would come of it, and Claudia understood that.

Sadly, I am no ordinary client, and besides...I recognize both of those voices. She was familiar with the man yelling as well as the woman profusely apologizing.

She motioned to her bodyguards, and one of them stepped forward to reveal the emblem on their short sword. When the owner realized it belonged to Duke Lindsay, his jaw dropped. She took advantage of his surprise to slip right past him.

My goodness! What Claudia saw before her made it impossible to hide her disgust.

A young sex worker had turned into a blubbering heap on the floor, her cheek swollen from the man's violence. Mirage had hurried over to her, standing between the poor girl and their belligerent customer, who had already raised his hand to strike Mirage too.

"What're you doing in here?!" he spat viciously when he noticed Claudia's entrance. "Get out! Now!" The man then turned his gaze back to Mirage, as if he thought the owner would intervene on his behalf and shoo Claudia away. "Whose money do you think is lining your pockets, huh? You're all a bunch of useless trash—only good for selling your bodies!"

Along with his scathing words, he brought the flat of his hand flying toward Mirage's face—but it wasn't Mirage who ultimately yelped in pain.

"Gah! You wench!" The man's eyes flared with rage.

Claudia stared coldly back at him, still holding the cane aloft that she had used to club his hand.

"Do you have any idea who you're messing with?! Don't think for a minute you'll get out of this unpunished!"

"You are Lord Yeats's third-born, correct? After your elder brothers died from illness, you landed yourself the position of heir and have been acting out ever since—or so the rumors say. It seems they were not exaggerating. If anything, they were understating things."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw how painfully red and swollen the poor young sex worker's cheek was. Claudia's temples throbbed, fury pulsing through her veins. She managed to keep her voice composed, but a venomous hatred smoldered within.

I never realized he was one of her clients. It finally dawned on her that there were things she hadn't been privy to in her last life. The shock hit her hard.

This man had a habit of choosing timid sex workers. The permanent partner system proved ineffective with him, since none of the girls lasted very long after he chose them, which resulted in him bouncing around from partner to partner. Claudia had never been one of those unfortunates, thanks to her strong-willed appearance, but she had always known he was a sadist who got off on making women scream and cry. It didn't help that the brothel considered its own workers disposable. As long as his actions didn't negatively impact their revenue, they wouldn't intervene.

Disgusting. Claudia hated the men who thought they could get away with violence by using their status or wealth, and she hated the brothel itself for keeping silent about the abuse.

"I-If you already know, then that should make this easier! You're an aristocrat too, right? It's better for you if you keep your mouth shut and back off. You don't want this to become a scandal for you either, right?!"

You bring shame to all aristocrats by your very existence. That's how you were before, and you're no different now.

He was trying to threaten her because she was a woman. Claudia had to purse her lips to keep from sighing at how predictably slimy he was.

"Hah!" the man snorted, sneering at her black outfit. "If you're a widow, you should act the part and go fish for men instead of coming here. Or what? Are you looking for employment here?"

Whack!

Her hand swung instinctively. The others present audibly gulped as they watched her cane slam into the man's head. His eyes rolled back, body reeling and collapsing onto the sofa behind him.

My, where is all this boldness of mine coming from? Is it the outfit? Or perhaps—and maybe more likely—her hatred and disgust for him, built up over two lifetimes, had taken over. Regardless, even Claudia was shocked at how quickly she had reacted.

"Shall we remove his head?" asked one of her bodyguards, stepping forward.

"No," she answered immediately. "That won't be necessary."

The man's reckless defamation of her character when she outranked him was reason enough for her bodyguards to earnestly consider beheading him. By law, they would be well within their rights. No one could arrest them for it. Still, Claudia couldn't afford for any of this to go public.

She spun on her heel, turning to the owner. "Judging by the way he spoke, he is funding your establishment."

"That is correct."

The man hadn't been so insolent purely because he was part of the aristocracy; he was confident there'd be no repercussions because he was paying the brothel off. If only I could have done something about this sooner, I could have prevented the damage he's already caused.

There were other unscrupulous customers, but this man was by far the worst of the lot.

"Then I will contribute ten times what he was paying you," Claudia offered, mentally berating herself for not being calm enough to handle the situation more shrewdly. But even if she couldn't buy the brothel, she could at least help fund it. "Will that be enough for you to take care of things from here?"

"Of course. I'll see it done."

The fastest way to deal with someone wielding their status as a weapon was to have someone with an even more impressive title strike them down. It wasn't Claudia's preferred method, but it was one only accessible to her because she'd been born a duke's daughter. Besides, she already had a mental relationship diagram documenting the links between all aristocrats. Using that, she could leak some information to the owner that would ensure the man left quietly.

Since the owner was dealing with the belligerent earl's son, Claudia dampened her handkerchief and pressed it against the swollen cheek of the sex worker still on her hands and knees on the floor.

"You must have been so frightened," she said tenderly.

Stunned, the girl hesitated before blurting, "No, not at all! Thank you for helping me."

This woman had been one of her sisters once—a coworker. The very same one who had used poison to take her own life.

She started working here around the same time I did.

Claudia had been so preoccupied with herself at the time—trying to acclimate and learn the trade here—that she hadn't paid any attention to those around her. Realizing this worker was the same age made her heart ache even more.

I can only hope there is some light in her life this time.

No, hoping wasn't enough. Claudia swore she would be the one to create that

light, to give this room's occupants a reason to want to live.

Even if I can only start by offering some small sliver of salvation, I promise I will do more in the future.

She wanted to create a world where no sex worker had to live in fear of men, where they at least had the option to do other work if they wanted.

Since I'm contributing now, I'm going to make sure I get my money's worth. First, she planned to improve the customer base here. Anyone who raised a hand against the workers would be permanently banned.

As strong determination swelled within her, a sweet, warbling voice cut through the air. "Dear me, what's this? Am I late?" Kayla asked with a tilt of her head.

"You missed the best part," Marianne told her.

"Whaaat? Marie, why didn't you call for me if something exciting was happening?" Kayla pouted, pushing out her bottom lip.

Marianne crossed her arms. "It's your own fault for keeping our guest waiting."

"Exactly," Mirage agreed. "You need to learn some punctuality. Lady Rose, please won't you remove Kayla from your list of prospective partners?"

"Mom, that's uncalled for!"

"That's 'Big Sis' to you, missy!"

Miss Kayla hasn't changed at all either. Her gentle, laid-back demeanor was part of her charm, but it could also be a shortcoming. Kayla's appearance was less ostentatious than Mirage's, and she lacked the delicate fragility that Marianne possessed. In fact, her looks didn't really stand out at all. That actually works in her favor.

Most people lost their nerve when they were around a world-class beauty, even paying customers. Kayla's plainness put people at ease. She was Flower Bed's soothing presence. She was beloved by her fellow sex workers as well as

her clients.

Plus, there is more to her than being laid-back. There was a comforting aura around her that even eased the suffocating tension of the air here; the moment she walked in, smiles returned to all the workers' faces. A good personality alone wasn't enough to snag the top spot in the sales ranking.

"Lady Rose," Kayla entreated adorably with dewy eyes, "won't you have a little mercy on me?" The mole beside her mouth was particularly eye-catching.

It's not fair, the way she looks up at you with those big puppy-dog eyes.

"Kayla, you shouldn't make such an outlandish request after how late you were!" Mirage said.

Marianne chimed in, "That's right, we've already claimed the seats on either side of her. You may as well give up now."

"If you two have the sides, that means I can go in from the front, right?" Kayla purred.

From the front? Claudia quirked a brow. She wasn't sure what that meant, but all three lively women were smiling to themselves.

Surely I can be forgiven for indulging in sentimentality a little longer, though.

Claudia was the only person who knew that these three would never live long enough to reach old age.

Bonus Chapter:

The Villainess and Her Friend Circle Admire the Flowers

T WAS A COMFORTABLE, temperate afternoon with the sun shining unimpeded, its radiant golden rays pouring down on the land below. Beneath its warmth, a cheerful clamor filled the Lindsays' garden.

Here I thought it was boisterous when my lady friends and I were together, but it's no different with men instead. Sylvester, Raul, and Lestea occupied the majority of Claudia's view from her seat. Although, to be precise, they weren't all men—it was two men and one woman, though she doubted Lestea would mind being lumped in with them.

"What's Raul doing here?" Sylvester asked sourly.

"I'm here because I was invited, obviously. In fact, aren't I the main reason we're having this little gathering?"

"Indeed," Lestea said. "You're the one who pleaded for an invite."

Raul's jaw dropped in indignation. "All I said was, 'It's starting to get warmer out now, isn't it?"

The wind buffeted them, tousling their hair. Strands of silver, dark brown, and aqua blue danced through the air. The faces of those gathered were more impressive and more gorgeous than any flower in the garden.

This whole gathering was spurred on by a conversation Claudia had with Raul during a tea party held by one of the crown prince's other bridal candidates. It had been the middle of winter then, too frigid for a leisurely stroll through the garden. She had promised him that when the snow melted and the temperatures rose, she would invite him out so he could better enjoy what their garden had to offer. As winter gave way to spring, she remembered that promise and sent him an invitation.

Their gathering felt more intimate than most, perhaps as a result of their seating arrangements. In lieu of a spacious table, they had a blanket stretched over the lawn, where they were presently enjoying a cup of tea. The other three had taken up whatever positions they preferred—all as close to Claudia as they could manage—and had their legs crossed beneath them.

Tristan sat behind Sylvester and off to the side. He was basking in the sunlight, staring off into the distance.

It's rare for him to join us like this. Could it be because Lestea is also here? Whenever she and Sylvester met privately, Tristan was nowhere to be found. There had to be some prerequisite for his attendance.

A giggle escaped Claudia's lips when she noticed Tristan's mop of fiery-red hair dip as he began to nod off. When everyone had condemned her and her actions in her previous lifetime, Tristan had narrowed his eyes at her in contempt and disgust. Now that the two were on friendly terms, she realized he had his own charms.

I wonder if that's what Lou fell for. If only she'd known ahead of time that Tristan would be in attendance, then she could have invited Louise as well. But the guest list had wound up this way precisely because the gathering was supposed to be for Raul.

Raul's eyes softened as he drank in Claudia's smile. "The garden is lovely, but you, Claudia, are the most beautiful flower of all."

"As if you even need to state the obvious," Sylvester grumbled.

"Nothing wrong with paying a compliment, is there? I know there are some women who prefer others not extol their virtues, but not Claudia."

"I suppose."

Raul had a point: some women interpreted such praise as empty flattery.

Claudia thought that the less confident a woman was, the more likely she was to interpret it that way. *But most women would be pleased, I think.* Exaggerated

praise could certainly chafe, but there was nothing more pleasant than having one's best efforts recognized.

Claudia invested a significant amount of effort into her appearance on a daily basis, so when someone commented on her appearance, it was as if her efforts were being rewarded.

As she saw it, there were two types of people in the world: those whose natural beauty blossomed like the most resplendent flower regardless of outside help, and those whose beauty required cultivation, much like the careful maintenance administered to her family garden. Claudia understood she fell into the latter category, hence why she never neglected the beauty routine she'd built. There were people who fell somewhere between these two categories, but by and large, most women were like her. There wasn't a maid in her family's employ who didn't use moisturizer.

After digesting Raul's words, Sylvester reached toward Claudia, taking her hand in his. "Of all in creation that the dazzling sunlight touches, you are the only thing capable of capturing my attention and never letting go. You're as beautiful as always, Dia." He planted a chaste kiss on the back of her hand.

Claudia stiffened. If they were at a party, she might have instinctively smiled at him. The air of relaxation at their little gathering had gotten the better of her, easing any tension that might have otherwise kept her on her toes. Kept her prepared for Sylvester to pull something like this. As things were, she couldn't immediately react. Heat traveled all the way to the tips of her ears.

"Th-thank you," Claudia said numbly. She kept her mouth open to try to say something more, hoping she might be able to hide her embarrassment, but then Lestea captured her free hand.

"O goddess of mine," Lestea purred at her. "The only reason this world has such bright, vivid color is because you are in it. Even the splendor of Mother Nature would blur into oblivion if you did not exist to give it meaning." Her blue eyes shone with a sensuous energy, infusing her words with such sincerity that

made Claudia emotionally retreat.

Raul ripped Lestea away from her, allowing Claudia to breathe an unexpected sigh of relief. Sylvester must have sensed her discomfort because he pulled her close.

"What do you think you're doing, slipping in and taking Claudia's hand?" Raul snapped at his retainer.

"We're both women. There is nothing inappropriate about it," Lestea argued, peeved.

"You really think that's an excuse?"

"Hey, Tristan," Sylvester said, shooting a look over his shoulder. "Quit nodding off and escort these two out."

"Bwuh?" Tristan blurted in his stupor.

"As I told you, I was specifically invited here!" Raul said, peeling his gaze from Lestea to gawk at the prince in disbelief. Not because of what he'd said but because he'd taken this opportunity to wrap Claudia in his arms. "Can't you at least maintain proper etiquette?!"

"Must I adhere to such formal conventions even in private spaces?" It was a rhetorical question, obviously. "Besides, you wouldn't be able to meet with Dia like this at all if not for my attendance."

"Ngh..."

Friendships did not supersede established customs. Since Claudia was a young lady of marriageable age, she couldn't be alone in the presence of another man. Nor could any man touch her, save for an emergency. It was also thanks in large part to Lestea being a woman that they were able to comfortably meet this way.

"It's not fair that the rest of you can touch her so freely." Raul shook his head. Sylvester snorted at him. "It's high time you learned your place." "A heart is free to feel whatever it wants!"

"I merely suggest it would be more constructive to give up on those feelings."

"Is that all you're capable of? Being condescending to others? Highhandedness won't win you any favors."

At that, Sylvester smirked. "I see no issue. What does it matter to me if I win no favors from you, Raul?"

Realizing the futility of arguing the point with Sylvester, Raul switched tactics, turning his gaze on Claudia. "May we speak frankly for a moment? I have to ask: just what do you see in this guy?"

She tilted her head back, glancing up at Sylvester. His golden eyes, filled with curiosity, stared back at her. The way they searched her evoked a flare of embarrassment, one strong enough to make her want to crawl into a hole. She quickly averted her eyes, focusing on Raul instead. She smiled at him.

"The reason he is so gruff with you is to hide his own embarrassment," she explained.

He sneered. "That's not a very cute way of hiding it."

Claudia thought it was absolutely adorable, but it hardly surprised her that Raul disagreed. *I guess this is what they mean when they say love is blind.* She had warmed the bed of dozens of men in her brothel days, but this was the first time Claudia had ever fallen in love. She was venturing into completely unknown territory.

"It makes a certain amount of sense, given that Prince Sylvester is a sadist to his core," said Lestea.

"I completely agree," the drowsy Tristan said with a nod, eyes half-lidded.

"The closer you get to him, the less mercy he shows you. If Lady Claudia says he acts that way to hide his embarrassment, then...yeah, I can see it. That's what it's been this whole time!"

Raul arched a brow at him. "Are you sleeping with your eyes open?"

"I can't believe it," Tristan went on, ignoring him. "You actually have a cute side to you, Syl. But there's no need to hide your embarrassment, not when we've been friends for as long as we have."

"After putting up with him for so long, do you just naturally start deluding yourself?" Raul gave a sympathetic shake of his head.

"Maybe it's more of a survival instinct. He has to think positively in order to keep going," Lestea suggested. She and Raul gave Tristan a pitying look, as if he was the real victim in all of this.

Admittedly, when it comes to Lord Tristan, he does have a habit of catching all the flack. Whenever Sylvester's mood soured, Tristan got the short end of the stick. But rather than accept that as inevitable, Claudia recognized she was partly to blame and resolved to be more careful in the future.

The breeze ruffled her wavy black hair. Looking back at all that had happened, it was hard to believe she could finally indulge in such serene moments. Life was stranger than fiction, and that extended to the people and relationships in it. Even when bonds were broken, they were sometimes restored in entirely new forms. She still couldn't quite get used to the way Lestea worshipped her.

Before her death and subsequent reawakening as her younger self, everyone had led very different lives. The ties that bind us all are completely contingent upon our own actions.

It was only because Claudia had changed completely as a person that she had been able to cultivate new relationships with those around her. In particular, there was something intensely reassuring about the warmth Sylvester's presence provided. But it was embarrassing to be so physically affectionate with him in front of others, so she pulled herself away.

"What is it, Dia?"

When he tried to stop her, she shifted his focus by saying, "Aren't you thirsty?" Although they weren't seated at a table, they had drinks and light snacks with them. Claudia quickly returned to her original spot and retrieved a

cup.

Another gust caressed her cheeks, luring her gaze upward. Her eyes landed on the vivid emerald-green covering the trees. The surrounding flowers stood primly, demanding equal attention without crowding one another. The sky above was a majestic deep blue that unfurled, stretching all the way across the horizon. There was something so invigorating about it, something that seemed to broaden her field of view.

Claudia slowly exhaled. Everything she saw was breathtaking. Amid her busy days, it was easy to take such sights for granted and forget how precious they really were, especially since this was her family garden. On an intellectual level, she understood it was beautiful, but it required a relaxed presence of mind to fully appreciate that beauty. She was grateful she could do that today.

The boisterous voices around her didn't grate on her nerves; they brought a liveliness to an already delightful occasion. It felt like they were having fun, and she was glad they were able to enjoy the garden.

There were times when her own lovestruck heart threw her for a loop, but she was still maturing. Her previous self would never have been able to indulge in the moment and appreciate the scenery like this.

Coaxed by the warm spring sunlight, Claudia's lips pulled into an unbidden smile. She turned her gaze back to her company. She blinked rapidly upon finding time frozen. No, not *literally* frozen, but everyone was staring at her with their lips parted. It puzzled her why they were so focused on her.

"Pardon?" she murmured, hoping that word alone would prompt an explanation.

"Apologies, but you captivated me completely, Dia."

"Captivating indeed," Raul agreed. "You're like a rare flower blooming on the tallest peak, far out of reach."

"It's true. You seem almost divine with the way the light pours over you,"

Lestea added. "Yet you hold yourself with such dignity and grace that it's impossible not to feel moved. Ah, my only regret is that we cannot capture your form on canvas right this moment."

"You looked very beautiful just now," Tristan said sincerely, summing up the more flowery opinions of the rest of their group.

Claudia's pulse quickened. She reached for a strand of hair that had fallen across her shoulder, trying to distract herself from the embarrassment. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I was just thinking how happy I am, appreciating how precious this moment we all get to spend together really is."

"Hm. I consider everyone else undesirable nuisances, but if you're enjoying yourself, I suppose that's all that matters," said Sylvester. Despite his cynicism, his gaze was warm and gentle, though perhaps that was only because he was fixated on Claudia.

"I greatly admire and respect your beautiful heart," Lestea said, then rounded on Raul. "Hey, Raul, I would thank you not to get in my way, please."

"Don't try to sidle up any closer to her than I am!" He slung an arm around his retainer's neck, reeling her in when she tried to scoot toward Claudia. Resentment burned hot as cinders in Lestea's eyes.

"If it bothers you so much, why not change your gender?" Lestea shot back at him.

"That's not really the problem here, is it?! Don't assume you can get away with whatever you want just because you're a woman too!"

Claudia expressed her agreement with a nod, which prompted Lestea's eyes to fill with deep sadness. *No, don't you dare give me those sad, abandoned puppy-dog eyes.* She knew better than to express whatever sympathy she was feeling. Lestea would never learn her lesson otherwise. Claudia had to swallow back her emotions.

A shadow fell over her, accompanied shortly by a voice. "It seems you're all

enjoying yourselves."

"Elder Brother!"

She hadn't expected Virgil to show up, not while the sun was still high in the sky. Ever since graduating from the academy, he had been working alongside her father, and it was always pitch-black outside by the time he returned.

"You must have finished early today," Claudia said.

"I wrapped things up quickly since I heard Syl and Tristan would be coming by today." Virgil took a seat beside her. On the surface, it sounded as if he was eager to see his longtime friends, but she only had to take one glance at Virgil to tell he was worried about her being surrounded by so many men.

"What, so you intend to sit in on this little party too, Virgil?" said Sylvester, not even trying to hide his displeasure.

Virgil gave him a pointed look. "In case you weren't aware, Syl, this is *my* family home. Since you are a guest here, you are more than welcome to leave if that bothers you."

"Driving away a member of the royal family? You sure have grown cocky."

"Aristocrats have a duty to criticize the royal family when necessary," Virgil reminded him, showing little deference despite their difference in status.

Raul's eyes lit up. His expression said what his mouth wouldn't: that he fully approved of Virgil going toe-to-toe with Sylvester.

I think this may be the first time I've seen all of them like this in a private setting, Claudia thought. Prior to enrolling in the academy, she'd been unaware of Tristan and Sylvester's relationship with Virgil. Virgil always kept up his cold, inscrutable facade when he was in the public eye. It was nearly impossible to see past it and realize how close he actually was to these other two men.

When Sylvester noticed Raul practically mooning over Virgil, as if he'd found an unexpected ally, he sighed and handily disabused him of the notion. "If you think he's on your side, you are sorely mistaken. Virgil is nothing but an

insufferable brother-in-law."

"It is an older brother's job to protect his younger sister," Virgil argued immediately.

Sylvester lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. "See? You'd best come to terms with the fact you won't be able to get any closer to her than you already are."

Raul went still as a statue, and Lestea shot him a pitying look. "No matter how you struggle, the outlook isn't promising," she said.

"You're the last person in the world I want pointing that out!" Then, under his breath, he snarled, "You traitor!" When he throttled her this time, he seemed much less playful than before.

While they kicked up a fuss, Tristan tried to use the opportunity to put some distance between himself and Virgil. Unfortunately, just as Claudia happened to notice him slinking away, so too did Virgil.

"Tristan." Virgil's voice rumbled like thunder. "There's no point in hiding behind Syl."

"I haven't done anything wrong!" Tristan cried.

"Then why are you running?"

"Uh, instinct?" His eyes darted to Claudia. "My lady, please save me!"

"Don't try to undermine me by going to my sister." Virgil folded his arms. "Ah, that's right, it's about time for end-of-semester exams. I sincerely hope you wouldn't dare to embarrass us by earning poor marks on yours, being a close retainer to His Highness."

"Argh! I don't wanna be lectured!" Tristan clamped his hands over his ears, and Virgil wound up to begin his tongue-lashing.

Raul scooted back discreetly. This little display had done much to communicate how hard and unforgiving Virgil was.

"Elder Brother, we're supposed to be admiring the flowers today," Claudia cut

in.

"Oh, are we now?" Virgil quirked a brow. "It is such a shame, then, that all flowers pale in comparison to your beauty."

"Nonsense, our gardeners are impressively skilled."

It was only when Virgil gazed at his younger sister that his eyes finally softened and his expression, at least for a split second, melted into something sugary-sweet. The rest of those gathered who glimpsed it all shared the same exact thought: *This guy is obsessed with his sister.*

Afterword

H ELLO, EVERYONE! Bakufu Narayama here!

I often get the kanji wrong for the Narayama part of my own name, so I think I'm better off spelling it out in hiragana for simplicity's sake. The one saving grace is that I've never messed up on the Bakufu part, at least. Sometimes I think it might be easier to have people just call me Bakufu, but given how frequently the term is used alongside the words "Edo," "Kamakura," and so on, it'd be really hard for me to google myself. No matter what Bakufu you try to search, Edo always comes out on top.

Leaving all that aside, here we are at Volume 2! Thank you so much for picking it up. I've never been the type to write a single series for a long time, so this one is proving a continual challenge for me. As difficult as it is, I deeply appreciate the support. All the reviews on different websites have been very encouraging.

The further the series progresses, the more new characters are added. This has made for a lively cast. Do you guys have a favorite yet? Thanks to Ebisushisan's gorgeous art, I have a hard time deciding. Every time I look at the character designs, I find myself entertaining different headcanons that aren't even a part of the main series!

I love adult content. I was so close to crossing the line with the bonus chapter for this volume that it was hard for me to rein it in. I deserve a pat on the back for not letting Claudia get steamy with the veteran sex workers. It's much easier with Sylvester, since Claudia will put a stop to it for me. I feel bad for making him go without, but he'll just have to hang in there.

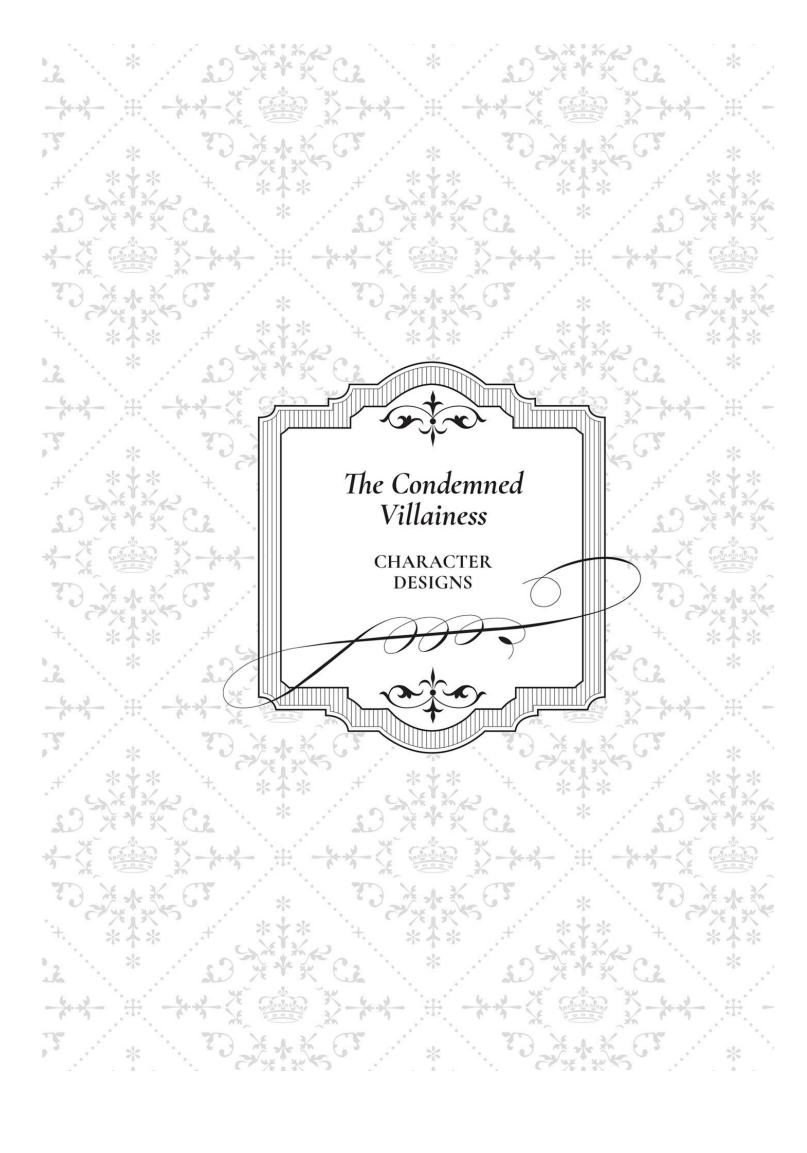
I have to wonder which one of them will take the lead in the bedroom. Either way, they're sure to have adorable children! I can't help picturing them in my mind. In the meantime, I hope you'll enjoy the story as it develops and unfolds.

I hope you'll also support the manga version of the series. Kitaguni-san's take on everyone is incredible!

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude, which I hope to do here at the end with each volume. To all the readers who have supported me, to my family, to all the publishing staff who have helped make this series a reality: thank you!

I hope you will continue to support me and enjoy the series. I look forward to us meeting each other again in another volume.

—BAKUFU NARAYAMA









FROM THE AUTHOR

Bakufu Narayama

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a mangaka. I failed to accomplish that, but it makes me so excited to be involved in the industry in a different way now. It was such an emotional experience getting a peek into the process of adapting something into a manga.

FROM THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ebisushi

I drew the illustrations for Volume 2 as well! I really enjoyed the introduction of these new characters, plus being able to depict all sorts of different expressions for Claudia and Sylvester! Like the rest of you, I am a reader of the series and anxious to see where it goes from here. I hope you'll continue to support me as well!



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