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Let's Get to
Villainessin':
➤ Stratagems of a ➤
Former Commoner

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Episode One](#)

[Episode Two](#)

[Episode Three](#)

[Episode Four](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Side Story 1: What Happened That Summer](#)

[Side Story 2: My Sister Mio](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series](#)

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SA, AKUYAKU REIJOU NO OSHIGOTO WO HAJIMEMASHOU

MOTO SHOMIN NO WATASHI GA IDOMU ZUNOUSEN Vol.2 by Hiironoame

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Original Japanese edition published by SHUFU TO SEIKATSU SHA CO.,LTD

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Cross Infinite World

contact@crossinfworld.com

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Published in the United States of America

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crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com

Digital Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-155-9

Print Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-156-6



"HAPPY BIRTHDAY,
MS. MIO!"

"WHAT IS
THIS?"



Prologue

MY name is Mio Sato. Or at least it had been before I renounced my life as a commoner and became Lady Mio Sakurazaka. I changed my name, my identity, my entire existence for one reason and one reason only: to save my sister Shizuku, who is suffering from a terminal illness.

Shizuku is a kind and compassionate girl who's wise beyond her years despite only being in her second year of middle school. Despite knowing she had only three years left to live, she'd said to me on one quiet evening, "Mio. You've done so much for me—more than anyone should. Please, you don't have to keep forcing yourself."

Her words had pierced my heart. Could I have been as brave as she was, still thinking of others in the face of such a cruel fate? I was sure I couldn't. I would've succumbed to the sadness, the unfairness of it all, bawling my eyes out and resenting the world for dealing me such a hand. But Shizuku, my sweet, selfless sister, bore her burden with grace and strength that humbled me every day.

My sister is irreplaceable to me. That was why I agreed to this contract, to become an adopted daughter of the Sakurazaka family—all to save her.

The agreement was mostly straightforward: I would take on the role of the villainess in place of the illustrious Lady Shizuki and attend Sosei Academy in her stead. My task was to become the catalyst for the protagonist Nonoka's growth, sacrificing myself to my doom in order to lead the world to its happy ending.

There were other caveats I had to come to terms with. For example, there was the fact that the world we lived in was supposedly based on an otome game and that Shizuki was supposedly a real-life "villainess." Oh, and also the fact that I may or may not have been truly of the Sakurazaka bloodline. But besides those factors, the matter was straightforward: to save my sister, all I had to do was be a menace to Nonoka.

That was all I had to do.

That was all I had to do, and yet...

“Ms. Mio, Ms. Mio! Which skirt do you think works better?” Nonoka asked, holding up an option in each hand.

Nonoka and I had become, um, friends?

We were on a school field trip. I’d successfully accomplished my task of sparking Nonoka’s interest in fashion, but not in the way I’d intended. The idea had been to mock her sense of style, which would make her want to improve her fashion sense to spite me, but instead, I’d managed to become so supportive that she felt comfortable asking me for advice!

And not that I’d done anything supportive at all! My comments to her had been nothing but harsh, each calculated to sting and alienate, yet my words seemed to just bounce off of her, inert duds that did not affect her psyche.

I found no joy in the role I was forced to play—I felt the weight of each unkind word keenly—but there was no way for Nonoka to come out of this unscathed if I were to save my sister. No matter what, I had to push her away.

“To even *suggest* a color other than lavender with that base? Have you learned anything—*anything* at all?” I said as venomously as I could, hoping to shatter any illusions that we were on speaking terms.

She blinked, a moment of realization dawning on her. “How did I miss that... Of course! And what about the top? Which one works?”

“I’ve spent this entire time trying to explain the concept of balance to you,” I sighed. “If you go with that one, the whole look will be thrown off.”

“Got it. Then what about my purse?”

“That really depends on personal preference, but I would pick...*this* one. Nonoka? Are you even listening to me?”

“I am! You really know your stuff, Ms. Mio!”

“Is this girl all right in the head?” I muttered under my breath.

I’d never met such a clingy person in my life. She must’ve been a dog in her

previous life because I could almost see that tail wagging furiously behind her.

Sure, you could argue that I answered each of Nonoka's questions carefully and accurately, but what other choice did I have? Lie? Lying would hinder her growth, the very thing I aimed to support. So, I resorted to pushing her away using a dismissive attitude—because even the best advice has no value if it's delivered poorly—or so I thought! Any normal person would not have stood for this shabby treatment and stormed away ten times by now, but not Nonoka. She weathered the storm of my verbal barbs, unwrapping each harsh comment to find the hidden gem of truth within. Now do you see the quandary I found myself in? Every bit of attitude from me was met with a big smile and an even bigger heart.

Shizuki—you said this world was based on an otome game—but what was the title of said otome game? It wasn't "Reincarnated as the Villainess, But the Heroine's the Last Boss!" or something along those lines, was it? Based on Nonoka's current performance, I could hardly imagine any villainess breaking her spirit, in this timeline, or any other.

"Ms. Mio, Ms. Mio! I think I'll wear this outfit on my next day off. Wanna join me?" Nonoka asked.

"No. Why would I take time out of my busy schedule for you?" I replied. "You have friends for that, don't you?" I couldn't have made my disdain clearer. But Nonoka just looked at me with those confused puppy dog eyes, as if to say, *I do have friends for that. I'm looking right at one.*

Please don't tell me you think of me as a friend. The question remained unspoken; the answer to it, I feared, wouldn't be one I'd like to hear.

Nonoka's friend had once remarked, "I was a little scared of her at first, but it turns out she's actually a good person," about me; Ruki had called me a tsundere the other day. All signs pointed to the fact that I was on track to avoid my downfall and live a full and fulfilling life.

That would've been good news—had I been your average reincarnated antagonist. Unfortunately, this wasn't a role I had unwittingly stumbled into, it was a mantle I'd assumed willingly to save my sister. Thus, I *had* to lose Nonoka's favor.

Fortunately, that was a task easier than most. Trust can take decades to build, but only seconds to destroy. One moment was all I needed to shatter Nonoka's trust irrevocably—I just had to pick the right time, the right place, and the right occasion.

“Now then, let's get to villainessin'.”

Episode One

IN a grand hall so vast that the far end appeared as nothing more than a blur, Ruki and Rikka attended a Yukishiro zaibatsu-affiliated wedding reception.

Despite being seated in an area for distinguished guests, neither had any personal connection to the bride and groom. Since weddings usually symbolized a union of significant corporate interests—more political than personal—the Yukishiro family was required to show a strong vested interest in the alliance. Thus, Ruki and Rikka’s presence on this day was an obligation.

“Have there been more banquets than normal to attend lately, or is that just me?” Rikka asked her cousin seated next to her.

Ruki gave her a sidelong glance. He was fully aware that she understood the importance of these political moves and the necessity to have Yukishiro representation at such events. Her comment wasn’t merely to gripe about the tedium of the occasion but more a veiled remark. “Indeed, there seems to be a surge in companies seeking partnerships and mergers lately,” Ruki responded in understanding.

These marriages weren’t at all rare in the world of business and high finance, and as such, were received with both positive and negative interpretations. Given recent developments that were privy to the pair, prudence suggested expecting the worst.

Behind the scenes, a worrying trend was unfolding, one that both Rikka and Ruki suspected but found too daunting to discuss openly. This fear clouded their judgment, making it difficult for them to discern the true nature of things. Though they both recognized the reality, they chose to remain silent on the matter and used the wedding as a convenient diversion.

Lifting her champagne glass for a sip, Rikka sighed as she turned her gaze back to him. “Apropos of nothing, what do you think of Mio?”

“Mio?” he echoed. His lips quirked into a mischievous half-smile. “In short,

she's an 'interesting woman,' I assume."

Rikka nearly laughed aloud. "Since when did you become a connoisseur of shōjo subculture? You do realize the implications of that phrase, don't you?"

While the exact usage of the phrase "interesting woman" might differ in context, it was typically said by desirable male protagonists in romance manga to describe women they found themselves attracted to. Essentially, Rikka's question was twofold: whether Ruki recognized his own appeal, and if he was interested in Mio.

He only responded with a disarming smile. "No idea. I picked up that line from a manga Ruri's fond of."

Ruki was the future heir of their entire family's future. He was not only blessed with looks but the intelligence and athletics to match. In other words, the notion he was a catch was so self-evident that he didn't even realize Rikka was teasing him.

"And what about you?" Ruki asked. "You seem to have taken quite an interest in her yourself."

"I have," Rikka replied with an amused smile. "And why shouldn't I? She's a walking contradiction, that one."

"Indeed. She's obviously kind at heart, yet tries so hard to come off as harsh," he agreed. "While she was ruthless when dealing with those classmates who tried to humiliate her, she struggles to muster that same severity against Nonoka."

"Like an aloof but caring older sister who can't bear to see her sibling get hurt, to say nothing of her sharp tongue," Rikka smirked.

Mio's behavior toward Nonoka, particularly her verbal interactions, was undoubtedly harsh and seemed unjustifiable at first glance. However, a deeper examination revealed her sharp words were constructive, even beneficial for Nonoka. When Mio thought she was unobserved, she would occasionally cast looks toward Nonoka that betrayed a genuine concern.

"Then I suppose we both agree she's acting that way for a reason," Ruki proposed.

“You suppose right,” his cousin replied. “Considering how ‘selective’ her sharp attitude is, I can only presume that reason must be related to Nonoka.”

“I’ve already done a bit of digging with that supposition in mind.”

“Of course, you have,” Rikka chuckled before quickly downing the rest of her non-alcoholic champagne. She cast a surreptitious glance around to ensure they were not being eavesdropped on before asking, “So, what have you learned?”

“Mio and Nonoka first met on the day of the entrance exam. Nonoka was being bullied by Saionji and Azumaji, and Mio intervened to help her.

“My. Well, that certainly explains why those two harbored *such* animosity toward her.”

Under societal definitions, Azumaji and Saionji belonged to the upper class, but that distinction was only clear when it was drawn between them and the lower class. Within the exclusive circles of zaibatsu society, they were seen merely as commoners with mustaches drawn on—a fact they understood better than anyone. They targeted students they deemed beneath them at school, a practice hardly noble but strategically safe. Rikka had always been puzzled by their decision to antagonize a Sakurazaka, even an adopted one, but now it was apparent that their actions were not entirely voluntary.

“I suspect that answers one question, but what about Mio’s attachment to Nonoka?” Rikka continued. “We can hardly keep writing off her interventions as mere coincidences.”

“That would be what we call looking out for someone, wouldn’t it?” Ruki said casually.

This was Mio’s deepest secret, now casually acknowledged between Rikka and Ruki as if it were the most obvious truth in the world. If Mio had been present to hear this, she would have been reeling.

“Do you have an idea as to why she’s looking out for her?” Rikka asked.

“I have a theory,” Ruki replied. “And it has to do with the fact that Nonoka is the granddaughter of the current chairman of the Nagura zaibatsu.”

“So, you think Mio is protecting Nonoka because she sees something of

herself in her?”

“It’s one possibility, yes.”

“But does having similar circumstances really justify going to such lengths?”

“That’s the thing, I’m not convinced it does. In my opinion, the specificity of it never made sense.”

Ruki pulled out his phone and handed it to Rikka. She looked at the screen to see a document titled ‘Results of Inquiry.’ “This is a dossier on Lady Shizuki?” Rikka asked. “I thought she was studying abroad.”

The document detailed the impressive achievements of a woman who was as beautiful as she was intelligent. Yet, as Rikka scrolled to the bottom, a particular detail caught her eye. “I can’t quite believe what I’m seeing,” she murmured in disbelief. The document revealed Shizuki’s covert manipulation of an investment fund. The figures were astounding, illustrating her enormous financial influence. “I’d heard rumors that she was a savvy investor, but you’ll excuse me if I find these numbers far-fetched.”

“She’s playing quite the shell game, so these numbers are just estimates, but they’re ones our analysts trust.”

“Incredible. She’s planning something, but what? Is she plotting a takeover? Preparing to strike out on her own? Or could it be...” As the thought struck her, a chill ran down her spine. She handed the phone back to Ruki without voicing her fears.

“Our analysts believe she adopted Mio almost as a proxy of sorts,” he relayed.

“A proxy related by blood,” she murmured. “So, Mio’s erratic behavior around Nonoka could be under Shizuki’s orders?”

“We believe it’s highly likely that Shizuki is grooming Mio for some unknown purpose.”

Rikka’s brow lightly furrowed. If all the events had been a test for Mio and not Nonoka, then her inconsistent actions began to make sense. This revelation not only solved the mysterious behavior but also reinforced Rikka’s belief that Mio was fundamentally a good person, tormented each time she had to play the

villain.

“We should do what we can to make sure she isn’t too disliked,” Rikka concluded.

“Agreed. I’ll keep an eye on the situation too.”

If Mio had been present to hear this conversation, she would’ve been beside herself with frustration.

NONOKA had led a life as ordinary as any child could hope for. Raised by two loving parents, her days were filled with quiet contentment, as steady and inevitable as the morning sun. This fragile tranquility, however, was brutally ruptured one day in her middle school years.

“Ms. Hiragi, could you come with me, please?” The voice of her homeroom teacher sliced through the hum of the classroom, jarring Nonoka from her thoughts. They walked the empty hallways in silence before reaching the nearly deserted faculty room, a place suddenly as foreign as it was familiar.

Her teacher, a young woman whose normally bright eyes now mirrored the gray pallor of the overcast sky, struggled visibly as the words caught in her throat. The silence stretched taut, suffocating. Finally, she spoke, her voice trembling despite her efforts to stay calm. “Ms. Hiragi, I...there’s no easy way to say this. There was a tragic accident. Your parents...” She paused, swallowing hard. “They’ve passed away.”

“What?” Nonoka whispered.

“They were in a car accident,” her teacher continued. “They didn’t survive.”

“That’s... That’s not possible...”

Denial was the first emotion to surge within her. She stared at her teacher, willing her to retract the words, to laugh off this horrific scenario as nothing but a tasteless prank. But the sorrow in her teacher’s eyes, the awkward shift of her gaze, bore only the weight of irrevocable truth.

“H...How?” Nonoka whispered.

She had seen her parents that very morning. They had waved her off to

school. The notion that these vibrant, loving figures were no longer a part of this world was incomprehensible. The words, though spoken clearly by her homeroom teacher, refused to form a coherent truth in her mind.

“I...I’ve gotta get to the hospital,” Nonoka said abruptly, a strange calm enveloping her. Her eyes held a distant, serene expression as if she were looking through the walls of the room, through reality itself, into a place where her parents were still waiting for her. She turned sharply, ready to flee from the unbearable news.

Snapping out of her own shock, the homeroom teacher hurried after her. “W-Wait, I’ll drive you. How do you even know which hospital to go to?”

Silently, Nonoka got into her teacher’s car. The world outside blurred past. The next thing she knew, they were at the hospital, where Nonoka was guided directly to the morgue. There, under the harsh, unyielding light, laid her parents in eerie repose and covered with clinical white sheets. They seemed so still, as if they were just sleeping, but...not. Her legs trembled as she approached.

“Mom? Dad?” she ventured into the void.

No response came.

“Don’t be gone. Please, you can’t be gone. You’re just sleeping, right? This isn’t funny anymore. Please wake up. Wake up, or I’ll never forgive you!”

Nonoka’s hands found her mother’s shoulders, shaking them with a child’s futile hope for an answer. The unnatural stillness, the cold unyielding to her touch, struck her with a visceral dread. “Mom?” Her voice broke as she gently, almost reverently, lifted the sheet.

The sight that met her eyes was nothing short of gruesome. She moved to her father, lifted the sheet, and then dropped it abruptly. She backpedaled, her movements shaky and terrified until she collided with the solid, sorrowful presence of her homeroom teacher.

As the full, merciless weight of reality crashed down upon her, Nonoka’s knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor.

NONOKA couldn't remember anything in the aftermath of the tragedy. By the time her recollections returned, the funeral had already taken place and she was now under the guardianship of social workers who had taken her to an orphanage.

There, a new existence awaited Nonoka. For the first three days, she remained withdrawn, her gaze fixed on the floor while other children played outside. She curled herself up in a quiet corner, knees drawn up and arms wrapped tight as if trying to hold herself together. The other children, each carrying their own episode of loss and heartache, understood the need for space at this critical juncture and left her to grieve.

Among them was a girl named Miyu Sugiura. Six years Nonoka's junior, she was an elementary school student. Miyu was a strange specimen and was always watching Nonoka. Discreetly at first from afar, but over time, Miyu began to draw nearer and subtly closed the distance between them. Nonoka, lost in her grief, didn't notice the young girl's gradual approach until suddenly Miyu was right there beside her, close enough to touch yet utterly silent still.

One week after her relocation, Nonoka finally cracked. Turning toward the young girl who had become her stalwart companion, she asked hesitantly, "Hey. What's your name?"

Miyu's face lit up as she replied, "Miyu!"

"Okay. So, um—"

"Whatcha doing here?" Miyu interrupted.

Nonoka blinked in surprise, then met Miyu's big, earnest eyes. "Me?" she echoed. A hint of weariness crossed her face as she shook her head slightly. "If I knew that..."

Having lost her parents, Nonoka wondered why she was still there. Each day was a question without an answer, each breath a reminder of what had been lost. Why she continued, why she remained in this world, was a mystery too deep and too painful to ponder alone. So, she redirected the question back to Miyu. "What about you? What are you doing here?"

She didn't expect a real answer; she just needed to steer the conversation

away from herself. But Miyu puffed out her chest, a spark of pride in her eyes as if she had been preparing for this very moment. “I’ve been waiting for you to talk to me!” she declared.

“Excuse me?” Nonoka shot back in disbelief.

“The director always says, ‘Every child here carries a little scar within their heart. We gotta be kind, allow each other space, and wait to talk until the other person is ready!’” Miyu said.

“Oh. I get it.” Now that Nonoka thought about it, everyone including the director of the orphanage had left her alone as much as possible.

“Yep! So, I was waiting for *you* to talk to *me*!”

Nonoka almost smiled. It was true that Miyu had ventured near, uncomfortably close even, yet she had respected the silence. That almost smile had been the closest to a positive emotion she had felt in a long, long time Nonoka realized. “You’ve been waiting for me to speak to you, huh?” she echoed quietly.

“What’s that?” Miyu asked.

“Nothing.” Nonoka shook her head. “You waited so patiently for me to talk. You must have something really important to say?”

“I do. The thing is—” Miyu stood up and moved directly in front of Nonoka so that they were at eye level. There was a glint of desperation in her eyes, a fervent plea.

“Miyu?” Nonoka said hesitantly.

“The thing is, I...I...I want you to become my big sister!”

“Huh?” Nonoka blinked, taken aback.

“My real older sister, she died protecting me,” Miyu continued.

Nonoka’s heart lurched. “How?” she whispered.

“There was an accident. With our whole family.”

“I...” Nonoka uttered at a loss for words.

This young, *young* girl began to pour her heart out, giving Nonoka a serious

presentation on what a big sister meant to her. One might not expect such a serious talk from a little girl, but Miyu really meant every word.

Nonoka only learned about the accident later. A truck had rammed into the car carrying Miyu's family; no one survived except for the little girl, who was found enclosed within her sister's arms. At the time of their current conversation, Nonoka was still unaware of these harrowing details, yet she already felt a profound empathy for her. She later felt profound empathy for the girl who had suffered through a tragedy of that magnitude firsthand whereas Nonoka had only heard about it subsequently.

Even with that empathy, however, Nonoka struggled to grasp what Miyu was trying to convey. "But I'm not your sister," Nonoka responded gently. Thinking back, Nonoka couldn't see herself as the courageous girl who had died to protect her sister. The fact that Miyu still longed for a sister after such a traumatic event was somewhat frightening to Nonoka. She briefly wondered if Miyu was seeking someone else to make a similar sacrifice, but soon realized this was just a morbid misinterpretation.

"I know that," Miyu said. "You're nothing like my sister."

"Yet you still want me to take her place?" Nonoka asked.

"I'm not asking that! I'm just asking you to be my big sister because I think we can get along!"

Nonoka was still confused about what Miyu truly wanted. "Get along?"

"Get along!" Miyu grinned from ear to ear, stretching her arms out wide. "I've just been so alone, you know? Well, not really alone, 'cause I still have my friends, but not anyone like a sister."

"I'm sorry, I still don't get it. Why do you need a sister?"

"Because then I won't be all alone!"

"I understand, but—"

"And you won't be all alone either!"

A lump formed in Nonoka's throat at Miyu's simple but energetic notion. "Neither will...I?"

“Yeah! If you’re here, then I won’t feel alone. And if I’m here, you won’t feel alone either!” Miyu looked at Nonoka expectantly. “You won’t, right?”

“I-I’m not sure.”

For a reason she couldn’t explain, Nonoka’s thoughts drifted to her deceased parents. She wondered, was this guilt for trying to find happiness without them? Miyu, however, was poised to dispel this guilt in one, single utterance:

“You don’t have to be sure! Just be my sister! If you do, then I’m sure my real sister will finally be at peace.”

“Your sister will be...at peace,” Nonoka echoed softly, more to herself than to Miyu.

“That’s right! She always wanted me to live a happy life. If I’m not happy, she won’t be able to rest.”

Nonoka could hardly muster up a response. Miyu definitely didn’t come up with that idea herself; someone must have told her that. But did the origin of the idea really matter? Nonoka struggled to dismiss it—not when she so desperately wanted to believe her parents would feel the same way.

“Is that really how it works?” she muttered to herself. As the self-posed question lingered, clarity dawned upon her. She looked up at Miyu’s round, expectant eyes and said, “Miyu, I...I would love to be your big sister.”

“It’s settled then!” she exclaimed, her face brightening with joy.

“**NONOKA** and Miyu did eventually become the best of friends, much like real sisters,” Shizuki said.

We were in her room. She’d just finished recounting that tragic episode from Nonoka’s past. Her leisurely figure sitting across from the coffee table was... blurry, for lack of a better word.

“Heavens, Mio, are you crying?” she asked me. “Just what about that story was worth crying over?”

Despite her apparent exasperation with me, she still handed me a handkerchief. Dabbing away the tears, I tried my best to convey my feelings. “I

didn't know she had such a tragic past."

"What? I told you her parents died in an accident, didn't I?"

"You did, but... Wait. I thought you said she lived with her relatives?"

"She did. She stayed at the orphanage for about a month before her relatives came to pick her up."

"They... They picked up Miyu too, right?"

"No? The two were separated."

"Whaaat?!" I exclaimed at the top of my lungs. *After that heart-wrenching episode, nothing more came of it than a brief month together?!*

"It's all right. It's not as if they never talked to each other again. They write to each other regularly. They're still close to this day."

"That's not all right at all! If anyone even tried to tear me away from my sister, I'd never forgive them!"

Shizuki raised an eyebrow. "Is this your way of telling me you resent me for separating you from Shizuku?"

A strangled whimper escaped my throat. "N-No... I feel nothing but utmost gratitude and respect for the woman who extended a helping hand to someone in need..."

Her mouth flattened into a dry smile. "You needn't tiptoe around me. I'm well aware of what I did."

I thought I'd been making an ironic joke, but Shizuki seemed to take it rather seriously. I tried to clarify but was cut off. "Yes. The two are close, but Miyu is sick."

"What?!" I slammed both hands down on the coffee table and jutted myself forward, my face just stopping short of Shizuki's nose. A little sister sick was a tale too close for comfort!

"Relax. It's not incurable or anything."

"Really?"

"She just needs a simple operation to correct the issue."

“That’s a relief...”

If Miyu had been in a similar situation to Shizuku, I wasn’t sure how I would’ve reacted. *If Nonoka had been in a similar situation to me*, I wasn’t sure how I would’ve reacted. But thankfully, that wasn’t the case. I calmed down and resealed myself.

“Now that I think about it, Shizuku’s sick, Ruri too, and now Nonoka’s little sister as well?”

“That is, um...” Shizuki seemed unwilling to continue her train of thought.

“What?” I prodded.

“Remember how I told you this world is based on an otome game?”

“Yes? But I don’t see how that is relevant.”

“You see, the thing about writing an interesting script is that there are only so many ways one can go about it. A common approach is to layer multiple storylines that share a common theme.”

“You mean repeating the same story beat over and over again?”

“Essentially, yes. People cannot emotionally connect with something they find unfamiliar. The flip side of that is if they *do* encounter something that resonates with their own experiences, the emotional connection can be profound. As an example of that, how did you react to hearing about Miyu’s illness just now?”

“That’s... That’s true,” I admitted quietly, falling into reflection.

Why *had* I leaned in so intensely just then, hands pressed against the table? If it had been some random person’s sickness, I doubt I’d have blinked. Maybe a slight twinge of sympathy for an acquaintance, but nothing more. My reaction was intense because I could see myself in Nonoka’s shoes. *I can empathize with her because I am going through something similar.*

“I see your point in personal experience being crucial to creating an emotional response, but what do you mean by ‘layering’ these stories?” I asked.

“How do you create that personal connection when there isn’t one? In the absence of a pertinent real-life experience to draw from, you can create that experience through the story.”

“In other words, cultivate a sort of pseudo-personal connection by way of the narrative?”

“That’s it. Of course, the risk is that you might overuse a story beat and wear it out. Though...”

“Though?”

Shizuki let out a chuckle. “Given how long trends tend to last in video games and manga, I’d say that isn’t much of a concern.”

I looked at her, my eyes widening as the realization dawned on me. “Ohhh, so that pseudo-connection cultivated in one story can carry over to another and so on.” Thinking on it, even the game that this world was based on incorporated the ubiquitous villainess in its story. However, a discrepancy stood out to me. “But Shizuku and I aren’t characters that show up in the game, are we?”

To which, Shizuki shot down my “Shizuku being sick might not have been a coincidence” theory in an instant. “Mio. How many people are sick at any given time on this planet, do you think?”

A lot, I suppose.

“As I was saying,” she resumed, “Miyu just needs to have that surgery and she’ll be as good as new. She currently lacks the courage to. Thus, the next arc of Nonoka’s story is her doing everything in her power to give Miyu the push she needs.”

“Doing all she can to save her sister—that sounds a lot like me.”

“It does, doesn’t it? The two eventually exchange a promise: If Nonoka’s class is the overall victor at the upcoming school Sports Day, Miyu will have the surgery.”

“But Nonoka can’t win the entire event by herself,” I murmured, “she needs her class for that. Which means...” *Nonoka must garner the support of her class—my class. The class that teems with Corporate Legacy students—pompous, self-important Corporate Legacy students...*

“Indeed. The Corporate Legacy students—especially the ladies—do not assign any importance to the school’s Sports Day. To quote one of them, it’s nothing

more than a dreadful chore they must suffer through.”

“I...don’t like where this is going.”

Shizuki seemed to be making subtle yet overt references toward a single female member of the Corporate Legacy student body, but quickly assuaged my concerns: “Relax, Mio. The villainess is little more than a background character in the Sports Day arc. She grumbles, of course, about the sweat, dirt, and effort, but after a bit of pointed provocation from Ruki and the others, she tries just as hard as any other. You needn’t even sabotage Nonoka this time. You can try as hard as you want so long as you pretend to be uninterested.”

“I see!” I exclaimed, suddenly excited. It was a tiny shame that I couldn’t overtly support Nonoka’s efforts, but it was leaps and bounds better than antagonizing her for them.

I remember feeling relief in that moment, comforted by the idea that the villainess I was playing wasn’t as heartless a character as I’d thought. To be honest, I wasn’t sure why I’d thought this. Perhaps I was so glad to not play such a comic book villain for once, so eager to be faced with a task that seemed manageable for once that I’d forgotten one crucial detail:

Since when has anything ever gone according to plan since I started this whole thing?

STANDING before Shizuku’s hospital room, I took a deep breath to steel myself. I looked up at the door, nodded, and stretched a smile across my face. *One, two...*

I swung the door open. “Shizuku, I’m here!”

She turned to look at me, one leg in her pants, the other awkwardly hovering in mid-air.

I gently closed the door.

Before you ask—yes, I do usually knock before entering my little sister’s room. This time, I just had a lot on my mind, unsure of how to face her after our last encounter, so I kind of *forgot* proper manners.

Disappointed at myself, I hung my head low and opened the door once more.

“Mio. What are you doing?” she asked.

“Um. I don’t know. Sorry.”

“I was a little surprised but it’s fine,” she said, obviously trying to cheer me up. “Did you come to see me, or did you come to awkwardly hang out in the hospital corridor? Come on, you don’t have all day. Or do you?”

“I do, actually, for once.”

Shizuku returned to her room and sat on her bed. I headed to the kitchen first to peel the apples I brought her. Yep, it surprised me too how casually I could just refer to the private kitchen in the private hospital room like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Mio,” came Shizuku’s voice. “I guess ‘for once’ means you’re usually pretty busy?”

“Hm? Oh, um, yeah. My part-time job, remember?”

“The modeling one?”

“Yeah, that one. The one Cousin— *Miss* Shizuki introduced me.”

That. Was. Close. Hopefully, she didn’t catch on to what I almost said. Of course, the real job Shizuki had introduced me to was the villainess one, but Shizuku couldn’t know about that. Just another lie I had to tell to keep her from worrying.

I returned to her room with fresh apple slices. “Here you go.”

“Thank youuuu.” Shizuku picked up a fork-speared apple slice and stuffed her cheeks, happily chewing away.

I couldn’t help but think she looked more...lively than usual. But I had to remind myself that Shizuku was a master of deception, her outward appearance was rarely a reflection of how she felt. However, I was sure that the prospect of a cure was at least a small sliver of hope if nothing else.

I’m going to make sure you receive that treatment, Shizuku.

“Why’re you clenching your fists so tight?”

“Huh? Oh! Nothing.”

Shizuku raised a suspicious eyebrow.

I gotta be more careful.

“Okay,” she said skeptically. “You said this Ms. Shizuki introduced you to your modeling job?”

“Yeah. All the clothes I model are from Sakurazaka Group-affiliated brands.”

“Oh, really? You know, I heard the photographer you work with is this young prodigy. He climbed his way to the top and absolutely hates playing favorites. So, I don’t know, it’s kinda hard to believe he’d take you on just because Ms. Shizuki said so.”

“How... How do you know that?”

“What, I can’t look out for my big sister?” She jerked her head away, a hint of a pout on her lips. Overwhelmed by her adorableness, I pulled her into a big hug. “M-Mio?”

“Hehe,” I giggled. “Your big sister appreciates your concern!”

“I-I can’t breathe!” she exclaimed, pushing me off with both hands. But she was smiling, the cuddle bug.

Suddenly, she started coughing.

“Shizuku?! Are you all right?!”

“I’m... I’m fine. I choked on my own spit is all.” She flashed me another smile. But something about it seemed forced.

“You’re not feeling any better, are you?” I questioned.

“I am. Seriously. I’m fine.”

She’d forgive me if I didn’t believe her. It was clear she didn’t want me to worry, a thought that gripped my heart tight. At the same time, I didn’t want to dismiss her efforts. I just smiled at her and said, “Okay. But make sure you tell *someone* if you’re feeling worse for wear.”

Gently stroking her chest, Shizuku returned my smile with a slightly wry one. “How about you just worry about yourself?” she said teasingly. “I said I’m fine.”

She paused. "Yeah. I'm all right."

"But—"

"For now, anyway."

My heart shattered. "Shizuku..."

"I promise I'll tell you if it becomes too much for me. I just...don't like how I'm sitting here doing nothing while you run yourself ragged for my sake."

"Running myself ragged. Really, Shizuku, it's nothing so—"

"You honestly think I wouldn't notice?"

Hearing her quiet, almost defeated reply, I gently held back my own. Shizuku probably realized that I was going to extremes for her, but would she ever guess that these extremes involved becoming a villainess and dying for her? Silence, I thought, would be my best bet to get her off my back, and yet...

She scoffed. "You know, this happened last time, too. You're usually so quick to deny, but whenever it comes to this you just clam up. Like what could be so bad that you don't even want to talk about it?"

Shizuku was growing more astute by the day. As I wondered how I might extricate myself from this line of questioning, my phone suddenly buzzed. "Sorry, I gotta take this. One sec." Excusing myself, I hurried out of her room and into the hallway leading out to the lounge, when I ran into two familiar faces.

"Mom? Dad?"

"Mio..." My dad's eyes widened when he saw me. Without another word, I rushed into their arms, embracing them tightly.

"Um, Mio? Are you sure you should be doing this?" Dad asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I'm sure."

When I first became a Sakurazaka, I was instructed to keep my origins as a Sato a secret. However, this was all part of a plan to trap those who dared to investigate my background. Now that the trap had been sprung and my origins revealed, there was no longer any need for me to maintain the pretense. After

roughly explaining this to my parents, they hugged me back.

“It feels like so long since we last saw each other like this,” I admitted.

Dad smiled, glancing down at me. “Is it just me, or have you grown taller?”

“Okay, not *that* long, Dad.”

“Really? It sure feels like it. You’ve been doing okay?”

“Yeah. You too? Mom?” I turned to her, noticing her hand pressed to her mouth, her eyes glistening as if she might cry. Gently, I nuzzled my cheek against hers; she squeezed me tighter.

“Mio,” Mom said. “You’re doing fine? Like really, *really* fine?”

“Yes, Mom. Like I told you on the phone, I’ve been fine.”

“Okay, okay,” she said. “Sorry, I know I’m being fussy.”

Her hand on my back was quivering. Just how worried was she about my new life as an adoptee? “No, you’re not. But trust me, I’m fine.” I tried my best to reassure her, patting her back gently. She took a deep breath and released me from her arms.

“How you’ve grown since the last time I saw you,” she admired.

“Um, Dad *just* said that.”

“No, no, I meant more like...you’ve matured.” She paused and gave me a warm smile. “Did we catch you on your way out?”

“Oh my gosh, I forgot—I was supposed to be replying to a text. Can we do the rest of our catching up in a bit?”

“Of course, take your time. We’ll be with Shizuku,” Mom said.

“Okay. I’ll join you in a sec.” I waved them off and pulled out my phone, seeing a message from Shannon asking for a call when I was available. “Hey Shannon, I saw your message. Did something happen?”

“There’s been a development at the academy,” she reported.

An interesting tidbit must have reached one of the many students under the patronage of the Sakurazaka family. “It must be urgent if you’re reaching out to

me like this?" I ventured.

"Not very," Shannon replied. "It's just that I am well aware of trouble's penchant for finding you, so I thought it prudent to warn you before it takes you by surprise."

"Yeah. Good looking out," I said, only a little bitterly. But I couldn't *not* acknowledge her point—not after what happened with Ruki at my old job and Nonoka at the entrance exam. *Oh well, it can't hurt to be more informed.* "So? What is it?"

"It's Azumaji and Saionji."

BY the very definition of the expression, Asuka Azumaji had been born with a silver spoon in her mouth. The daughter of a company president, she epitomized privilege and wealth. Her peers had recognized this; throughout elementary school, Asuka had been the target of their affection and attention. Once she transferred to Sosei Academy as a Corporate Legacy student in middle school, however, all that adoration, that entitlement, ended abruptly.

Her father helmed an unremarkable company that was part of a larger though still unremarkable zaibatsu. Asuka's older brother had been groomed to inherit the reins, so for a time, it seemed there had been nothing for her to do but live the good life, basking in all its pleasures while everyone around her toiled for her benefit.

But then the bad times came. Her father's company began to falter, and there was a looming threat of its collapse or, worse, the possibility of losing control to an outsider. In a bid to preserve their standing, Asuka's family had recognized her to be the key. She was their prized daughter, a valuable asset who could be married off to secure political favor and prevent the company's downfall. Such tactics were neither cruel nor unusual in their circles. To enhance her appeal and potential alliances, her family promptly enrolled her in the prestigious Sosei Academy.

Asuka's life changed completely almost overnight. Where she had once floated above the rest, revered and untouched, Asuka now found herself walking among the ordinary, just another girl in the hallway. Her opinions,

which used to be taken as gospel, suddenly mingled undistinguished among many. Even if she had never been inherently selfish, she struggled to reconcile this stark difference between her past and current treatment. The bitterness of enduring these changes, combined with the knowledge that her only reward at the end of the line was a marriage she would likely neither desire nor approve of, swiftly led Asuka to vent her frustrations on the general students.

Sayaka Saionji's situation was similar. Where Asuka's father was a president, Sayaka's was a managing director of a larger entity. Drawn together by their shared background, they formed a bond. Their friendship became a shield, a way to protect themselves by tearing down others. In their eyes, it was a necessary defense against a world that had turned its back on them.

Three years of middle school later, Asuka and Sayaka prepared to ascend to Sosei Academy's high school division. Although Sosei technically allowed students from lower divisions to move up automatically, advancement exams were still held as a formality. On the day of these exams, which coincided with the entrance exams for external students, Asuka and Sayaka encountered Nonoka Hiragi—and the courses of their lives were irrevocably altered.

They hadn't arrived at school that day with the explicit intent of finding new targets for their torment. Their true aim was to scout unsuspecting general students who were unaware of their reputations, hoping to sway them to their side. Despite their intentions, fate led them to antagonize Nonoka, and this unfortunate encounter placed them directly in the line of sight of Mio Sakurazaka.

Mio Sakurazaka, a lady of one of Japan's big three zaibatsus came to perceive them as enemies. This had been Asuka and Sayaka's greatest failing. It was an ironic twist of fate, for Mio possessed a protective nature toward the weak. Had Asuka and Sayaka played their cards right, they could have gained a powerful ally. Instead, they failed to recognize this opportunity, slamming shut the door to a potential guardian patron.

With one path closed, Asuka and Sayaka sought another. Desperation drove them to bow their heads before Rikka Yukishiro, pledging their allegiance. More accurately, they bowed not to Rikka herself, but a member of her entourage. As one could imagine, this meant that their position in Rikka's entourage was

exceedingly shaky. If Rikka were asked whether they were friends, she wouldn't hesitate to say no. Their situation only grew more precarious as Rikka began to cozy up to Mio.

This budding friendship between Rikka and Mio was a threat that Asuka and Sayaka could not ignore. They knew that if it flourished, it could bring their misdeeds to light. Such a revelation would mean facing not only the wrath of Japan's third-largest zaibatsu but the first-largest one as well. It would be social suicide, not just for them but for their families too.

Fortunately, Rikka had allowed them to demonstrate why they deserved to stand by her side. Asuka and Sayaka set off to work straight away to investigate Mio's weaknesses. They stumbled upon the fact that Mio, purported to have been a descendent of true Sakurazaka blood, had been adopted and lived a commoner's life just a few scant months earlier.

Asuka and Sayaka did not blow the whistle on this right away. Recognizing its potential to make peace with the Sakurazaka family, Sayaka proposed they bring it to Mio in good faith. However, Asuka's jealousy festered. How dare a commoner by birth lord it over proper ladies as if it were her prerogative? Thus, Asuka decided to put it all on black. If their intel was reliable, Mio would be exposed as a fraud, and her adoptive family would be forced to disavow her. Not only that, but by knocking them down a peg, they would successfully curry favor with Rikka, gain enormous influence, and pave the way for a frictionless high school career.

By any objective measure, Asuka's plan was full of holes. But at fifteen, she lacked the life experience to see the folly of her gamble. For that, both she and Sayaka paid the ultimate price. Their attempt to expose Mio backfired spectacularly. Mio's reputation soared while they, having flown too close to the sun, plummeted back to the ground. It had all been an elaborate trap, designed from the very beginning to elevate Mio's status.

As the dust settled, Asuka and Sayaka found themselves isolated and powerless. It was almost too predictable that they would become the next targets, an outlet of stress for the Corporate students above them.

At first, the harassment was subtle. In group activities, no one engaged with

them, and classmates routinely began to “forget” to relay to them crucial announcements. There were frequent, seemingly accidental collisions in the hallways, the nagging suspicion that the laughter echoing behind them *was* aimed at them. Initially, they dismissed these occurrences as mere paranoia, but as such incidents accumulated, they had no choice but to acknowledge them—and do little else. They were powerless to stop such incidents. The two former bullies knew all too well that being in a position of weakness meant always being at the mercy of those above them.

Could they have named names and informed the teachers of what was going on? They might have considered it, but the two had just been suspended for attempting to frame another student. Would anyone believe their claims now? Who could say they weren’t attempting another deceit? Thus, Asuka and Sayaka chose to endure the bullying in silence, which only worsened the situation. The conditions were perfect for it to escalate—victims who wouldn’t retaliate, and no one around with a real interest in intervening. Some even might have viewed the harassment as justified, a deserved consequence of their previous actions against Mio.

Things escalated and escalated until one day, a pivotal incident occurred. A band of Corporate girls from the neighboring class snuck into Asuka and Sayaka’s class to vandalize their desks—only to be caught red-handed by Asuka and Sayaka themselves.

The culprits froze up for a second as they took in their unexpected guests. But upon realizing that it was their unsuspecting victims that had found them, that fear transformed into righteous anger.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” the ringleader sneered. “If it isn’t Ms. Sayaka and Ms. Asuka. Come to defend your honor? How utterly bold—and misguided.”

The high-handed leader of this group, Shina Urama, with her distinctive wavy blonde pigtails, was the daughter of the president of a company under the Sakurazaka umbrella. Despite her lofty connections, she was no more remarkable than the girls she targeted. Before their fall from grace, Asuka and Sayaka would have retaliated sharply, but now, stripped of their status, they could only silently endure, biting back their words and their pride.

On the other side of this confrontation, Shina was battling her own anxieties. She realized that if this conflict were to escalate, she might soon find herself facing the same downfall as Asuka and Sayaka. Her haughty demeanor was a projection of these insecurities—she could not afford to seem vulnerable, especially not in front of her entourage.

Fortunately for Shina, her facade seemed effective. Observing Asuka and Sayaka's resigned silence, she felt emboldened. "Embracing humility at long last, are we?" she said. "You know, I feel vindicated. There was always something about you two that rubbed me the wrong way. All your petty tyranny over the common folk when you were hardly any better yourselves."

"I..." Sayaka bit her lip. Asuka's gaze was fixed on the floor.

The girls could offer justifications for their actions toward the general students, and indeed, there would even be some merit to their reasons. For instance, there was real tension and envy between the general and Corporate students, envy that often manifested in subtle digs and slights directed at the Corporate students who stood at the bottom-most rung—those perceived as easy targets. In a way, Asuka and Sayaka's actions had been a form of self-defense, a preemptive assertion of dominance to ward off potential harassment. But for all that pretext, the fact of the matter was that they had still chosen to become bullies.

It was indisputably wrong to bully others. Shina bullying two former bullies didn't make it any less wrong. But the girls couldn't bring themselves to call her out on it. Not when now, after everything that had happened, Asuka and Sayaka fully realized the wrongness of their past behavior—they were guilty, and they deserved this.

Emboldened by their silence even more, Shina shoved Sayaka. She collided with Asuka, and both tumbled to the ground in a heap. "That'll teach you to never mess with the Sakurazakas again," Shina declared smugly, prompting laughter from her entourage.

Shina believed this would conclude the episode—a bit of what she saw as righteous retribution, a scene witnessed only by those present. However, just as she basked in her apparent triumph, a new voice cut through the noise.

“Enjoying ourselves, are we, ladies?”

The figure of one Mio Sakurazaka, the very cause of Asuka and Sayaka’s current plight, stepped through the door.

ACCORDING to Shannon, Sayaka and Asuka had become the latest targets of bullying at the academy. They fell victim to Shizuki’s trap and were sentenced to three days of community service for attempting to ridicule and expose me as a fraud. While this seemed like a light punishment on paper, the real and far greater consequence was their total loss of face and social standing for daring to harass a Sakurazaka.

To be honest, I would’ve more than liked to say, *they got what they deserved!* and left to them to their fate. But this was a world based on an otome game—an otome game that did not have a development in which the villainess’s former underlings get bullied!

Concerned that leaving them alone could lead to deviations from the original storyline, Shizuki and I discussed and agreed I should step in.

Thus, one afternoon, Shannon and I waited in ambush. As soon as her text arrived, I headed to the classroom and arrived just in time to see Asuka and Sayaka pushed to the floor with a blonde-haired bully towering over them, laughing menacingly.

With my usual dismissive flick of my hair, I anchored myself, slipping into my villainess persona. *Time to get to villainessin’.*

“Enjoying ourselves, are we, ladies?” I said with a haughty giggle.



“Lady Mio?!” squeaked the blonde ringleader. “What are you doing here?!”

Shina Urama. Though an associate of the Sakurazaka Group, she never once appeared in the original story. I flashed her a perfunctory smile. “How quaint of you to ask, Ms. Shina. Considering this is *my* domain, *my* classroom, why would I not be here? You, on the other hand...”

The color drained from Shina’s face as my implication sank in. “L-Lady Mio, this isn’t what it looks like.”

“It isn’t? Well, that’s a relief. Because for sure I thought I was witnessing someone deliberately leaving their own class to torment someone in mine. But since that’s not the case, I can rest easy, can’t I?”

“L-Lady Mio...”

She couldn’t even bring herself to meet my gaze—to lie, to confirm or deny what I was saying, or to talk at all it seemed. She was going to play the role of the villain with such thin skin?

I closed the distance. “Ms. Shina, what were you saying just before I arrived? ‘Never mess with a Sakurazaka’?”

“I-I...!”

“You strike me as a girl with at least something between her ears, so I’ll explain it to you. Yes, I humbled these girls for daring to cross me, but that was where my interest ended. So,” my finger lifted her chin, compelling her gaze to lock with mine, “you are free to antagonize whomever you wish; that is beyond my concern. However, do not—*ever*—presume to act in my name again. Is that clear?”

Her nod was quick, desperate. “Y-Yes, sorry.” The tremble in her voice betrayed her fear, and she didn’t dare remove my touch.

“Will you do it ever again?” I asked, cryptically on purpose.

“D-Do what again?” Shina whimpered.

“Will you channel your frustrations onto others and use my name as your shield ever again?”

“Never. Never!” She shook her head violently.

I almost felt pity for her. Was I truly that intimidating? On reflection, I probably was. After all, in the public eye, I was the girl who had just orchestrated the complete downfall of Asuka and Sayaka. I guessed that no one wanted to even catch my eye right now.

In that case, I’d be merciful and wrap things up. “Allow me to make myself clear one last time. I will retaliate against every threat that comes my way without mercy, but I do not hurt innocents without reason. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Shina replied quickly. “I won’t ever harass those two girls again!”

If only she had consistently applied such logic and reason, we might have avoided this unpleasant confrontation. But what could you do?

“Good,” I said. “Then we are in agreement. This conversation will be buried here, never to resurface. To spare you becoming like those two over there, I will act as if today’s events never transpired. Now leave.”

“Th-Thank you, Lady Mio! Excuse us!” Her gratitude was palpable, as was her haste to escape my presence. Hugging themselves, Shina and her entourage fled the room like baby spiders scattering into the shadows.

After they disappeared from view, I returned my gaze to Asuka and Sayaka. They just sat there in a daze, as if in utter disbelief of what had just transpired.

“Do you two intend to stay on the floor indefinitely?” I inquired.

“Oh, um.” Sayaka’s laughter was tinged with nervousness as she scrambled up, brushing off her skirt in a fluster. Asuka, on the other hand, remained sprawled on the ground, immobile.

“Ms. Asuka? Are you injured?” I pressed, showing slight concern.

She murmured something inaudible.

“What was that?” I urged.

“Why did you help us?” she asked louder but barely intelligible. “We tried to humiliate you, you know?” She hugged her knees closer, her defenses visibly

up. Was accepting help from me such a blow to her ego?

“You call *that* humiliation?” I shot back. “Please. In actuality, I’m grateful to you. You and Sayaka played your roles to the hilt.”

She gripped herself even tighter. “You...bitch.”

“Yes, I’m a bitch. Yes, I look down on you. But that is no justification for them, or anyone else for that matter, to harass you like that.”

Sayaka suddenly spoke. “Is that why you stepped in?” She certainly seemed to be the more level-headed of the two.

I shifted my gaze to her. “Partly. But mostly, I intervened because I believe you two may still yet redeem yourselves.”

“Redeem ourselves?” Sayaka repeated.

“Yes. Now that through this incident, you know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of such treatment.”

“I...” Sayaka struggled to find words. I thought she had none to offer, but after a moment, she murmured, “We’ve always known what it felt like.”

I felt something shift inside me. I’d always thought of these two as mindless minions, mere pawns of the villainess that would ultimately contribute to her downfall. I’d never once thought about the fact that they were real people, burdened with fears and struggles of their own.

“Well, as long as you’re aware,” I returned, my voice softening. “Now, what you choose to do next—whether to change or continue on your path to ruination—is none of my concern.” With that, I turned to leave. But I found myself stopping in the doorway, turning to give them one final glance. My last words left me not in the voice of the villainess, but my own. “Ms. Sayaka, Ms. Asuka, it isn’t too late. You two can still save yourselves. Because unlike me, your hearts aren’t wholly darkened.”



“**JUST** who does she think she is?” Asuka mumbled, the evening sun backlighting her figure as she and Sayaka watched the doorway where Mio had departed.

“Right?” Sayaka added. “She did kind of save us, though.”

“Yeah, as an afterthought,” Asuka spat. “She didn’t even make them apologize to us. She probably just thought they were an eyesore and wanted them out of her classroom.”

Sayaka only smiled wryly in response, but internally, she doubted if that was true. Yes, Mio drove Shina away. Mio had explicitly stated her reason for doing so was to defend her honor—but if that were true, then what was all that about redemption? There was one possibility, but... No, Sayaka brushed the thought from her mind.

Asuka sighed. “Whatever. Who cares what that girl thinks? More importantly, we have to do something about this.” She glanced at the partially defaced desks, knocked over to the ground when Shina had pushed them. “I am *not* getting chewed out for this.”

They began to restore their desks in silence.

“Hey, Asuka,” Sayaka suddenly spoke. “What are you going to do?”

“What am I going to do?” Asuka repeated, confused. “About what? Nothing. After what Ms. Mio said to them, I doubt Shina and them will be back.”

“Right. But I meant more like what are *we* going to do? After all that, I feel like we owe it to her.”

Asuka looked at Sayaka in disbelief. “You’re not seriously thinking of apologizing to her, are you? She may have helped us, but through intimidation, which makes her no different from the rest.”

Asuka’s point was straightforward: someone with power oppresses a subordinate, who in turn lashes out at someone even weaker. Mio’s actions, using her authority to silence Shina, were a clear perpetuation of this cycle.

“Asuka, I know how you feel,” Sayaka said. “But I feel like we’ve been given a chance here—a chance to escape from all this. Or would you prefer to spend the next three years at Sosei constantly looking over your shoulder?”

“Of course I don’t,” Asuka spat bitterly. She paused, her thoughts tumbling over each other. Guilt gnawed at her for the mess they’d created, particularly

with Mio. Her pride, however, clung stubbornly to her, a trait so deeply ingrained it seemed part of her very bones.

But Sayaka, her long-time friend, understood how she worked perfectly. “Then how about this: First, we make things right with Rikka.”

“Rikka? Why start with her?” Asuka echoed in confusion.

“Because we messed up, Asuka. We thought we were doing the right thing but completely misread the room. Let’s sort that out first, and then... Well, we can cross that bridge when we get there.

“But—”

“Remember when you dragged me out for ice cream by the station? What did I say?”

Asuka blinked. “What? Wait, what? Why are you bringing that up now?”

“I said yes, didn’t I, Asuka?”

Asuka hesitated, her gaze darting around as if looking for a loophole, a typical escape route. But the memory, combined with Sayaka’s unwavering support, was a guilt trip that worked like no other. With a resigned sigh, she conceded, “Fine. You’re right. We’ll do it your way.”

ON a lunch break like any other, Asuka and Sayaka hurriedly devoured their food in preparation to confront Rikka. Upon arriving, Rikka’s entourage initially barred their way, but after some finagling, they managed to secure an audience. Now, they stood in the chilling shadow of Rikka’s presence.

“Ms. Saionji, Ms. Azumaji,” Rikka began, “to what do I owe the pleasure? I’m told you have urgent business with me.”

Sayaka spoke first. “Thank you for granting us this moment, Ms. Rikka. The truth is...” she hesitated, exchanging a fraught look with Asuka, who gave a subtle nod in return. “The truth is we’ve come to discuss...the recent oversight on our part. We chose the path of least resistance, twisted your directives to suit our convenience, and caused disruption not just to you but to everyone involved.”

As she finished, both she and Asuka bowed deeply, their voices united and solemn, “We are profoundly sorry, Ms. Rikka.”

A murmur swept through the entourage, a mix of whispers and clucks of disapproval. With a single gesture, Rikka quelled the hubbub. “Raise your heads,” she instructed, her voice devoid of warmth.

As they complied, Asuka and Sayaka met Rikka’s ice-cold stare.

“Do you comprehend the extent of your folly? Despite my *explicit* stance considering Ms. Mio a friend, you chose to undermine and embarrass her, tarnishing my reputation in the process.”

“Yes, Ms. Rikka,” Sayaka responded. “Our actions were misguided, and that’s why we are here—not to plead for forgiveness, but to sincerely apologize.”

Rikka’s gaze shifted to the silent Asuka. “Is that right?”

Asuka’s eyes briefly met Rikka’s before dropping away. “Yes, Ms. Rikka,” she responded. “We deeply regret the trouble we’ve caused.”

“Well, in that case,” Rikka continued, “apology accepted.”

Three potential outcomes had loomed over the girls: Rikka could reject their apologies, accept them without further comment, or accept and forgive them fully. Today, they faced the second scenario, one that signified Rikka’s acknowledgment of their remorse but not her forgiveness. The severity of their missteps weighed heavily on them, and they knew that any leniency from Rikka was a testament to her exceptional grace. Thus, the two bowed deeply once more.

“You are most gracious, Ms. Rikka,” Sayaka stated.

“Thank you for your time,” Asuka added.

As they turned to leave, a voice stopped them cold. “One more thing,” Rikka called out, her tone shifting noticeably toward something softer, yet still imbued with authority.

Rooted to the spot, they slowly turned back. Rikka’s expression had softened, her posture relaxed, yet her eyes remained piercing. “What are you two planning to do next?”

“Next, Ms. Rikka?” Sayaka said.

This was a ploy to stall for time—she knew right away Rikka’s question pertained to whether they planned to apologize to Mio. Sayaka wanted to apologize. If it was just her, she would’ve affirmed right away. But her eyes drifted to the girl beside her. Asuka was an important friend—more important than anyone in the world—and she would never dare to ignore her feelings and unilaterally decide for them both.

Noticing her shifting gaze, Rikka said something unexpected. “Your actions have cast severe aspersions on the integrity of Sosei Academy. Frankly, I wouldn’t have found expulsion to be an unreasonable response.”

It was Asuka who responded to her. “We are...well aware, Ms. Rikka.”

“Then, have you ever considered why your only punishment was a few measly days of community service?”

Asuka blinked. “I... No, I haven’t,” she admitted. Her mind had been preoccupied, replaying her confrontation and overwhelming defeat at the hands of a Sakurazaka, leaving little room to ponder the reasons behind their punishment.

A few days of community service—now that she thought about it, the penalty did seem unusually mild. As Corporate Legacy students, tasked with upholding and exemplifying the highest standards for the rest of the student body, they should have faced the most severe consequences. So why hadn’t they? As the pair confronted this puzzling question for the first time, Rikka’s lips curved into a mischievous smile. “This was shared with me in confidence, so you’ll forgive me for my redaction. Let’s just say, someone who shall not be named advocated passionately for clemency on your behalf.”

The revelation struck Asuka and Sayaka like a bolt from the blue. No amount of deliberate vagueness could conceal the implication—there was only one person who would’ve gone out of their way to do such a thing.

“Asuka.” Sayaka’s glance held a world of meaning, and Asuka understood it instantly, her eyes locking with Rikka’s.

“Ms. Rikka,” Asuka began, her voice carrying a new resolve. “Sayaka and I...

We planned on apologizing to Ms. Mio next.”

“Asuka’s right,” Sayaka concurred. “It may be too little, too late, but we are committed to making this right, one step at a time.”

The girls exchanged nods. Seeing this, Rikka’s expression softened into a pleased smile. “Ms. Sayaka, Ms. Asuka.”

The girls froze. It was well understood at Sosei Academy that addressing someone by their last name, in a place where first names were standard, meant intentionally distancing oneself. Rikka had chosen now of all times to close that distance.

As Asuka and Sayaka looked on in complete shock, Rikka spoke to fill the space between them. “You both have made mistakes. These mistakes may linger, but they don’t define you. Can I trust that this time, you will truly prove yourselves worthy of my endorsement?”

The rehash of a challenge previously bestowed then failed. The first time, the girls had tried to prove their worth by undermining Mio, but this time, with their intentions realigned...

“With Sayaka by my side, I am committed to earning the right to call you our friend.”

“We won’t make the same mistake twice. Together, Asuka and I will demonstrate our true value.”

Their words, strong and clear, prompted nods of approval from each other and a knowing smile from Rikka. “Despite her sharp tongue, Ms. Mio is fundamentally kind-hearted. If you approach her with sincerity in your heart, she will forgive you—I am sure of that.”



THE news of Asuka and Sayaka’s confrontation with Rikka reached me while I was in the car on my way home. Riding alongside me, Shannon murmured, “Is this truly for the best?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “Frankly, Lady Shizuki seemed at a loss on how to manage the situation herself.”

Those two girls were meant to be the villainess's underlings. In essence, they were originally supposed to be Shizuki's (and thus my) partners in crime. Upon learning of their dilemma, Shizuki wrestled with how to intervene. It conflicted with the villainess's character to offer help in such a situation, yet the potential ripple effects on the storyline if ignored were even more troubling.

"She decided to help them in the end?" Shannon speculated.

"Yes. But 'help' wouldn't be the word I'd use," I replied.

All I did was silence a troublesome group of upstarts. The fact that this action inadvertently 'saved' Asuka and Sayaka was merely a fortunate side effect—this had always been the intention. That was why I had executed my role with such cold efficiency—so that there was no risk of my actions being misconstrued as anything even resembling benevolence. This way, the girls would gladly join Rikka's circle, and everything would settle down perfectly.

"With one chapter closed, it's onto the next," I concluded. "Sports Day—let's see what you got, shall we?"

To save the world, to save my sister—I must face my complete and utter downfall.

Now then, let's get to villainessin'.

Episode Two

A few days later during homeroom, it came time to discuss the upcoming Sports Day. All the different events were written down on the blackboard, and there was eager chatter about who would participate in each one—among the general students, anyway. The Corporate students, especially the girls, couldn't care less. Riku and Nonoka led the discussion in front of the class and struggled to find volunteers for each event, resulting in the participants for most events being decided by lots.

This was exactly how it went down in the original game. According to Shizuki, Nonoka had volunteered for the kibasen, or mock cavalry chicken fight. Consequently, Asuka, Sayaka, an unnamed fourth classmate, and I drew for the kibasen and participated involuntarily. To reproduce this outcome in the real world, we might've had to rig the results of the draw, but we ultimately deemed this unnecessary as the villainess had a very minor role to play in this whole arc. All she did was begrudgingly participate in the kibasen, begrudgingly get fired up, and begrudgingly win. The extent of her interaction with Nonoka was just a snide, "Look at you in the mud—where you belong," and nothing more. Thus, Shizuki instructed that unless there was interference with our overall victory, it really wasn't a big deal. Therefore, we left my participating event completely up to the luck of the draw.

I had to admit I was curious about how it would all shake out. There *was* that game narrative restoring force I'd alluded to previously, and if it was powerful enough, perhaps I'd end up teaming with Asuka and Sayaka just like in the game. Somehow, I doubted it was. Correction: I *wanted* to doubt it was. Because the alternative—that there *was* this strong restoring force and I was *still* able to mess up the storyline this much—would make me look almost maliciously incompetent.

Such were the random musings that occupied my mind when it came time for my name to be pulled out of the ballot box and...

What would you know? It was for the kibasen.

Uh-oh. Was the restoring force real—and powerful? No, no, it couldn't be. Just probabilistically, it wasn't *that* crazy that I'd just happen to draw the kibasen, right? Coincidences happen, or so I told myself when I noticed the classroom had gone eerily quiet. I snapped out of my musing to find the class seeking volunteers for my kibasen team. I could feel Nonoka sneaking glances at me. *Why was she sneaking glances at me?!*

But before that riddle could be answered, another even more alarming riddle presented itself. Two hands shot in the air—Asuka's and Sayaka's.

Huh?

Riku, the moderator of the discussion thus far, arched a brow. "You two would like to volunteer for the kibasen?" There was a tinge of confusion to his voice, as if in disbelief that these two prim and proper ladies, who probably balked at even the *idea* of dirt getting under their fingernails, would *volunteer* to get down and dirty.

But to everyone's amazement, they nodded. They then stood up from their seats and walked over to mine. Sayaka stood slightly off the side while Asuka took center stage right before me.

"Ms. Mio. There's something we need to say to you," Asuka began.

"Yes?" I replied, mustering up as much indifference as I could. Internally, I was screaming while doing my best to hold my composure. In the next instant, however, all my efforts were rendered moot.

In that classroom, in that homeroom, on that day—in front of everybody—Asuka and Sayaka...*apologized*.

"Ms. Mio. We are deeply sorry for our actions," they said, their heads bowed in unison.

Surprise rippled across the classroom—epicenter, me. *Um, weren't these two supposed to hate me?*

"Whatever could you possibly be referring to?" I replied. Of course, I knew what they were apologizing for. But I was trying to give them an off-ramp—

hopefully, one they'd take to spare them the humiliation.

"For spreading unfounded rumors of your identity. We beg your forgiveness," Asuka continued.

Nope. Didn't take it.

Well, this was another fine pickle I found myself in. I, the villainess, was being apologized to by my underlings. What was my role here? Was it to recognize their remorse and forgive them? It didn't seem like the villainess-y thing to do. What was the alternative? Laugh in their faces and brush off their apologies as too little, too late? That certainly sounded more like it, but...

I shot a glance at Shannon. She slowly shook her head, confirming my suspicions. Of course. We had just done so much work at the behest of Shizuki to extricate these girls from their predicament and protect the integrity of the storyline. If I were to deal them another blow here, they'd fall even further.

"Okay," I relented. "Why apologize now, of all times?"

"Because we would like to participate in the kibasen with you," Asuka answered.

It was illogical. In what world was it appropriate to segue from an apology about spreading unfounded rumors about me into wanting to join me for the kibasen? Unless...the storyline restoring force was forcing them to say nonsense to get the plot back on track?!

Probably not. Better find out what was really going on. "I don't understand. Could you possibly be less cryptic?" I demanded.

"Of course; my apologies," Asuka stated. "The other day, you looked out for us."

"I believe I had made myself *exceedingly* clear I hadn't done that for you?" I countered.

"Ms. Rikka told us why our punishment had been so light."

"Excuse me?"

Rikka had told them *what*? Wait. She *knew* that I'd advocated on their behalf? How? And not only knew but *told* Asuka and Sayaka?!

I shot Rikka a violent glare. The smug look on her face screamed, *you can thank me later for telling them what you couldn't bring yourself to.*

No! Why did everyone think I was some terminal tsundere physically incapable of properly expressing their feelings?! *I am a villainess. A villainess!*

Asuka continued, "That's why we want everyone to know. That at heart, you are a—"

"Okay, okay, I get it. The kibasen, right? You're welcome to join."

Nope. I had to cut her off before whatever painting-me-as-a-good-person thing came out of her mouth next. Whatever. I might've hastily agreed to team up with them for the kibasen, but that wasn't a big deal. That was exactly what happened in the original game anyway. Yeah. This is way better than having my kindness exposed—or God forbid, I end up teaming with Nonoka. "Wait. Don't you need four people to form a kibasen team?"

The realization struck me as the words left my mouth. I then suddenly re-realized that our soapy teenage drama-like exchange had been witnessed by the entire class—and the individual most interested was the girl standing at the lectern.

Nonoka, her face screamed, *let me join. Let me join!*

No, no, no, not this. Anything but this! There was no way that the heroine and villainess teaming up for Sports Day could be anything but story-derailing!

Nonoka's lips parted to speak. Before she could, I yelled, "Anyone else?!"

I managed to shock her into silence. *Whew. That was close—by the skin of my teeth.* Nonoka looked grumpy about being interrupted. I'd bought myself time, but not much. I had to find someone else before she realized what was going on.

Quick, I needed a friend... A friend...!

But of course! How could I have forgotten?

I have no friends!

Crap. What do I do now? Ask Shannon? But Shannon's not supposed to know me. But what other choices did I have? This might be one egg I had to crack for

the sake of the omelet. Resolved, I prepared myself to nominate Shannon when suddenly Rikka raised her hand.

The entire class, including me, was stunned into silence. A beat later, she said with poise, “I volunteer.”

Another wave of surprise rippled across the classroom. No doubt the question on everyone’s mind was, *Rikka is volunteering to become a horse?*

On a kibasen team, three people were horses while one acted as the rider on top. I was the villainess; there was no way I’d be a horse. But a Sakurazaka riding on top of a horse named Yukishiro? That was problematic in its own way.

Unless she was preparing to fight me for the role of rider? Whichever way, I had a bad feeling about this.

“Ms. Rikka. You wish to join *my* team?” I questioned, hoping to insinuate that if she were to join, I wouldn’t be giving up my position.

She just smiled at me. “Is there a problem?”

Yes. Many problems. But glancing at the grumpy Nonoka, I realized that if I were to decline Rikka, Nonoka would volunteer herself right after.

Ahhh, darn it!

“No. No problem at all,” I said. “Welcome to the team, Ms. Rikka.”

Riku observed our exchange with a mixture of disbelief and mild amusement before he announced, “Well, that settles that,” and wrote our names on the blackboard. Nonoka next to him had her cheeks puffed out in displeasure.

Very cute, Nonoka, but why have you taken so much of a liking to me? I’m serious. Like why?

“Are there any other volunteers for the kibasen?” Riku broadcasted as he turned back to the class.

Nonoka, right? She was supposed to participate as well. But she looked so depressed about not teaming with me that she didn’t even seem to realize what was happening.

“None? Then we’ll draw the remainder by lots.”

Oh, fine! I guess I have to do something here, don't I?

"Nonoka? I thought you said you wanted to participate?" I shot at her.

"I do!" she replied near-instantaneously. She then asked some of her friends if they wanted to team with her. They caved to her charm in short order and that was another team settled.

Phew. At least with that, I've avoided the worst-case scenario of the heroine participating in an event she wasn't supposed to.

And no, Shannon, it couldn't be helped, so would you please stop looking at me as if I've done something completely uncalled for?

Heaving a sigh, I sat up straight in my chair.

Thinking on it, I'd made the faculty swear secrecy on the matter of my intervention, so how did Rikka find out? A silly question, after all, as Yukishiro was far more powerful than Sakurazaka. Whatever we could do, they could do better. Was this their way of entrapping me or helping me? The latter, if I had to guess. In that case, this outcome was perhaps an inevitability.

Lost in my thoughts, I hardly noticed it was break time. As soon as the bell rang, I noticed Rikka approaching. "Ms. Mio, do you have a moment? I'd like to discuss our approach at the upcoming Sports Day."

"Of course," I replied with a nod.

She went on to declare suddenly and unequivocally that she intended to be a horse. Her entourage erupted in protest, but Rikka silenced them, explaining that it was only appropriate because she had volunteered to join my team.

Thank goodness. That was one potential headache pre-empted, I thought when Rikka said, "While I have you, Ms. Mio."

Oh. Of course, that wasn't the heart of the matter. Here we go.

"I was wondering if you knew whether Ms. Shizuki will be in attendance at the financial gala coming up in a few days?"

"She's studying abroad. I doubt she'll be able to make it," I conveyed. "I could confirm with her if you wish?"

“No, no, that’s quite all right. I just had a few questions for her, but perhaps you may be able to help me out instead?”

Despite my feigned indifference, Rikka hung on, clearly unwilling to let the matter go. I got the feeling she was probing me for information. I was an outsider who’d studied up on the bare necessities to become the villainess. There were many holes in my knowledge, and I could only hope she wasn’t trying to find one of them.

Concealing my wariness behind a polite smile, I asked, “Yes, what is it?”

“As I’m sure you know, the Yukishiro, Tsukinomiya, and Sakurazaka families are known as ‘the big three’ Japanese zaibatsus. I needn’t explain why that is, correct?”

“I’m familiar, yes.” These zaibatsus were considered the big three because of their immense assets and the significant gap between them and the fourth-largest zaibatsu. Each of the big three had total assets in the hundreds of trillions of yen, with only a fluctuating difference of a few tens of trillions between them. However, the gap between the third and fourth largest zaibatsu was much more substantial, spanning orders of magnitude.

What if the Japanese zaibatsus had never been dissolved? This was the premise of the otome game this world was based on. It was a seemingly minor change, yet one that resulted in major differences down the line. However, this knowledge, including the looming financial crisis, was information that Rikka and I, ordinary denizens of this world, should not have been privy to. So, why was Rikka bringing up the zaibatsus now? I looked at her for clarification.

“You’re aware that Ms. Shizuki has significant holdings overseas?” she pressed.

“Of course,” I answered after a pause. This was a lie. I had no idea she had holdings overseas. It did sound familiar; perhaps this was one of those things Shizuki had mentioned in passing.

“Previously at a New Year’s party, Ms. Shizuki had mentioned these overseas companies of hers were a small side project and nothing more—something she started with her allowance money.” Her eyes bore into mine, clearly trying to see if I would react to this information at all. *Sorry, honey, I have no idea what*

Shizuki is doing behind the scenes, so you won't be getting anything from me.

"If that's what she said, then who am I to question it?" I asked. "Though, if it's her usage of the word 'allowance' you're hung up on, I wouldn't be."

Shizuki knew the future. Forget millions—with that kind of foresight, I wouldn't be surprised if she was getting a return of tens of millions, hundreds of millions, from her "allowance" alone.

Yeah, I might have found all this surprising a few months ago, but not now.

"You never cease to impress me, Ms. Mio," Rikka observed.

I fluttered my eyelashes in confusion. "Excuse me?"

She flashed me an awkward smile. "Say, do you happen to know the name Akizuki?"

"Of course," I replied instantly. This was something I actually did know. The Akizuki family was the aforementioned fourth-largest zaibatsu, the ones traditionally excluded from public discourse due to the significant wealth gap between them and the Sakurazakas in third. My tutors had explained that despite this disparity, the Akizukis liked to claim they were part of a "big four," though no one else recognized this. "Did you have something to share concerning those pretenders?"

"The word is they've been aggressively chasing mergers and acquisitions by way of marriage. Some might say they're attempting to upset the status quo."

I understood Rikka's warning right away. Though the gap between third and fourth couldn't be surmounted by four alone, perhaps four plus five certainly could. It was a prudent warning—if Shizuki hadn't possessed knowledge of the future. If this had been something for me to worry about, it would've come up much earlier. "I'll take that to heart, thank you," I acknowledged, flashing her a noncommittal smile.

Rikka's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed knowingly. "But yes. It's of no concern at all—not compared to what Ms. Shizuki has in the works."

I... Hm?

Don't tell me Shizuki isn't just stockpiling hundreds of millions but...billions?



ON the sprawling campus of Sosei Academy, various facilities were reserved exclusively for the students of the Corporate Legacy program. In a secluded corner of one such café, Rikka and Ruki shared a discreet meeting.

“So, how did it go?” Ruki inquired, twirling a glass of iced coffee between his fingers.

Rikka paused, taking a slow sip from her iced tea before replying with a wry smile. “There’s not much to tell, except that Mio never ceases to amaze. When I hinted that Shizuki might be concealing trillions in assets, she didn’t even bat an eye.”

“Is that right?” Ruki mused. “And this is the same café waitress I remember?”

Mio, once a commoner who had eked out a living just months prior, now mingled among elites as if born in it. Ruki, though not one to stereotype that all commoners were simpletons who wore their hearts on their sleeves, still found it a stretch that fundamental perspectives on wealth and power could evolve so drastically and swiftly. To any average individual, the revelation of a close relative’s hidden trillions would surely shatter their poise.

“It really is quite fascinating,” Rikka pondered. “Do you think she’s always had such a penchant for pretense?”

“That, or she developed it in a few short months.”

“Now there’s a terrifying thought.”

If it were true that Mio had honed such sophisticated social skills in just a few months—a skill set Rikka and Ruki had spent their lives perfecting—then labeling her as a “prodigy” or a “genius” might not just be flattery but plain truth.

Ruki peered into the depths of his glass. “Though one can’t help but wonder, given how she handled Saionji and Azumaji. That trap was entirely one of her own makings. Unless... No, that can’t be right.”

“Unless what?” Rikka urged. It wasn’t like Ruki to bite back his words.

“No, I was merely pondering whether it was possible that Shizuki might be the

mastermind behind it all, and Mio merely her puppet.”

“You’re right. That can’t be.” Rikka laughed away the possibility. If that were true, then Shizuki would not only have perfect knowledge about Sayaka and Asuka but Rikka and Ruki as well, orchestrating every move to make Mio appear flawlessly competent. But that wouldn’t be possible. With that level of knowledge, what would that make her? A clairvoyant?

Ruki snapped out of his thoughts. “At any rate, Mio has shown considerable growth. There’s no doubt about that. Now what about Akizuki? You told her about that, yes? What was her reaction?”

“Yes. I suspect she already knows. She sort of just smiled blandly at me when I told her. I suppose that means...”

“She’s set up another trap, has she?”

Soon, another individual would join Sayaka and Asuka in the hall of unfortunate victims. The two Yukishiros exchanged awkward smiles, a shared understanding that the game was far from over.

THE villainess in the Sports Day arc was nothing but a background character. Her presence was inconspicuous, her contributions marginal but sufficient to help her class cinch a victory. She doesn’t even antagonize Nonoka at all. That was why when Nonoka approached me after class, asking me if I wanted to split a parfait with her on the way home from school, it was all okay.

“Ms. Mio! Are you free after class today? I’d love to take you out for ice cream!”

No, are you kidding me?! Of course, this wasn’t okay! Not by a long shot! Why was Nonoka, the heroine, chasing after me, the anti-hero, like a puppy desperately in need of a friend?!

Yes, Nonoka was adorable and forthcoming. Yes, I would’ve loved to be her friend. But I couldn’t—not when it was between her or my precious baby sister.

“Excuse me?” I shot back coldly. “I’m busy.”

“Okay!” she replied cheerfully. “Then how about the on-campus café

instead?”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“I am, which is why I suggested a less time-consuming alternative!”

Without even waiting for my reply, Nonoka zipped past me, clearly set on her destination.

Not following you. No matter what, I'm not following you...! I vowed silently when she bumped into an upperclassman-looking fellow.

“Hey there,” he cooed to Nonoka. “You a first year? What’s your name?”

Ew, talk about greasy.

“My name? Hiragi, why?”

“And your first name?”

“Oh, um, Nonoka. Sorry about that.”

Wow. The guy was about as subtle as a freight train, and Nonoka was utterly oblivious. Did she not have a suspicious bone in her body? Heaving a sigh, I approached them.

“Nonoka, huh? Cute name,” the boy expressed. “You a general student? Why don’t you let daddy here take you out on a little—”

“Hey, Casanova,” I called out.

He turned to me. “What? Can’t you see I’m in the middle of— M-M-M-Mio Sakurazaka?!” The color drained from his face.

Ah, this guy. He was on the “list of people to keep an eye out for” Shizuki provided, some bottom-tier Corporate playboy. “Ah, you know who I am. Then that should make this quick.” I smiled thinly. “Scram.”

“At once, ma’am!” And off he went, sprinting down the hallway at full speed. I didn’t bother watching him leave; my attention was fixed on Nonoka. “Really, Nonoka, are you a child? Handing out your full name to just anyone who asks. It’s a miracle you’ve survived this long.”

“Sorry,” she murmured. “I’ll keep that in mind.” She squirmed for a second. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“Looking out for...? Why, I— Goodness, girl, just how self-conscious can one be?” I dismissively flicked a lock of hair into her face as I turned to leave, but was stopped abruptly by Nonoka tugging at the hem of my uniform. “Nonoka? What act of brazenness is this?”

“Um, the café’s that way,” she explained, pointing in the opposite direction.

“Are you daft? Like I said, I don’t have time for—” I heard a phone vibrate; realizing it was Nonoka’s, I gave her a look to say, *you can take it*.

“Sorry, just give me one minute,” Nonoka apologized before stepping away.

Well, wasn’t that the perfect out? I wasn’t obligated to give her one second, let alone a whole minute. Sniping her a final look as she talked to whoever was on the opposite end of that line, I turned to leave.

And leave I did. I left school and didn’t stop until I was at a certain photo studio. Apparently, my shoot from last time performed quite well, and they wanted me back for another. And no, I swear that wasn’t some personal side quest I was gallivanting off to but a task crucial to the tyrant effort. If you won’t take it from me, then take it from Shizuki, who ordered me here.

It was our way of making lemonade out of the lemons I had wrought. We’d make use of Nonoka’s attachment to me and use these photo shoots to drive her interest in fashion even higher. Today’s outfit: an off-the-shoulder blouse and tiered maxi skirt over thigh-highs. It was a variation of the well-to-do young lady outfit I usually wore, a complete set from Shizuki’s own fashion brand: SIDUKI. Coincidentally, the theme of this specific line was “dress like a Sakurazaka” or something like that.

To be honest, it didn’t quite sit right with me that we were modeling my go-to outfit. Because, well, this *was* the outfit the world usually found me in. The fact that we were modeling it meant that we expected Nonoka to mimic it to a certain extent. This was *my* look. What if Nonoka and I were to bump into each other on the street wearing the exact same thing? I think that would make her day, and...I don’t know. The idea of doing anything that might bring her any closer to me wrenched at my heart.

One day, I would have to hurt Nonoka. Like, really, *really* betray her. To make that easier on me, I would’ve liked to avoid interacting with her, to create that

distance now and maintain it, but my role in spurring her growth made that impossible.

Seriously. Why do things have to be so complicated?

“Mio, what’s going on? You look like your dog just died.” Yuya’s voice broke through my thoughts.

“Oh, sorry.”

Crap. I was in the middle of my shoot. I brushed aside my thoughts and refocused. It was weird; at first, I’d been a total fish out of water in front of the camera, but now, thanks to the great Yuya Takanashi’s guidance, I’d venture to say that I was almost comfortable. Though, I had to reiterate that this was thanks to the great Takanashi-sensei. If it weren’t for him, I was sure I’d still be floundering.

I somehow made it through my shoot, and after all the cameras and lighting fixtures had been put away, Yuya came up to me. “Mio, honey, you’re a natural.”

“I’m not sure about that,” I deflected.

“But I am,” he replied. “At first you were *here*.” He used his hand to gesture a line at about waist height. “But now you’re *here*.” He moved his hand up maybe an inch. “The speed at which you improve is nothing short of phenomenal!”

Really? Judging by how little your hand moved, it sure didn’t seem like it. “I always appreciate your bluntness,” I replied. “But I’m well aware I have a long way to go. Next time, I’ll be on a step even higher yet.”

“Cheeky girl. I know you’re good for it, though. It’s odd; this is typically when other girls begin to plateau.”

“Well, *I* can’t, because... No, never mind.”

The words, *because I have to save my sister*, clawed their way up my throat before I swallowed them back down and offered a bland smile instead. Yes. I was driven to improve like a soul possessed, but I was sure that went for all the other girls in this industry. To claim otherwise just to distinguish myself felt disingenuous, not to mention disrespectful of their efforts.

“Such unique sensibilities,” Yuya commented. “Oh, you never fail to captivate. It makes me wonder, from which couch cushion did Shizuki find you hiding under?”

I started to recount that our meeting had been nothing but a coincidence, yet I could only utter a single syllable. I had honestly thought for a time our meeting had been a random encounter. Now, I wasn’t so sure anymore.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” I stated with another bland smile, cutting the conversation short.

After saying goodbye to Yuya, I started to collect my things to head home when I noticed a new voicemail on my Sato phone number. It was from the doctor at the previous hospital where Shizuku was being treated. I quickly played the message and learned they had found some of Shizuku’s belongings in her old room and requested I retrieve them.

Seeing no reason not to, I left the studio and headed straight to the hospital, still dressed in my Sosei Academy uniform. It took some getting used to, wearing my uniform everywhere without the need to switch identities. But after having my identity unveiled in such a dramatic manner, I had better put that uniform to good use, right?

Upon arriving at the hospital, I checked in and approached the young nurse who had always cared for Shizuku. She appeared slightly cautious at first glance until recognition dawned on her, and then her expression warmed into a kind smile. “Is that you, Mio? My, don’t you look fancy. What brings you here today?”

“I just came by to pick up Shizuku’s belongings,” I answered.

“Oh? Did she forget something?” She flipped through her notebook. “Ah, this. Okay. Give me one second, I’ll be right back!”

I sat in the waiting area for a few moments before the doctor came out holding a small bag.

“Hello, doctor, it’s good to see you,” I said, standing up to greet him.

“It’s good to see you too. Keeping well these past few months?”

After exchanging pleasantries, he lifted the bag. “This is Shizuku’s. To thank you for coming all this way, I’d love to treat you to a drink,” he stated, pointing at the nearby vending machine.

I understood his intent for a word with me in private immediately. I smirked inwardly—I wasn’t sure if the old me would’ve caught on so quickly. “Of course. I’m sure you have lots of questions about Shizuku,” I responded.

He smiled at my recognition. “I hope I’m not being too presumptuous.”

“Not at all. You were her doctor for a long time.”

The hospital transfer had been pushed through rather quickly; it probably left him with more questions than answers. Needless to say, he didn’t know a single thing about the deal I made.

“What are you having?” he asked as we approached the vending machine.

“Orange juice, please.”

“Coming right up.”

The doctor fed a few coins into the machine. It whirred to life and dropped a paper cup before splashing it with orange juice. He handed the cup to me before he procured himself a cup of coffee. With our drinks in hand, we settled onto the adjacent bench. He waited for the mood to settle a bit before breaking the silence. “So, how’s Shizuku?”

“She’s doing well,” I replied. “Stable, at least, thankfully.”

He took a moment to absorb the news. “I see.”

I felt a twinge of guilt. *This is the doctor who had cared for Shizuki through countless challenging days*, I reminded myself. He deserved more than my guarded words. After a brief pause in which I contemplated my answer, I said, “She, um. She might make it in time to receive that experimental treatment after all.”

“Is that so?” he returned. “I thought that might’ve been the case.”

His insight caught me off guard—it didn’t seem like he was trying to trick me

into revealing that. “You did?” I asked, my voice spiking with surprise.

He shrugged gently. “The person who came by to handle the transfer paperwork clearly had ties to the zaibatsus. It’d just been a hunch, but...seeing you today, in that uniform, I thought maybe I could dare to hope.”

“I...I see.” The guilt intensified. “I apologize for keeping you in the dark.”

“Not at all. I’m relieved, in fact.” He tipped his head back and downed the rest of his coffee in one, long gulp. “In my line of work, good news can be rare. But hearing that Shizuku might have a chance...I’ll take that. I’ll take that any day of the week.”

Our conversation devolved into silence. After a moment, he stood and tossed his cup into the nearby trashcan. “It was good talking to you, Mio. Take care getting home.”

And that was the end of it. Watching him leave, I quickly downed my own cup. I was about to get up and throw it away when I felt a gentle tug on my sleeve. Startled, I whipped around to find a small girl next to me. *When did she get there?*

“Are you the doctor’s girlfriend?” she asked.

“Am I the...*what?*”

“The doctor’s girlfriend,” she repeated. Her eyes shone with innocence. Clearly, she meant nothing by this question... I hope?

“No, I’m not his girlfriend,” I replied. “We just, um, know each other.”

“Really?” the precocious young girl tilted her head in confusion. “What a coincidence. I know him too—he’s my doctor!”

“Oh? Is he?”

This was an inpatient ward. Looking at her, about as young as Shizuku was when she was admitted, my heart softened in sympathy.

No, no, no. What was I doing feeling sympathy for just any random girl in this hospital ward? Cases like Shizuku were rare. Not every kid here was suffering from a terminal disease like her. This girl would probably be in and out in a few days, never to be seen by me again. “Did you need me for something?” I asked.

“Oh!” she realized. “Could you help me? I had a question about my studies.”

“Like homework?”

“Sort of. Here.” She pulled out a book, which seemed to be a guide on understanding modern manners and etiquette written in an easily digestible comic book format.

Wait, manners and etiquette? This girl isn't some corporate heir, is she? No, if she were, she'd have protection; she wouldn't be out wandering by herself like this, would she?

But no, that was a poor metric. There was already one zaibatsu girl sitting on this bench without an escort, and it wasn't her.

At any rate, it seemed prudent that I find out for certain. My carelessness when it came to random encounters had already raised enough flags to last me a lifetime. “I could teach you—but first, would you mind telling me your name, young lady?”

Look at me. I'm learning!

“My name?” She paused for a moment. “It's Miu.”

“Miu?” I repeated.

“Yep, Miu!”

“I see. Very nice to meet you, Miu.”

Phew. For a second there I almost thought she might've been Nonoka's young friend. She definitely said Miu and not Miyu.

And also, *paranoid much, me?* Considering the number of hospitals in the city, the likelihood of little Miyu being at this particular hospital was already slim. And even if she were here, what were the odds that we would just happen to run into each other?

“And yours?” Miu said.

I snapped out of my thoughts. “My name? It's Mio.”

“Then you're big sister Mio! Nice to meet you!”

My heart melted. The way she said that just reminded me way too much of

Shizuku back then. Before I knew it, I was fired up. “Nice to meet you too! Now, what was your question? Ask your big sister anything!”

“Thanks! I was having trouble with this part here.” She gestured toward the open page.

“Let’s see, let’s see...” I scootched over to Mio so that the open book could rest evenly across our laps. The exercise she was stuck on was seating order when hailing a cab, something I’d just recently learned myself. The memory of the “animated” discussion Shizuki and I had during my lessons brought a wry smile to my face. “Seating order, huh? Which part is giving you trouble?”

“So, I understand how the seat right behind the driver is for the most important person. Then the seat *behind* the one next to the driver is for the second most important. The third important goes in the middle seat in the back, and the least important sits up front next to the driver.” She paused here.

“Exactly. That’s very good,” I praised. It was impressive for an elementary school student to have already grasped so much, but I could sense she was just building up to her question. “So? What’s the question?”

“I was just thinking that if it were me, I’d like to sit in the front seat, next to the driver. Because that’s the seat with the best view, isn’t it? So, why’s it the worst? And then, the third-best seat being in the middle at the back? What if the person sitting there was really big; wouldn’t it get really cramped?”

My eyes widened, then I nodded my approval. I’d asked the same question about the middle seat in the back to Shizuku, but that bit about the front seat was new to me. Leave it to a child to shake up your perspective in unique and imaginative ways. “So, the thing about this seating order is that it prioritizes passenger safety. The ‘best’ seat is just another way to say the *safest* seat in an accident. And by that logic, the front passenger seat is the most dangerous, which makes it the worst.”

She blinked at me. “Oh. I think that makes sense.”

“Yeah,” I replied with a smile. “But that doesn’t mean a super important person can’t ask to sit in the front just to see the view. It’s not so rigid as that.”

“Really?! Okay, okay... Then what about the seat in the middle?”

“Well, that’s only in the case that there are four passengers. If there are only three, it’s common for the last person to just sit up front.”

There was nothing wrong with a subordinate acting even more deferential, after all.

Ultimately, however, our lively discussion was purely theoretical. In the real world, things worked differently—or so Shizuki had taught me. “If it were me,” I began, “I would simply arrange for additional transportation.”

More cars. This was the simplest and most elegant way to avoid complications. And then if there had been some reason that everyone simply *had* to ride together, it could be in a more spacious car instead, like a limousine.

Hearing this special cheat strategy, Miu’s mouth dropped open. “Then...is everything in this book wrong?”

“Not at all,” I answered. “What I’m trying to say is that etiquette is not a set of strict rules one must follow. It’s a mindset of sorts—a way of thinking that always has you putting others first. If you get that, you won’t need to sweat over every little rule in some etiquette book.” I paused, looking at her to gauge her reaction. “Does that make sense so far?”

She brought a finger to her chin, hummed in thought for a moment, and then said: “Nope! Not at all!” and gave me an adorable, toothy smile.

“Perhaps I am jumping the gun a little bit,” I said. “But don’t worry. You’ll come to understand it.”

“You think so?”

“I think so. If that was the only question you had so far, then I’d say you’re firmly ahead of the pack. When I was your age, I didn’t even know what seating order meant. So yeah—you should be proud of yourself.”

Her face lit up. “Thanks, big sister Mio!”

With that, she took her book and hopped off the bench.

“Was that everything?” I asked.

“Yeah!” she nodded. “Oh. Did you say you were staying at this hospital?”

Her question was no doubt innocent, but I still hesitated for a second. “No, it wasn’t me, actually.”

Even if the secret about my identity was out, it still didn’t feel right to parade my sister’s business out in public like that.

At my vagueness, Mio’s face fell. “‘Wasn’t’? Are they... Are they okay?”

“Oh, no, no, no, nothing like that,” I quickly reassured her. “They just transferred hospitals is all.”

“Really?” she uttered, still a little gloomy.

I nodded.

“Okay. That’s good, then.” She paused. “Then I hope they can get better soon and leave the hospital far behind them!”

“Thanks, Miu. That means a lot. And I hope the same for you.”

At this, the young girl gave me one final smile full of childlike innocence and a quick “bye-bye, big sister Mio!” before she sprinted out of the waiting room door.

It had barely been two seconds before a nurse could be heard chiding someone for running in the halls.



AFTER apologizing to the nurse, the girl who had just left Mio’s side slowly walked back to her hospital room. There, she found a surprise waiting for her.

“Big sister Nonoka!” she shouted, her eyes glimmering with joy.

“Miyu, there you are. Where’d you go?”

Miyu giggled sheepishly. “I just went on a little walk.”

“Okay. As long as it was a *little* walk.” Nonoka paused. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine! Like always.”

Nonoka looked askance at her, but not all accusingly. “Reeaally?”

“Yeah!” Miyu shot back. Then her face lit up. “Oh, also! I did it! I did the thing that you taught me!”

“What thing?” Nonoka asked, a little confused.

“The thing where you said never to give my name out to strangers! So, when someone asked me for my name just now, I gave them a fake name! I said I was Miu!”

As Miyu stood there, her little chest puffed out in pride, the innocent little girl remained blissfully unaware of the looming consequences that her one small white lie could unleash.

And neither did Nonoka. She barely registered the implications of what Miyu had just said, preoccupied as she was with how to persuade Miyu to go through with the surgical procedure she needed.

ONE day in homeroom, Nonoka stood up in front of the class to give a proposal. “I’d like to ask all of you to join me in practicing for the upcoming Sports Day!”

The general students mostly responded positively, with nods and murmurs of agreement, while the Corporate students were markedly less enthusiastic—that is to say, they completely ignored Nonoka like she wasn’t even there.

This, of course, wasn’t an isolated display of social dichotomy at Sosei Academy, rather a microcosm of the whole—one battle in the ongoing war between the privileged and the masses.

But Nonoka, ever the protagonist, would not be content until she had utterly shattered the status quo. “Would the Corporate students also like to join us?” she added, calling us out explicitly.

One prickly lady took it upon herself to respond. “No thanks. What if I jam a finger?”

“A jammed finger?” Nonoka repeated with a frown.

Oh, no. I can just tell this girl is about to make a fool out of herself.

“But,” she began to say.

“Nonoka,” I interjected firmly, cutting her off before whatever version of, *you can’t be serious, it’s just a finger*, could escape her lips. “It’s your right to decide

how you feel about that day. But just as we respect your choice, we expect the same courtesy in return. You may not care, but Ms. Akane is a pianist.”

The aforementioned prickly girl, Akane, was deeply passionate about her art and performed in recitals from time to time. She refrained from physical activity because to her, a jammed finger was a very real and very serious injury. Nonoka could suggest that she partake in some less risky activity, but dismissing her very valid concerns as “just a finger” would’ve been utterly insensitive and a big misstep for the heroine to make.

Nonoka seemed to realize this right away. “I’m so sorry, I had no idea,” she quickly expressed, bowing in apology to Akane.

That seemed to utterly disarm Akane. She stammered back, “Well, now you do,” and turned her head away dismissively.

Phew. That was one hiccup averted. For once, I found myself grateful for Nonoka’s sharp perception—even though it was usually used to see right through my villainess guise to the schemes underneath. *Grumble, grumble.*

On second thought, I may have extinguished one fire by starting a bigger one. Nonoka was supposed to inspire and unite the class to perform their best for the event. That was how they originally won, and I just threw a wrench into that whole development. *Uh-oh.* As my eyes nervously wandered the room, searching for a way to get the plot back on track, they suddenly caught Rikka’s gaze. She gave me a knowing smile, then turned toward Nonoka.

“Ms. Nonoka, you don’t strike me as the athletic type, so I’m quite surprised to see you so gung-ho about Sports Day. Is there a reason for this, if you don’t mind sharing?”

Rikka! Oh! I can always count on you to understand me!

But wait... Huh?

She understood me? How?

Whatever. I brushed the thought from my mind. This was no time to question how Rikka knew what my intentions were. This was an opportune chance I was going to take.

Nonoka fidgeted, a flicker of apprehension crossing her face before she managed to speak, “I, um... I used to live in an orphanage.”

The classroom let out a collective gasp. Even the general students found this shocking, let alone the gentry who looked at Nonoka as if she had just professed she was from Mars. Rikka, however, seemed oddly composed. Or maybe she was frozen in shock? I cleared my throat pointedly at her to snap out of it.

“Pardon my surprise,” she stated. “I had no idea.”

“Yes,” Nonoka replied. “Though it wasn’t for very long.”

“I...I see,” Rikka uttered, still processing the revelation. It didn’t take her long to recompose herself.

I’d always thought of Rikka as cut from the same cloth as Shizuki—driven, rational, and unshakeable. Yet here she was, shaken. Then I realized: *Of course. Nobody could be completely equivalent to Shizuki.*

“I wasn’t there long,” Nonoka repeated, “but I connected deeply with a young girl. We became very close, almost like sisters.”

“Like sisters,” Rikka whispered.

At the same time, I noticed Ruki also react, his eyes drifting away. Were they both thinking of Ruri?

“She’s...She’s in the hospital now,” Nonoka added quietly.

Well, if there was one sentence guaranteed to secure Nonoka the support of two powerful allies without questions asked, that was it. I could only imagine the weight with which those words tugged at the Yukishiro cousins’ heartstrings. But if it were anything close to the anguish I’d felt when I first learned the news, then my heart went out to them.

Rikka seemed to struggle to find her words. “Is it...serious?” she finally asked weakly.

“The doctor said it’s a simple medical procedure,” Nonoka answered. “But at ten years old...”

“She’s afraid,” Rikka finished for her.

Nonoka hung her head. “Yes.”

There was a palpable shift in the atmosphere of the classroom, like an errant rain cloud had flown in and released a sudden deluge to soak the room in a gloomy, heavy air.

Cutting through the heavy silence, Ruki interjected. “What does all this have to do with our Sports Day?”

Nonoka took a deep breath before explaining: “It’s...a little complicated. You see, I always talk to her about this school, including our Sports Day. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, she promised me that if our class won, she would brave the operation.”

“I see,” Ruki articulated as he sniped a glance at me. Was he looking for an ally? Perhaps someone else with a sickly younger sister who understood the heartache he was experiencing?

If so, then yeah. I feel your pain.

I feel it—but I can’t show it.

As the enemy, displaying empathy for Nonoka was one of the last things I was allowed. I feigned indifference and pretended not to notice Ruki.

Nonoka continued to address the class, her eyes snapping open suddenly as she clasped her hands above her heart. “I’m aware this is my responsibility alone. There’s nothing in it for any of you; it’s selfish of me to even ask, but please—help me. I must get her the care she needs.”

With that, she bowed deeply and the room fell into silence. When she finally raised her head a moment later, her eyes seemed imbued with so much courage, so much strength—I was positive I wasn’t the only one captivated by them.

Ruki was the one to break the silence. “I’m down for a little practice. I can’t speak for all of us, but I had no intention of losing in the first place.”

Rikka jumped in right after. “When there’s a little sister involved, what more can you say?” she added with a smile.

With the two most influential voices giving support, the rest of the Corporate

students quickly fell in line. Excitement began to spread through the general students as well, and soon, the entire room was abuzz with energy.

Amidst the rowdiness, two voices—my underlings turned rivals turned underlings again—looked to me for guidance. “Ms. Mio. What are your thoughts?” Sayaka and Asuka asked.

I smiled as wickedly as I could. “Oh, am I supposed to care?”

As I said that, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Riku glowering at us. *Good.*

But then Asuka and Sayaka looked at each other, nodded—and said something truly unexpected. “So, this is what Rikka meant.”

Rikka? What did Rikka say? That I could be surprisingly merciless? I mean, yes, I am the villainess, so that isn't wrong.

I barely gave their words another thought for the rest of homeroom. The bell rang and I gathered to leave, but I barely made two steps when a voice arrested me.

“Ms. Mio,” came Riku’s voice, chasing after me in the hallway.

Without missing a beat, I flicked a lock of hair from my shoulders and smiled. “Yes?”

He held my gaze firmly. “You heard what Nonoka said. Will you not help her?”

“Help her? Now why in the world would I do that?” I asked back, presenting myself as the woman without a heart, utterly confused as to why I would help another when there was nothing in it for me.

His gaze narrowed. “Why do you keep playing the heel?”

“The heel? Whatever could you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.”

“You’re delusional.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

He paused. "So I am."

Hah. Flawless victory...

...my ass! What?! Even Riku figured out my ploy? How?! Seriously, why can't everyone just let me meet my doom as the antagonist in peace?!

Okay, maybe my approach here was flawed. Just *maybe*, intentionally playing up the villainess angle to stimulate Nonoka's growth made me look like a teensy-tiny bit of a tsundere. But this was fine. This was a temporary problem. If there was one axiom I believed in, it was that trust can take years to build, but seconds to destroy. I could be the tsundere now all I wanted—as long as I could be the bad guy at the very end. One, truly despicable act—that was all I'd need to reach that cathartic denouement and unite Nonoka with her love interests.

This was why I embraced those allegations—or tolerated them, I suppose. This incoherent, jumbled mess I got myself into was just for now. They could suspect me all they wanted. I just had to grin and bear it because the payoff would come. Not now, but it would.

I smiled wickedly once more. "Remind me again why I'm obligated to listen to anything that girl has to say?"

Riku fell into thought, then said, "Kibasen, was it?"

"That's the event I was drawn for, yes."

"You're just afraid you might lose in such a plebian sport, aren't you?"

What a thinly veiled provocation, I thought. But the original villainess would've fallen for something so blatant, wouldn't she have? *Well, isn't this a surprise? Seems like not everything is going against me.*

"Don't make me laugh. 'Losing' is not in a Sakurazaka's vocabulary."

A softball finally came my way. I'd be an idiot if I didn't take it. And thus, I rose to the challenge. With my pride as a Sakurazaka on the line, I would devote myself to Nonoka's cause (secretly, of course). As Riku stood slack-jawed, I shot him one final smirk before pivoting on my heel and walking away.

If only I had known at the time that there was even a fraction of a chance I wouldn't be able to back up my words.

ONE evening, the financial gala Rikka had mentioned took place in the grand ballroom of one of Japan's premier hotels—owned by the Yukishiro family. There I was, in attendance and scarcely believing it myself. I, an adopted member of the Sakurazaka family—a commoner just mere months ago—was not just in attendance at this gathering of the financial elite, but positively making an impression, actively mingling and introducing myself with my adoptive parents by my side.

“Everyone, meet Mio, our new daughter,” my father Shinya announced to yet another group of distinguished guests.

“Shizuki has taken quite a liking to her. We have as well, of course,” my mother Miyuki added with a casual smile.

It'd been like this for a while now, my parents lavishing praise upon me to everyone we met, trapping me in a seemingly endless cycle of introductions. In preparation for the event, I'd taken the time to study up on all the names and relations of everyone who would be in attendance, turning this affair into little more than a matching game.

After we finished our rounds, Miyuki pleasantly acknowledged my efforts. “Well done, Mio. That went about as smoothly as it could have.” I dipped my head slightly and thanked her, to which she let out an airy giggle. “You must be tired, with it being your first time and all. You're free to go now. While we continue mingling, why don't you relax and enjoy the party? Maybe chat with some of your academy friends.”

“Of course. But if it's all right with you, I think I'll go become a wallflower now,” I joked.

She laughed and gave me an approving look. “Then go, become the prettiest wallflower there is. Put the wallpaper to shame.”

With that, she gave me and my outfit a final once-over before disappearing into the crowd.

Put the wallpaper to shame, I turned the compliment over in my mind and wondered if I could truly do so. While my silk A-line gown, high-necked and

crimson with the shoulders bare, was quite the striking affair, it by no means stood out in the mosaic of equally attired guests and opulent hotel decor.

Still, it felt good to be complimented by my adoptive mother. With a light heart, I drifted over to the windows. Peering through the ceiling-to-floor panel of reinforced glass, I was offered an unobstructed view of the city below me.

It was a strange feeling to be observing the city from this lofty vantage. While I didn't exactly resent my past life, I certainly knew that juggling part-time jobs to support my sister would never have led me to this pinnacle. Honestly, how did I get here, towering over the city I called home, swathed in finery not for my own sake but for that of my sister? If someone had told me a few months ago that this would be my life, I would've laughed them out of the room.

Thank you, Shizuki, for giving me this chance.

I clenched a fist out in front of my heart, adding repayment of my debt to Shizuki as an addendum to my conviction to save Shizuku. *To fulfill my promises to both of them, I will become the villainess I signed on to be!*

With this vow made, I turned away from the window and was greeted by the sight of an unfamiliar girl standing before me. With her long, straight black hair and kimono, she almost resembled a Japanese doll come to life. There was only one girl in my mental Rolodex who matched the description: Mai Akizuki, daughter of zaibatsu number four.

She looked at me appraisingly. "Why, aren't you an unfamiliar face?"

I painted a quintessential lady-like smile over my face and curtsied. "Always a pleasure to meet a lady of the esteemed Akizuki family. My name is Mio. Mio Sakurazaka."

The rule in elite financial circles when it came to initial meetings was for the person of lower status to remain silent until spoken to. Mai here had violated that protocol, but no matter. The intention behind that rule was to avoid unnecessary trouble; I named myself right away to do just that and prevent Mai from incurring any further breaches of etiquette.

Mai, however, had other ideas. "Ah. So you're the..."

No doubt the word she'd bitten back was "adoptee." Clearly, someone didn't

think too highly of me.

On reflection, Rikka had warned me about them, hadn't she? I should've expected this attitude from zaibatsu number four. An adopted upstart like me would be the perfect outlet for their resentment at not being considered nearly as powerful as Sakurazaka or the other members of the big three.

Or so I thought when Mai's expression suddenly brightened. "A pleasure to meet you, Mio. My name is Mai. Mai Akizuki."

Just like that, she did away with the Ms. and addressed me by my first name. Maybe I would've accepted that level of chumminess if it came from Nonoka, but definitely not her. Was Nonoka special, or was Ms. Akizuki here plotting something unpleasant?

Fortunately, she would make that clear very soon. She brazenly looked me up and down, her gaze lingering unapologetically, then said as if she were the most perceptive girl in the room: "You're quite prim for an adoptee, aren't you? Color me surprised. Or perhaps I shouldn't be if the rumors are true—that you're a true, blue-blooded Sakurazaka." She nodded approvingly. "Yes, I think you shall be suitable."

I had a bad feeling about this. *Suitable? Suitable for what?*

"You shall make a fine match for my brother."

Her words hit me like a brick to the head—the abruptness, the rudeness, the sheer condescension was...impeccable. I almost preferred to think she said it merely to provoke a fight with me, but observing her earnest expression, I reluctantly had to accept she was being entirely serious.

Hm. Maybe this girl should've been the villainess.

It almost upset me how effortlessly she could say something so liable to incite loathing, while I was over here, fighting for my life to maintain my image. Jokes aside, I knew Shizuki picked me to be the villainess for a reason. As she once explained, she needed someone who would feel guilt yet not be crushed by it—a person of strong will and stronger moral compass, which this girl clearly lacked, but damn if she didn't serve as a fascinating case study.

Pulled back from my reflections by a subtle change in the atmosphere, I

noticed Mai's sunny demeanor had shifted abruptly into a frown. "Hey. I'm offering you the chance of a lifetime; the least you could do is say something."

"Pardon me," I said. "I was just digesting your most...sudden proposal. Would you mind explaining why you seek such a union?"

"Goodness me, I have to explain even that?"

This was the first time since my ascension to high society feeling so lost in a conversation. Did all my interactions with intelligent, discerning people these past few months skew my perspective? Was I the one who was out of touch here? Without giving a verbal response, I tightened up my smile, urging her to explain.

"Fine," she expressed with a sigh, "allow me to spell it out for you. Marry my brother, and you bring Akizuki and Sakurazaka together. That way, we can finally get the upper hand over those pesky Tsukinomiyas."

"So, in other words, you envision our marriage as a stepping stone to foster more business ties, allowing for a seamless integration of both families into a single powerful entity, ultimately positioning ourselves as a rival to Tsukinomiya?" I clarified.

She turned her face up and looked down at me. "That's what I said, isn't it? Glad you've finally caught up."

I would've "caught up" quicker had you said all that from the beginning.

Also, your plan is full of holes.

"Sorry, but I'm afraid I find myself unable to accept," I disclosed.

She looked stupefied. "You're rejecting my offer? An adopted daughter of a branch family, turning down the Akizukis? You'll regret this!"

I...was a little stupefied myself. This girl was making Sayaka and Asuka look like tactical geniuses in comparison. I almost wondered if this was the way to make Nonoka hate me, by constantly irritating her with flawed arguments.

Oops, I got lost in my thoughts and ignored her again, making her even more displeased. Better end this conversation quick. "I was merely stating that it is not my place to be entertaining offers of my own marriage. Moreover, I can't

help but wonder if a union with an ‘adopted daughter of a branch family’—as you so eloquently put it—can truly give you the leverage you desire.”

Of course it wouldn’t be able to. A marriage arranged as a symbol of cooperation between the two families, I could understand. But the other way around, the idea of a marriage arranged to *enable* cooperation, just seemed like an utter crapshoot.

Mai took a second to digest my words before she turned bright red, as if she truly hadn’t considered this as a potential issue at all.

Crap, now I’ve done it.

I’d gotten so used to the nuanced exchanges and hidden agendas in most conversations that I’d replied to Mai with the same assertive clarity I would use with someone like Shizuki or Rikka to uncover their underlying intentions. The result was a complete loss of face for Mai—not what I set out to do. Now that it happened, what should I do? Simply apologize for my bluntness and move on?

“Mai, what’s going on here?”

A new, male voice interrupted us suddenly. I turned to see a young man, visibly older, striding toward us. It definitely appeared to be Kaito Akizuki, her older brother. He gave me a quick, assessing glance as he neared, to which I replied with a subtle nod. Coming to a halt in front of us, he acknowledged my nod—then unexpectedly thumped his sister lightly on the head.

“Ow!” Mai cried. “What was that for, brother?”

“Why don’t you tell me, Mai? Why did I hear my name and ‘marriage’ come up in the same sentence just now?”

“That was... That was just small talk!” Mai exclaimed, snubbing him with an indignant head turn.

Their exchange seemed more playful than confrontational, suggesting a strong relationship beneath the surface. The brother heaved a weary sigh at his sister’s antics before he turned to address me. “Ms. Mio, a pleasure. I am Kaito Akizuki, the older brother of that moody little miss over there. If Mai has said anything out of line, please know she means well. Still, I offer my apologies on her behalf.”

“Not at all,” I quickly said. “As Ms. Mai said, we were just chatting.”

By indirectly stating I had no intention of censuring Mai further, I hoped to bring this matter to an end.

The brother then—I suppose I really should call him *Kaito* at this point—narrowed his eyes appraisingly. “Clearly, this isn’t your first rodeo. Very well met, newest addition to the Sakurazaka clan.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “I heard it was Ms. Shizuki who vouched for your adoption. Is that true?”

“Indeed, it is,” I answered.

He hummed appreciatively. “Then we will have to keep an eye out for what she has planned, won’t we?”

I said nothing, revealed nothing on my face. I wasn’t faking it; I truly didn’t know enough about her plans to reveal anything in the first place.

Realizing he wouldn’t be getting anything from me, Kaito chuckled quietly. “No matter. Whatever schemes she’s concocting, they’re of inconsequence to us. We Akizukis are a cornerstone of the big four. Don’t expect that we’ll be content playing second fiddle forever.”

I smiled back at him. “I appreciate the advice.”

Our random encounter that night ended with a bland exchange of smiles.

DO villainesses seem like the kind of people who try very hard? In my mind, no. In fact, I’d even go as far as to say that lack of effort is non-negotiable to their character. I mean, how many stories do you read where the antagonist who gets kicked to the curb is someone who tirelessly strives to excel in everything?

But I wasn’t *a* villainess. I was hired to *be* the villainess. Every day, my job was to keep the narrative flowing smoothly toward my inevitable downfall—and trust me, that was no easy task.

As the saying goes, there ain’t no rest for the wicked. So, on a beautiful weekend afternoon, I had invited Sayaka and Asuka to my home. Shortly after

Shannon announced their arrival, I made my way to the entrance hall to welcome them. I found them awaiting, slightly awkward in their surroundings.

“Welcome, girls,” I greeted.

Two graceful smiles greeted me in response. “Ms. Mio.”

They both wore charming, flowing dresses, seemingly in sync for the occasion. Standing together, they looked particularly striking, even outshining me in my casual-yet-stylish rich girl room wear.

It dawned on me again that these girls in front of me were not some one-dimensional NPC lackeys from a video game, but two fully realized individuals—main characters of their own stories. They had made mistakes, yet they embraced the opportunity to evolve instead of stagnating toward their doom—a choice I celebrated. Internally, that is.

I brushed a lock of hair from my shoulder. “Are you girls going to stand there all day? Now, come in, we have work to do.”

With a swift turn on my heel, I beckoned for them to follow as I strode toward one of our parlors. I had reserved the room for the day, notable for its expansive window that provided a breathtaking view of the central courtyard from wall to wall. We settled around the coffee table near the window, each of us taking a cookie as the tea was served. Once we were comfortable, I began to outline the day’s agenda.

“I’ve summoned you both here to practice for the kibasen,” I announced. “Don’t worry, I’ve arranged a change of clothes for you both.”

“What?” they both uttered, teacups halted in midair.

Well, I’d be surprised too if I was invited to a classmate’s house without knowing the purpose, only to find out we would be doing what said classmate explicitly said she wouldn’t be doing—that is, helping Nonoka.

“We brought our gym clothes, actually,” Sayaka admitted.

“Tracksuit and everything,” Asuka added.

Or...not surprised?

I was the one to mutter a confused, “What?” this time. “Wait, why? I’m

certain I didn't mention anything about this beforehand?"

"You didn't," Asuka clarified, "but we guessed that was what you might've had in mind."

Sayaka nodded her agreement.

Strange... I could see how Nonoka or Rikka might still believe in my better nature, but these two? After everything I had done to them? And then undone, slightly—but even now? Surely, they couldn't still think well of me...could they?

Observing my puzzled expression, Sayaka clapped her hands together and exclaimed, "Ah! Of course, we know you're not doing this for Ms. Nonoka's sake. You want to win purely to uphold your pride as a Sakurazaka."

"Y-Yes, that's exactly right..."

Even stranger, the excuse I'd come up with beforehand came straight out of one of their mouths and not mine. Well, that was convenient and totally fine.

Something was clearly amiss. Yet, there I was, swimming in denial. From a purely objective standpoint, I really failed to see how they could regard me as anything but antagonistic. Sure, I'd "rescued" Nonoka from their clutches, but my subsequent actions should've spoken louder—publicly scorning Nonoka on multiple occasions, mocking her in front of everyone during PE, and that wasn't even mentioning the recent debacle with these two. If I were on the receiving end of such behavior, I'd label the perpetrator as nothing short of cruel. So, why did it seem like they saw me differently? I wanted nothing more than to ask them outright how they viewed me but feared that if they answered anything but "vindictive bitch," I would never recover.

Yeah, you know what? I'm just going to pretend that they don't suspect a thing and that everything is fine for the sake of my own sanity. I'm just going to be a good little background villainess for the rest of the arc and let sleeping dogs lie. After that, then... Yeah. As I said, trust can always be shattered.

With my mind made up to not dwell too hard on present situations, I enjoyed a leisurely little tea break with my new friends. We then donned our gym attire and made our way to the courtyard.

"By the way, was Ms. Rikka not invited?" Sayaka asked en route.

“Are we practicing with just the three of us?” Asuka added.

I flashed them a villainous grin. “A standin will replace her for today’s session. We can’t let a Yukishiro catch me breaking a sweat, can we? Oh, and to that end, I must ask for your cooperation in keeping these practices our little secret.”

People love to feel special. Hopefully, hinting at the exclusivity of our little circle would buy their silence and prevent them from spreading any rumors painting me as sincere and diligent. And indeed, their faces brightened as they quickly agreed. Perfect.

With that matter settled, my thoughts turned to the specifics of who might be helping us, or how we would even practice for the kibasen in the first place. I had delegated the organization of this session to Shannon, who managed everything without my input. Therefore, I wasn’t exactly sure what she had planned. I knew she couldn’t be involved directly, given her need to remain incognito at school. The only other person our age I could think of who might be of help was Shizuki, but that was out of the question.

As we stood in the courtyard, awaiting the start of our mysterious practice, a voice—familiar yet noticeably deeper—called out from behind us. Trying to place the voice, I spun around—and promptly almost choked on my own spit. Standing there was a strikingly handsome, blond young man.

Shannon. It was Shannon dressed like a guy for some reason.

I dashed right up to her and hissed in her ear, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Protecting my identity as your servant,” she replied nonchalantly.

“I get that, but *cross-dressing?!?*”

“They won’t suspect a thing, trust me.”

Shannon squared her shoulders and puffed out her chest. Where there used to be undulating hills and valleys, there were now tracts of flat, arable land. Her transformation was undeniably impressive, but her boobs had been the least of my concerns. “These are two, *sheltered* ladies. You expect them to get physical with a guy they don’t know?”

“That won’t be an issue,” she dismissed.

“How will that not be an issue? That is like, *the* issue! Hey, are you even listening to me?!”

Shannon walked straight past me and to the girls. “Miladies, a pleasure. My name is Shion. I am Lady Mio’s butler, at your devoted service.”

“M-My,” Asuka stammered back, clearly flustered. “How do you do? My name is—”

“The illustrious Lady Asuka, correct?” Shannon interjected smoothly, then turned to Sayaka. “And you must be the exquisite Lady Sayaka.”

“You know of us?” Sayaka asked with a head tilt.

“Indeed, how could I not?” Shannon crooned. “Lady Asuka, the very essence of spontaneity and radiant allure, and Lady Sayaka, the epitome of delicacy and refined grace. Lady Mio’s descriptions do not do miladies justice.”

“The epitome of...” Sayaka trailed off in embarrassment. “Y-You flatter me...”

My jaw fell open. Sayaka blushed furiously, while next to her Asuka wouldn’t stop writhing.

But Shannon, unfazed, continued her “charismatic” onslaught. “Today, I have the honor of assisting you lovely ladies in your endeavors. But I fear that my presence, being that of a gentleman, might impose upon your comfort.”

The two sheltered princesses, clearly unaccustomed to such interactions with an (apparent) member of the opposite sex, exchanged nervous glances, unsure how to decline the close proximity of this charming enigma.

Shannon noticed their hesitation and turned away, her expression turning wistfully somber. “Alas, to think that my presence would be so unwanted.”

Distress immediately flashed across their faces. “No, no, not at all!” they blurted out in unison.

Girls?

I watched from the sidelines, bewildered by the unfolding scene. The pair, usually so composed, were now flustered as they beckoned Shannon eagerly.

“Please, join us for practice!” the two insisted like a couple of fans chasing after their favorite idol.

How was this even happening? Did they really just not have any immunity built up against men that even Shannon’s cheesy theatrics worked to cut through them like a hot knife through butter? You know what? Maybe this was a good thing. Maybe it was good that Shannon got to them before some other, actual unsavory character did—a harmless inoculation devoid of any real consequence. I just hoped that this first encounter wouldn’t affect their future... tastes in men. Few men are as pretty as a woman dressed like one, after all.

Oh, well. They say one’s first crush is bittersweet. I wouldn’t know, though.

“Okay,” I proclaimed. “Now that we’re all acquainted, let’s begin, shall we?”

At my word, Shannon snapped her fingers. Immediately, the ground began to rumble—a series of discrete, slight movements magnified to create a powerful wave, causing the earth beneath us to shudder. Simultaneously, a dense cloud of dust raced toward us from the distant far end of the courtyard, growing larger with each passing second.

“Wh-What is happening?!” A disconcerted Sayaka exclaimed.

“Nothing to worry about,” Shannon reassured with a gallant smile. “I’ve simply summoned our help for today.” Not one but several groups of girls emerged from the swirling dust—all already in kibasen formation. Each cluster consisted of four girls, three of whom acted as horses and carried the fourth “rider” member. “Please give a warm welcome to these college athletes who have graciously agreed to assist us,” Shannon stated, gesturing toward the crowd. “One cannot truly master the kibasen without a proper ensemble of allies and adversaries, after all.”

Sayaka and Asuka couldn’t hide their surprise. “This is...quite the elaborate setup for a school Sports Day.”

“Did you expect anything less? Victory at all costs—that is the Sakurazaka way,” I replied with a smug smirk.

But internally, I was just as shell-shocked as they were. To be honest, I hadn’t even considered arranging an entire mock kibasen battle to be an option—or if

it was even feasible. But that was on me for continuing to think of money as some sort of scarce resource for the Sakurazakas. I should've learned after the first, or second, or third time this had happened. *Victory at all costs, indeed.*

With another dismissive flick of my hair that was my calling card at this point, I switched into villainess mode.

Now then, let's get to villainessin'.

Just kidding.

We dove straight into scrimmages. As I had practiced diligently in preparation for today (I couldn't be caught lacking, not even in practice), I hit the ground running. Sayaka and Asuka, on the other hand, were new to their role as horses and floundered initially. Under Shannon's expert guidance, though, they adapted remarkably quickly. After just a few games, we began to hold our own. Despite their pampered backgrounds, which gave them a very obvious lack of stamina, they displayed unexpected agility and coordination. But then again, these were the villainess's underlings we were talking about, so it probably shouldn't have surprised me that they possessed latent athletic prowess. What did surprise me, though, was the way they approached each and every scrimmage. The fire in their eyes never died out, as if they were desperate to prove themselves, desperate to attract even a fleeting glance from a certain... man...who was actually a woman...

Huh.

As the sun set and we wrapped up a long day of practice, a certain thought struck me.

If we had college girls to help out with practice, couldn't one of them just have joined our team?

Surely Shannon didn't cross-dress just because she wanted to...right?



MAINTAINING the facade of a prim and proper lady at the academy on weekdays, practicing hard for the kibasen at home on weekends—this routine continued for several weeks until the early days of summer arrived in all its humid and oppressive glory.

Because I had to feign disinterest in Sports Day at school, our kibasen team hadn't yet practiced with the full squad. However, I wasn't too concerned. Rikka was quite the athlete, and the school had a full practice day scheduled before the actual event where we could iron out any minor issues.

If you were wondering how I knew about Rikka's athletic tendencies, it was all thanks to the handy little app on my phone, courtesy of Lady Shizuki and the Sakurazaka Group. It was a treasure trove of information, a toolkit for any self-respecting villainess, and I referred to it frequently to learn more about my fellow students. The data in those student dossiers was vetted and reliable, provided by the Sakurazaka Group's very own intelligence division.

According to the app, the competition at Sosei Academy was fierce, with plenty of students on athletic scholarships and those naturally gifted in sports. Our class, however, was the main stage where a video game took place, so it naturally brimmed with main-character types and ensured we were no underdogs. At the same time, we weren't leagues ahead of everyone else either, making the outcome of the day hinge on a single, pivotal event like the kibasen.

In other words, if my team and I performed well, we stood a chance to clinch the overall victory. It honestly seemed like a straight shot, unlike my last mission. But I still didn't let down my guard.

And so, Sports Day finally dawned upon us. We changed into our gym clothes first thing in the morning, gathered for a team huddle where Ruki gave a rousing speech, and then we were off. As a minor character, my role was limited. I swiftly won my first event, the short-distance sprint, and then had nothing until the kibasen, the grand finale of the day.

I was cooling off in the spectator stands, fanning myself with a folding fan in one hand, when Sayaka approached, looking visibly shaken.

"Ms. Sayaka, you seem rather upset," I noticed.

“Ms. Mio, it’s a little...” she trailed off.

Private? I wondered. Taking this as a hint she’d like to speak to me somewhere that wasn’t teeming with classmates, I said, “The heat is getting to me; I think I’d like a drink.”

She blinked. “Oh. Of course. What would you like?”

“No, no,” I corrected, “perhaps I’d like to see what options are available myself.”

Realization finally dawned in her eyes. “Ah. Then allow me to join you.”

We left the stands and grounds behind and wandered into a deserted hallway. There, I asked her again to share what was wrong.

“It’s Asuka,” she admitted. “We need to find a substitute for her. She...won’t be able to make it to school day.”

“Now that you mention it, where has that girl been today?”

Was she feeling unwell? I thought briefly before Sayaka’s grim expression dispelled that innocent notion.

“Sayaka?” I demanded, concerned. “Tell me what’s happening.”

“I... I can’t,” she said, dropping her face away from me.

Ugh, we are getting nowhere. I didn’t want to play hardball, but I had no choice.

I brushed away a lock of hair. “I wasn’t asking, Sayaka.”

“Asuka explicitly told me not to trouble you,” she replied.

“Because she believes herself so wise as to know what will trouble me and what won’t? Tell me, or else I’ll have to look into it myself. And believe me when I say *that* will be trouble.”

I was afraid I might be scaring Sayaka to subject her to the same version of me as the one that cornered her a few weeks ago, but to my surprise, actually smiled. “Thank you, Ms. Mio. I knew you would say that.”

It all clicked. Asuka herself didn’t want me to know, but Sayaka thought differently—she purposefully goaded me into threatening her so she’d have an

excuse to break her promise. In that case, I need only play along. “Out with it, girl. And don’t you even think of omitting even a single detail.”

“You’re relentless,” she said in mock distress. “Fine, but only because I have no choice.” Then, she turned serious. “The truth is, Asuka has gone to meet a potential suitor.”

“A potential suitor? Is she getting engaged?”

In the original story, Asuka was not late or absent for the kibasen, nor was she supposed to be meeting potential suitors—she was one of the villainess’s underlings for crying out loud. No doubt this meant that I had somehow caused the plot to veer off course once again. Then a more pertinent question struck me:

“Did she want this?”

Sayaka’s smile turned strained. “No. It’s her parents who are behind this—and the Akizuki’s. As you know, her family’s company desperately needs help.”

“It’s an arranged marriage, then.”

Arranged marriages were not an uncommon practice—at least, for the elite. The zaibatsus required a way to consolidate and maintain control, so in their current undissolved incarnation, they kept the practice alive. It wouldn’t have surprised me if Asuka were to be married off sooner or later, but...

“The Akizuki’s are behind this?” I echoed.

“Apparently, yes,” Sayaka confirmed.

“I see.”

I’d met the brother-sister pair just the other day and now this happened? It seemed a little too timely to be pure coincidence. Our meeting might have been brief and cordial on the surface, but who was to say it didn’t nudge things just a tiny bit off course? There was a high likelihood this was my fault—my fault that Asuka might be trapped in an unwanted marriage for the rest of her life.

My face hardened with resolve. “Sayaka, excuse me for a moment.”

Hers brightened with the slightest hint of hope. “Of course.”

I left for the locker room, took my phone from my bag, and immediately dialed Shizuki. A few rings later, she picked up.

“I have a favor to ask,” I said.

Shizuki didn’t miss a beat. “Go on,” she replied simply.

I explained everything—about Asuka’s arranged marriage, my unplanned encounter with the Akizukis, and the potential link between the two happenings.

“I see,” came her voice. “You were right to inform me. This is all quite unexpected. So? What’s the favor?”

“I would like you to stop this engagement from going ahead.”

Silence on the other end.

“Shizuki?”

Another moment of silence. “Mio, I won’t be stopping this—you are.”

I blanked. “Me? Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not even in the same country as Asuka at the moment.”

“I...I know *that*, but...” Shizuki was taking the opportunity before her term abroad started to do a little bit of globe-trotting.

“Mio, listen to me carefully. A matchmaking meeting must be stopped in person, preferably by someone with sufficient status. I’m out of the country, we can’t trouble father and mother over such matters, which leaves...”

“Me? But I don’t understand. It’s not like they’re getting engaged today and married tomorrow, we still have plenty of time before—”

“Mio.” The firmness in her voice stopped me in my tracks. “You’re not listening. I said meeting, not marriage nor engagement.”

“I... Right, you did. Okay, but my point still stands: it’s not like we have to do something *today*.”

“We don’t have to do something today,” she replied in a bit of a mocking tone. “That’s why you called me in a dither asking me for a favor? Because there’s no immediate need to do anything?”

“That is, um...”

Shizuki was completely right. A typical arranged marriage might be able to be canceled without much fuss, but there were considerable financial stakes and political maneuvers at play here. The marriage was merely a conspicuous emblem of the dealings beneath the surface. If the Azumajis, who stood to gain the most from this alliance, were to call it off without a solid justification, they would lose far more than mere social standing.

“Okay. Sorry, I understand what’s at stake now, but I still can’t step away.”

“Indeed, you have a team to lead to victory. But remember that the meeting is in the early afternoon, and it takes just under two hours to get there from the academy. You’ll make it if you hurry.”

“I... Right.” Even factoring in the two-hour return journey, I *should* return in time for the kibasen, the final event of the day. “Okay, understood. Then I’m heading out now. Fill me in on the plan through the app.”

“Will do. The car’s already been dispatched as well.”

I thanked her and was about to end the call when Shizuki’s voice halted me. Quickly, I raised the phone back to my ear.

“This is *your* mission, Mio. See it through.”

I paused, then smiled. “I will.”

This time, I ended the call and sprinted out of the locker room still in my gym clothes.

Well, so much for being a background character, I thought wryly. It’s time to thwart this arranged marriage and put a stop to the Akizuki’s disruptive schemes.

Now then, let’s get to villainessin’.



Episode Three

IN the limousine, I changed out of my gym clothes and into the dress that had been prepared and waiting for me. After quickly fixing my hair and makeup, I pulled out my phone to see if my villainess app had any updates. Sure enough, there was an updated mission titled “Stop Asuka’s Matchmaking Meeting.”

My heart swelled a little. “Thanks, Shizuki,” I muttered under my breath.

She didn’t have to do this. This little side quest was irrelevant to Nonoka; Shizuki could’ve easily deemed it unnecessary and told me to focus on the task at hand, but she hadn’t. She did this—for me.

As I passed my eyes over the mission details, a soft incredulity slowly took root. “Shizuki... *This* is your plan?”

It was *tight*. If even one element of the negotiations didn’t go according to plan, I wouldn’t make it back in time for the kibasen. It almost seemed reckless, like an idea thrown together without much thought, but then I reached the end of the page.

I see. So, this is how you’re going to do it.

On the car ride over, I drilled the plan into my brain—every line, every detail. Two hours later, we arrived at the hotel lobby designated as the meeting site. My accompanying maid and I strode purposefully through the posh space. “We’re meeting with Asuka’s mother first,” I told her. “Before that, we have to find out which room the meeting is—” Just then, a familiar cascade of jet-black hair caught my attention. “Never mind.”

Slipping into a sly smile, I approached Asuka. “Ah, Asuka, so this is where you’ve been hiding instead of gracing our school’s most important Sports Day with your presence.”

She whipped around and her eyes stretched wide. “Ms. Mio? What are you... I, um...”

She floundered, not knowing how much I knew. To spare her, I stated briefly, “Sayaka told me the gist of it.”

Upon hearing that her best friend sold her out, her expression knitted in displeasure. “Did she now?” It then softened, realizing her friend’s concern, before finally hardening with resolve. “Ms. Mio, I apologize for not informing you beforehand, but I cannot apologize for my actions. This is an Azumaji family matter. I must kindly ask you to refrain from getting involved.”

The unwavering resolve in her eyes, that willingness to sacrifice everything for something dear, was all too familiar, for it was the same resolve I saw staring back at me in the mirror each morning when I thought of Shizuku.

Who knew this lowly minion of the villainess had so many layers to her? I thought dryly. Once again, it struck me that while this world was based on a game, it was not tidy, convenient, or two-dimensional like one.

With a dismissive brush of my hair, I let out a long sigh. “I’d been prepared to persuade you to not do something as hopelessly naive as sacrifice yourself for your family’s sake, but it seems I’ve underestimated you.”

Asuka smiled weakly. “Thank you for understanding.”

“Oh, I do understand, all too well. And that’s exactly why you must call off this marriage—for your family’s true benefit.”

“Wait, what?!”

Before I could get in another word explaining the plan, a new voice interrupted our conversation. “Asuka, there you are.”

“Mother,” Asuka muttered bleakly.

The older lady, evidently Asuka’s mother, gave me a look before turning to her daughter. “Asuka,” she began, “are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“I do,” Asuka replied immediately. “This is my duty as an Azumaji.” Her eyes fell away and found mine sheepishly. “Not to mention my fault, as well, after what happened.”

Wait... Huh? Don't tell me Asuka's hastily arranged marriage is because she

lost her standing confronting...me?

Asuka's mother's attention returned to me. "And who is this young lady, Asuka?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Mother, this is—"

I snapped out of my thoughts and stepped forward, interrupting Asuka. "Mio Sakurazaka, a pleasure."

Surprise washed over her. "S-Sakurazaka?! Forgive my ignorance, Lady Mio." Realization then took place on her face. "Lady...Mio? But that would make you..." Her gaze darted between me and Asuka. "Asuka, what is the meaning of this?" she asked, her voice full of confusion.

"Well, you see..." Asuka trailed off as she looked to me for help.

I nodded and gladly filled in the blanks for her. "Indeed, Mrs. Azumaji. Your daughter and I have once clashed, but that is all in the past now. We've made amends, and she is now a valued friend of mine."

The mother looked disbelieving. She turned to Asuka. "Is...Is that true?"

"It...It is," Asuka replied. "As Ms. Mio has so graciously said, we are now...*friends*."

Understanding took a moment to settle in. Then the mother gasped and turned to face me completely. "Please accept my apologies for the delayed introduction. I am Asuka's mother, Ayame Azumaji. A pleasure to meet a friend of my beloved daughter."

"Not at all," I reassured her. "It must've come as quite a shock to you."

Ayame's slight reaction to my words didn't go unnoticed. By accepting her apology instead of brushing it off or overlooking it, I asserted my intention to hold my status as a Sakurazaka over her. It seemed as farcical to me as it would to anyone else to pretend that an adopted commoner like me was superior, but this pretense was vital for my plan. For Asuka's sake—for my next line to land with the impact I needed it to—I had to project and maintain my arrogance.

I slid into an innocuous smile. "An arranged marriage, in this day and age? How quaint. You must hold your family's interests in the highest regard to so

readily barter away your ‘beloved’ daughter.”

My words were vitriolic, spiteful, but necessary. This was my litmus test for Ayame. Should she speak up and endorse her daughter’s obligation to family without hesitation, I’d be forced to adopt more drastic measures. Yet, something told me it wouldn’t come to that. After all, her initial reaction upon seeing her daughter had been a hesitant, *are you sure you want to go through with this?*

That line led me to believe that Ayame held her daughter dear, and her subsequent silence seemed to confirm my suspicions. Clearly, she wanted to vehemently deny my insinuations of her indifference, to defend her love for her daughter, but she was paralyzed—unable to refute when it was Asuka herself who had suggested the marriage.

Caught in a struggle between her reluctance to release her daughter and her respect for Asuka’s wishes, Ayame’s silence resonated deeply with me. It, and the grief-torn expression etched on her face was an uncomfortably close reflection of the one my mother had worn during the talks of my adoption. Call it a feeling, a hunch, something even more instinctual than that...but I just knew somehow that Ayame and Asuka were just like me and my mom.

The plan was unfolding without a hitch. Here, I reached for my phone and dialed a certain number. One ring later, *he* picked up.

“Hello, this is Mio. Mio Sakurazaka. You’ve heard, yes?” I spoke to the man on the other end of the line.

“I have,” he replied. “You’re not playing games with us, are you?”

“Perish the thought. Now do you accept or refuse?”

“I accept. Of course, I accept.”

“Good. Hold on, I have someone else here you should speak to.” I held out my phone toward Ayame.

“What’s going on? Who is that?” she asked.

“Why don’t you find out for yourself?” I pushed the phone into her hand, and she hesitantly brought it up to her ear.

“Hello? Who is— Honey, is that you?! I...I am, but— What?!”

Indeed, the voice on the other end of the line was none other than the Azumaji company president—her husband. Ayame, caught off guard, couldn’t hide her surprise, which only intensified as the call progressed. As the spouses conversed about specifics, I grabbed Asuka’s hand. “I trust you brought your gym clothes with you?”

“My gym clothes? Why would I?” she replied in disbelief.

“Well, you’d best procure them quickly, because you’ll be competing in the kibasen in a few hours.”

“I don’t think I am, I’m—”

“Meeting your future husband? You needn’t worry about that any longer.”

Her expression grew guarded. “Ms. Mio? What did you do?”

“Oh, nothing, just extended a generous line of credit to your father’s company. On the condition that this little matchmaking session be called off, of course.”

“Excuse me?” *You did what now?* her expression screamed.

Offered your father’s company a generous line of credit, I wanted to repeat dryly but held my tongue. I’d been just as surprised when I read this was Shizuki’s plan. The amount she offered them was a mystery to me, but I wouldn’t be shocked if it were nearing the hundred million mark.

It was an interesting question, actually—what was the cost of stopping a marriage like this one? Since the engagement was merely a facade for the business dealings behind it, the cost to prevent it would undoubtedly need to match, if not exceed, the potential financial loss from disrupting those transactions. That was a bill Shizuki ostensibly took for my sake. Perhaps that wasn’t the best way to frame it. More accurately, she was investing additional funds to secure her stake in me, her designated villainess. Either way, the weight of this responsibility rested heavily on my shoulders.

Hah. As if the stakes could get any higher. If I fail here, my sister dies. Everything else paled in comparison.

As my thoughts rambled on, Ayame's call seemed to be nearing its end. "Okay. Okay. Then I'll do that. Thank you." With that, she hung up and handed my phone back to me.

"I take it everything is settled?" I asked.

"Yes, thank you," she replied. "My husband sends his regards. To both you and Lady Shizuki."

"I shall be sure to pass that on," I promised.

That was everything on the Azumaji side concluded. Now, to deal with the other half. As I turned to go find the would've-been fiancée, Ayame called out to me once more.

"Lady Mio, I have one question, if I may."

"If it's short," I replied curtly.

"Thank you. I just would like to know, *why* have you decided to help us? My daughter caused you no small offense, and yet..."

A hint of wariness crossed her features. No, not a hint, full-blown concern written all over her face. Her daughter's former antagonist now swooping in to bail her out must've set off a couple of alarm bells—the hidden cost of things, a catch they might've failed to consider.

I fell into thought for a moment, then looked at Asuka, who was observing quietly from the sidelines. "Yes, your daughter made a mistake. But she had the fortitude to admit that mistake and sought my forgiveness with a sincerity I might even describe as admirable. I've taken a liking to her. That's all there is to it."

"That's all there is to a several hundred-million-yen cash injection with no strings attached?"

"I fail to see the point you're trying to make."

But internally, I was just as surprised as her. Several hundred million yen. Once again, I was off by an order of magnitude. *When will I stop underestimating Shizuki, I wonder?*

With that thought, I left Asuka and her mother behind, making my way

toward the front desk. Who do I find there but the Akizuki heir, Kaito, like he was waiting for me? *I'd heard it was a collateral relative Asuka was set to marry, but I suppose Kaito wanted to come see things through.*

His brow furrowed as he saw me approach. "You? What are you..." Realization dawned on his face. "You came to stop the engagement, didn't you?"

"How astute of you," I replied. "I've just talked to Asuka's mother, and the whole thing's off. I was just on my way out."

His brow twitched, but besides that, he gave nothing else away. Then, in a deeper, more amused tone, he said, "You consider us—" he stopped short and shook his head. "No, *Sakurazaka* considers us a threat, don't they?"

Truth be told, they didn't. Shizuki had told me she couldn't care less about whatever maneuvers Akizuki made. I was tempted to snap back with something biting, suggesting that Sakurazaka regarded Akizuki as mere ants, but that approach seemed...a little too off the mark.

You see, Shizuki had said that the game's happy ending involves the heroine bringing Japan's zaibatsus together so they could weather the impending financial storm as a united front. If this were a neat and predictable game, I might have dismissed Kaito without a second thought. But purposefully provoking him in this more nuanced, complex reality felt counterproductive—even if he wasn't a major player in the game itself. If unity was the name of the game, it seemed wiser to soothe his ruffled feathers.

Arriving at that conclusion, I corrected him gently. "You misunderstand, Mr. Kaito."

"Oh? Do I now?"

His face turned darker all of a sudden. Likely, he was interpreting my words as a dismissal of the Akizuki family and their significance. I'd be lying if I claimed his reaction didn't intimidate me. The old me, the commoner me, would have quaked at the thought of offending the scion of a corporate dynasty, but a commoner I was no longer.

I stood up straight, proud as a Sakurazaka would, and dismissively flicked a strand of my hair right in front of his face. "Asuka is a dear friend of mine," I

stated simply.

Kaito eyed me with a mix of suspicion and confusion, expecting further explanation. When none came, realization dawned on him. “*That’s* why you stopped the meeting from happening?”

My reply was a bland smile. The real reason was to avoid catastrophically derailing the storyline by having one of the villainess’s minions be married off, but he didn’t need to know all that. “Perhaps you’d understand me better if I phrased it as such: Masking your ploy to snatch away one of my confidantes under the guise of strengthening your family’s enterprise—I just might interpret that as an act of open aggression.”

“Snatch away?” He looked taken back, then thoughtful. “But I was under the impression that Ms. Asuka had agreed to this arrangement willingly?”

“I suppose she had, yes. But she would’ve agreed to anything if it meant she fulfilled her obligation to her family.”

Asuka might’ve agreed, but what she agreed to was selling herself out for her family’s sake. That was the point I was trying to make.

Kaito’s face changed as he absorbed this, the lines of his expression softening. “That’s...not how it was framed to me. Then indeed, there seems to have been a significant misunderstanding. I’ll take care of the fallout on my end. You needn’t involve yourself further.”

I let out an amused chuckle. “Oh, will you? How very noble. Then you may consider that a personal favor.”

A flicker of surprise crossed his face. Indeed, this should’ve been a puzzling development for the Akizuki heir. Now that the matchmaking meeting had been called off, it was his duty to smooth things over on his end. This wasn’t my business, yet I chose to make it mine.

“What are you after?” he shot back dubiously.

“Consider it an olive branch. That I mean the Akizukis no ill will.”

“And I’m to take you at your word?”

I gave him a shrug. “Believe what you will. In fact, it’s good that you’re

skeptical. Expectations can be such burdensome creatures, can't they? I am *just* an adopted daughter, after all."

"Hm," he responded, his voice neutral yet thoughtful. "Very well, I'll hold you to that. You owe me one."

"Please do," I replied smoothly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Kaito."

With that, I turned on my heel, retrieved Asuka, and together we departed from the hotel.

THE matchmaking meeting had been successfully interrupted. Asuka's expression, however, was perpetually downcast on our ride back to the academy. Noticing this, I exchanged a glance with my accompanying maid.

"Would you care for a beverage, milady?" she offered promptly.

"A bit of milk tea sounds lovely," I replied. "And you, Asuka?"

Her response came as though she was snapping back from a distant thought. "Oh, um... Orange juice then, please. Thank you."

The maid nodded immediately and set about preparing our drinks. Once served, Asuka picked up her glass and sipped away. Well, that didn't help. She still looked depressed, just with a glass of orange juice now. Between her and Sayaka, she'd always been the livelier one, so it was jarring, and frankly a little upsetting, to see her so withdrawn.

Amidst the quiet, I thought about a way that might lift her spirits, when suddenly, she placed her glass down and locked eyes with me. "Ms. Mio, I wanted to thank you for your support of my family's company today," she said somewhat hesitantly. Curiously, she'd omitted any mention of her almost-engagement.

"Is the marriage still on your mind?" I asked.

She smiled weakly. "Yeah."

Her family's relief from financial burden should have been a victory, but it seemed to strip Asuka of her sense of purpose just as effectively. That loss of direction was understandable. I imagined how I would feel if Shizuku declared

she no longer needed my help. Would I be relieved? No, I'd feel utterly powerless.

If only I could say something to assuage that feeling, I thought...when an idea struck. It involved being a little deceptive to Asuka, but it should work.

"Asuka, I have a proposal for you," I conveyed.

Sensing the shift in tone, she quickly straightened her posture. "Yes, what is it?"

"While an injection of capital is all well and good, it scarcely addresses the operational issues systemic to your family's company. You understand that, yes?"

"I...I do, yes," she replied meekly.

Here was where my deception came into play. It was the subtle insinuation that Shizuki and I were merely one-time benefactors, ready to provide funds and then disengage, washing our hands of the whole ordeal. Contrary to this impression, I knew Shizuki wasn't one to invest without seeking a significant return; her involvement in Asuka's company was almost inevitable. But I chose not to reveal this just yet.

"You see, I didn't come to Sosei Academy just to study," I continued.

"I...I see."

"I must be somewhat vague for now, but know that I am here seeking an ally. Assist me in my endeavors, and in turn, I'll ensure we tackle the core issues plaguing your family's business."

"You would do that...for us?"

"Absolutely. With a little dash of Sakurazaka expertise, I'm sure we can whip that company of yours into shape."

And therein lay the linchpin of my strategy. Instead of me just asking Asuka for her help, and Shizuki just helping her with her family, I intertwined the two. By framing the two separate acts as a reciprocal deal—one where she earned my help instead of simply receiving it—she might finally be able to stop seeing herself as a bystander but an active participant in solving her family's crisis.

Just as I had hoped, her eyes ignited with a steely resolve. “I understand,” she said firmly. “Consider me committed. I’ll support you with everything at my disposal.”

“Excellent. I have high hopes for you, Asuka.”

The shadows of guilt that had lingered in her gaze dissipated instantly. At that moment, Asuka was reborn, officially becoming one of my underlings—but for the sake of *her* family.

As I sat back, proud of myself for what I accomplished all on my own, I suddenly noticed the limousine had slowed to a crawl. I inquired about the delay, and the driver informed me through the intercom that an accident had snarled traffic.

Well, I just had to go and jinx myself there, didn’t I?

“My apologies, Lady Mio,” the driver’s voice came through again, “but I doubt we’ll make it to the academy on time like this.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “Keep me updated should anything change.” After switching the intercom off, I dialed Sayaka’s number.

One ring and she picked up. “Ms. Mio. What’s the situation with Asuka?” she blurted out.

Slightly amused at her worry, I revealed coolly, “The meeting was called off, *and* we managed to solve her family’s problem.”

I could almost feel Sayaka’s relief through the phone. “Oh, thank goodness,” she exhaled, her tension dissolving with the news. “And um, thank *you*, Ms. Mio.”

“You’re welcome, but there’s a problem. We’ve hit traffic on our way back, and it seems unlikely we’ll make it back in time. How are things looking over there?”

“Our team is currently behind, but not by much. Based on my analysis of the students participating in the remaining events and their athletic records, I think we have a good chance of turning things around at the kibasen.”

Huh. For a second there I almost forgot who I was speaking to. I thought that

was Shannon giving me such a detailed report. I probably took too long to snap out of my surprise as in the next moment, Sayaka's airy giggle reached me through the phone. "I took the liberty of doing a little research beforehand, I hope you don't mind. Nonoka's thing and all."

"Nonoka's 'thing' is of no consequence to me—my reputation is," I replied sharply. "I will make every effort to return to the academy in time, but..." It seemed wise to prepare a contingency. "Sayaka, in the event that we *are* late, you are not to let anyone know the true reason behind our delay. If someone asks, I've dragged Asuka out on a personal errand."

"What? But that puts the responsibility squarely on you!" said not the girl I was talking to through the phone but the one in the car with me.

I gently shook my head and said in a way so that they both could hear: "All that effort to stop the engagement before it was official was to save face for the Akizukis. Telling everyone now would defeat the whole purpose."

It would almost certainly create hard feelings if word were to spread that Asuka rejected a proposal from the Akizukis. What we'd done was prevent that initial meeting from happening, effectively preventing such an arrangement from existing in the eyes of the public. To uphold this image, the secret had to die with us.

"Am I making myself quite clear, girls? This is my personal errand I've dragged Asuka out on," I added.

"Yes, Ms. Mio," Asuka articulated before falling into silence, her fists clenched tight. Sayaka also begrudgingly murmured her agreement over the phone.

"Good. Now, sit tight and wait for our return. Oh, but out of an abundance of caution, Sayaka, do try and locate a few substitutes."

"Will do. Good luck, Ms. Mio," Sayaka replied instantly.

Ending the call, I looked at Asuka. She looked like she wanted to say something, but I ignored her and dialed Shizuki next. "Hello, Shizuki?"

"I've been informed. You're not going to make it?"

I pushed past the lump in my throat. "It seems likely. I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. Traffic is traffic. I accepted the risk that you might not make it back when I agreed to send you out there.”

That...was not the reaction I’d expected. I’d been expecting more of a, *get out of the car and run if you have to, but make it back on time*. Had she not just said a few hours ago that I needed to see this through? Unless she was only talking about stopping the meeting?

Actually, she might’ve. Shizuki had said the villainess was a background character in this arc since the beginning. Even with my absence, my class should be able to pull off a victory.

They *should*, but...

“I have a favor to ask,” I stated firmly.

“Yes, I’m sure you do,” Shizuki replied. “You want to personally contribute to the win, don’t you? For Nonoka’s sake. Or should I say for Miyu’s sake?”

“I do.”

“All right. Let’s explore our options. A helicopter’s...out—no heliport nearby. Ah, but this should work. Ever ridden a motorcycle? We can’t drop you off right at the school gates, but we can get you close.”

“Fantastic. Thank you!”

“Dispatching now. Ready up and stand by.”

I ended the call and quickly told Asuka we’d be switching to motorcycles. She looked hesitant, but nodded, understanding the urgency to make it back for the kibasen. Moments later, two bikes pulled up beside our limousine. Climbing aboard, Asuka on one, me on the other, we gripped tightly and zoomed off, slicing through traffic like it was nobody’s business.

We bypassed the gridlock and switched to another limousine near the academy to cover the final stretch. In the limo, we changed into our gym clothes and soon arrived at the academy.

“Let’s go, Asuka!” I yanked on her hand, and we bolted across the campus. As we neared the athletic grounds, distant cheers—likely celebrating the day’s climax—filled the air.

We were too late, I realized with a sinking heart. But it was the outcome that mattered. My absence was a blow, but Sayaka and Rikka—Sayaka, who had trained her heart out, and Rikka, with her innate athleticism—should've been able to pull off a victory, even with replacements.

Reaching the field, I grabbed the first student I could find. "Who won? Who won the kibasen?" I pretty much yelled at the poor girl.

"Huh? Oh, um, team Red did," she replied.

Team Red—that was us! "Thank you," I exhaled, a wave of relief washing over me. But then, she added an unthinkable caveat to her words:

"Team Blue won overall, though."

My veins ran cold. "What? But you just said team Red won the kibasen!"

"They did, but team Blue placed second. The point difference wasn't enough to overtake them, so team Blue clinched the overall victory."

The realization of what had almost certainly happened crashed down on me with chilling clarity. A seemingly minor tweak—rearranging our lineup to fill in for Asuka and me—had thrown off our team's original roster, upsetting the placements for the day. Despite our best efforts—despite winning the kibasen—we couldn't bridge the point gap, and...we lost.

It was all because I chose to prioritize Asuka's future, embarking on this reckless detour for what now felt like selfish motives. In doing so, I'd jeopardized our main objective. I'd let down Nonoka. Nonoka had let down Miyu. The entire narrative had unraveled, and the blame rested squarely on my shoulders.

Reeling from the impact of my decisions, my legs shook and I staggered, nearly falling. "Are you okay?" the girl asked, her voice tinged with concern.

I looked up at her. Nothing came out at first. Then, "I'm...fine. Thank you for telling me."

Keeping my composure in the eyes of all those present, I took Asuka's hand and we made our way to the stands. A hush had fallen over our section, the atmosphere heavy, as if in mourning. We approached quietly, and the closer we

got, I could hear the sounds of sniffing.

“I’m so sorry!” a girl, one of Nonoka’s friends, cried out. She was in tears, clutching at Nonoka. “I’m so, so sorry! If I just snagged that bandana off team Blue, they would’ve been third, and we could’ve won! It’s all my fault!”

My heart clenched tighter—we were one bandana short from victory. She was shattered, blaming herself, yet...

If she only knew the truth.

You’re not to blame. You did everything you could. Nonoka is lucky to have someone like you by her side. Me, on the other hand...

I had ruined everything with one self-centered act. If only I had done better... No, if only I had done nothing at all, things wouldn’t have ended up this way. Team Red was supposed to win, it was literally how the story was going to unfold. All I had to do was ensure it stayed that way. *My job* was to ensure it stayed that way. Instead, I’d turned the tide against us.

I bit my lip. The worst part was my silence—I couldn’t own up to my mistakes, offer comfort, or vow to make amends. I could only sit there, stewing in my own regret.

Then, Nonoka’s voice broke through the tension. “Mizuki, it is *not* your fault!” she declared, her words meant to soothe another but they reached me, stirring a bittersweet solace within. It was strangely comforting that Nonoka was consoling her, almost as if she were doing it in my place, easing a bit of my burden.

But did I deserve that release? Did I deserve to distance myself from the blame, to pat myself on the back and say *oh well, we tried!* as if I were just another bystander processing the loss?

No, I didn’t. But the fact that I thought I did, even for a second, meant that I was weak. I bit down harder on my lip. It was then that Natsumi, Nonoka’s other good friend spotted me. She marched over, her eyes blazing, and all eyes swiveled to us.

“Where *were* you?” Natsumi demanded.

My mind immediately ran with all kinds of excuses, but I stifled them. I had screwed up, wasted everyone's time and effort, but I would at least own that—as the villainess.

My resolve hardening, I adopted a look of indifference. “I believe Sayaka informed you all beforehand?”

“*That's your excuse?!*” she shot back in disbelief. “You know we tried really hard to adjust the roster because of your absence? We made it work, yes. But we wouldn't have had to if you just...”

Showed up?

Say it. It'd be well within your right to say it. Indeed, it was your prerogative to. That's what I deserved, to be cast as the villain. It would clear my consciousness, just a little, yet you stopped. Why?

But maybe the quiet part didn't need to be said out loud. The message seemed clear enough as glares like sharpened blades turned toward me. Sayaka began to speak, presumably to mitigate the blame aimed at me, but I stopped her. *Remember what we agreed on*, I said with my eyes.

Then an idea struck: I was the villainess. The true objective of this arc wasn't to win the school's Sports Day—it was about convincing Miyu to accept the operation she needed. I could still do something about Miyu; this current predicament I found myself in didn't really matter, and I could use it to my advantage.

Realizing this might've been the chance I was waiting for, I dismissively brushed a lock of hair from my shoulders. “So, I missed Sports Day. What of it?”

“You knew how important today was!” Natsumi exploded. “Now Nonoka's friend won't be getting the operation she needs thanks to you!”

“So sue me,” I replied with a glib smile. “Her promise was never mine to keep.”

The words stung even as they left my mouth, and part of me recoiled at my own callousness. Nevertheless, all that was just a sign that I was playing my role correctly. I clenched my teeth, squared my shoulders, and steeled myself against the discomfort.

Natsumi's eyes flared. "You...are unbelievable! How can you even say that?!"

"Wait, Natsumi," Nonoka cut in, her voice calm. "I'm sure Ms. Mio has her reasons."

Oh, Nonoka. Your defense of me, even now, makes you the perfect heroine. I'm sure we could've been the best of friends—but I'm sorry. When it comes down to it—I would choose Shizuku over you every time.

"How can you still defend her?!" Natsumi yelled, turning on Nonoka.

Their friendship fraying before my eyes was not my intent, so I pressed harder. "Honestly, Nonoka, she's right. The bleeding-heart act is starting to get old. There's no noble cause behind my actions. I didn't help you because, frankly, your plight means nothing to me. It's that simple."

A bit of actual anger bled through, the frustration that despite everything, Nonoka continued to treat me like a friend, as she strove to understand me as one. Her face finally twisted in shock. "You...You don't mean that," she said quietly.

"Are you calling me a liar?" I challenged.

If I were truly kind, I couldn't have pushed away Nonoka with such cruelty. This was just proof that at heart, I was a selfish person who was more than willing to discard her classmates like litter if it served my purposes.

So, Nonoka, hate me. Curse me out. Take that anger and grief you feel and channel it to better yourself.

Clutching the hems of my tracksuit, I met her gaze with a sneer. "If your friend mattered as much to you as you claim, you should have taken action yourself."

Nonoka looked hurt for a moment, then she bit her lip and cast her eyes downward. Natsumi jumped to her defense fiercely. "How dare you? You have no idea the kind of effort she put in." She paused. "You know, I actually let myself believe there was some kindness in you. Hah. Who was I fooling?"

A general student condemning a Corporate student in public—her outburst turned into a spectacle. The surrounding crowd murmured in hushed, stunned tones, yet no one intervened. They just all looked at me in disgust and disdain,

not only the general students but my Corporate peers as well.

I'd done it. I finally accomplished what I'd set out to do and became the villainess. It had taken longer than expected, requiring some improvisation on my part, but that was it.

I was now one, giant step closer to saving Shizuku.

So why did I feel so empty inside?

THERE was no time to rest. The moment I stepped through our front door, it was off to strategizing the next steps. Our team's loss had been an unexpected development, but not the world-ending blunder I'd thought it was. *Finally*, I'd become a villainess worthy of my classmates' ire. That was the hardest part done. Convincing Miyu to undergo surgery would be a simpler task by comparison.

So, I pulled up all the information I could on Miyu. But as I read through her profile, I screamed. Right on a video call with Shizuki.

"All right. What have you done now?" she said.

"Why did you just assume I screwed up somehow?"

"Because have you?"

"I...um. Remember when I went to pick up Shizuku's belongings at her old hospital the other day?"

"Ah. You ran into Miyu there, didn't you? See? You did screw up. So? You managed to make a new friend?"

"I...guess you could say that."

Listen to me trying to play it off like she hadn't seen right through me... I puffed my cheeks out in a sheepish pout, prompting a light, airy laugh from her. "You won't be satisfied until you've raised every single flag there is, will you?"

"Listen, it really wasn't my fault this time. I was careful. I asked for her name! Twice, in fact! I was one hundred percent sure she said her name was Miu, not Miyu!"

The names were similar, sure, but I was certain I hadn't misheard. There was only one plausible explanation for this, and it was that Miyu had given me a fake name for some godforsaken reason.

"Is that right?" Shizuki said unbelievably. "Well, I guess it could happen. Kids are quite clever these days. Though it does seem awfully out of character for her..."

Shizuki could believe me or not, but the fact remained that Miyu had duped me with a false name. This wasn't another case of me stumbling headfirst into a trap like I'd done all the other times. "I don't know," I mused aloud, half to myself. "Maybe someone planted the idea in her head, like Nono...ka...?"

Wait a minute.

Did I not just recently suggest to Nonoka the wisdom of not giving away her name too freely to strangers? Surely she didn't pass that advice to Miyu, which then spiraled back to thwart me, right?

"Mio? Do you have an idea how this happened?"

"No. Um, no, not really. I was just thinking...this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Now I can just talk to Miyu directly, and convince her to get the operation."

"Yes, it might just come to that." She took a deep breath, then explained that Miyu had just turned down the operation again. Apparently, she'd been there to spectate on Sports Day and witnessed our loss firsthand.

"Then it's settled. I'll talk to her," I proclaimed.

"It's good that you're confident, but what's your plan?" Shizuki asked.

"I'm working on that as we speak."

Shizuki's expression turned exasperated. Then she shrugged. "All right. I suppose if there's one thing I can trust you with, it's this, but..." She looked at me. "Mio. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Um, yeah? Why, what's this all of a sudden?" I asked, tilting my head in confusion.

"At least recognize that you have a tendency to make people worry about you," she chided, pointing a finger toward her webcam, toward me. "Mio, it's

not mutually exclusive. Just because you made the right choice and used your team's loss to cultivate enmity toward you doesn't mean it can't also hurt you."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Do you? Then why do you insist on pretending like it doesn't bother you?"

"Because I..." *Have no choice in the matter.* It hurt being looked at like that by Nonoka, by everybody, but that was what I wanted: to garner everyone's hatred so I could save Shizuku. The negativity was mine to sort through, it was part of the job. How greedy would I be if I wanted to pursue my goal without bearing any of the consequences?

"Mio." Shizuki's voice softened. "You can blame me, you know?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're in this situation because of me. Every difficult choice you face, every moment you're pushed to the brink—it's because of me. That gives you the unique right to blame me for everything that's happened to you. You should exercise it, instead of shouldering everything yourself."

"What? No... No!" My emotions surged forth and I couldn't contain my voice.

"Just like that. Let it all out on me."

"That's not what I meant! I have never once thought to blame you for any of this, so stop it with that!"

Shizuki looked at me, her eyes widening at my outburst. "But if I hadn't given you this thankless task, you wouldn't have had to—"

"What you gave me is hope, Shizuki. You showed me a path forward, and I decided to walk it. I'm supposed to resent you for a life that I embraced willingly? Give me a break."

The words just kind of spilled out before I could catch them. I paused, taking a deep breath to recompose myself, and managed a small smile. "You know what Shizuku said to me the other day? She said to not worry about her anymore because she was going to die soon."

"Well, that's certainly..." she trailed off. Then looked at me to continue.

“But I was able to cheer her up. I was able to pull her back from that brink. You know why? Because a certain someone promised me she’d be first in line to get treated. For the first time in ages, Shizuku felt hope. Hope that *you* gave her.”

I was sure that if I hadn’t been able to make that promise to her that day, Shizuku would’ve broken completely. And I, watching my dearest sister force a smile onto her face as she gave up on life, would have broken right along with her.

“Do you see now?” I asked, my voice somewhat steadying. “How much you mean to me?”

“But you,” she replied flatly. “Sooner or later, you’ll—”

“Yeah, I’m having a rough time, I admit it. I hate being so mean toward Nonoka, I hate the stares that follow me around like I’m walking human garbage. It sucks, I hate every single second of it, but...” I stared at my webcam—at Shizuku on the other end—imbuing my gaze with all the determination I could muster. “I don’t regret it. Not one bit. You gave me hope, Shizuku. And I would never, *ever* fault you for that.”

Sure, assigning blame, unloading my troubles onto someone might make me feel better. Even so, I wouldn’t let Shizuku be that person, not when all I owed her was my deepest gratitude.

Shizuku blinked at me, and then her expression softened. “All right, hopeless idealist, you’ve made your point. I take my words back. And apologize.”

“Thanks. And me too. Sorry for getting all high-and-mighty on you.”

“Not at all. You made some very valid points and convinced me I was going about this the wrong way. So instead, I think I’ll give you a little reward for all your hard work.”

I gave a head tilt. “A reward?”

Shizuku responded with a slight, yet definitely mischievous smile.

SHIZUKI’S surprise was delivered to me a few days later. It was, as it turned

out, matching outfits for me and Shizuku. Excited, I went to visit Shizuku with her present as soon as I was able. After knocking on her door—this time—I entered her room to see her perusing yet another fashion magazine.

“Aren’t you still a bit young to be showing *that* much interest in fashion?” I remarked as I walked in.

“I don’t think it’s exactly the clothes I’m interested in,” she acknowledged, looking up from her read. “More the model wearing them.”

“Oooh.”

That would be me. I was indeed appearing more often in these magazines than I would’ve liked. There seemed to be quite a buzz about me, an actual Sakurazaka, modeling these outfits, which boosted sales significantly. As a result, the modeling jobs kept flowing in. It needed to be said, though: I only accepted the roles as part of my ongoing task of inspiring Nonoka’s interest in fashion—not for any personal reason. But I doubted that’d be going on for much longer. With Nonoka hating me, it seemed unnecessary for me to continue.

Oh well. I’d worry about that later. This moment was about Shizuku and me. I swung the bag with our matching outfits in front of her. Her jaw dropped immediately. “Why do you have a SHIDUKI bag?” she pressed.

“Oh. You know what this is?”

“Duh! It’s SHIDUKI, the accessible luxury fashion brand that girls’ dreams are made of!”

“Duh,” huh? It’s that well-known? Better not let her know I only learned about the brand recently then.

“Well, that’s good,” I said instead. “Then you probably already know that this is Ms. Shizuki’s brand. Since I work for her, she gave me a few pieces as a gift.”

“Oh yeah, she just gave you a few pieces,” she repeated mockingly. “Humblebrag much?” She dug through the bag, then her eyes snapped to me. “This is a whole outfit!”

I almost blurted out, *what’s the big deal?* But I remembered that SHIDUKI’s

luxury line typically sold for hundreds of thousands of yen per piece, while the accessible luxury items were priced in the *slightly* more affordable tens of thousands. This was a full set for both of us, which added up to quite a hefty chunk of change.

“You like it?” I asked.

“Of course I like it! But it’s so expensive... I can just have this? It’s not even my birthday. But it is yours soon. Did you get our birthdays mixed up?”

“Like I’d ever forget when your birthday was.”

“But seriously this is like, *expensive* expensive. Okay. What *is* your part-time job? Fess up.”

“I’m just a model who received a gift at work. That’s it.”

But Shizuku didn’t look convinced. “But to receive such lavish gifts... You two aren’t involved, like, *romantically*, are you?!”

I choked on my saliva.

But it was true our involvement went deeper than surface level. To family level, actually, which might’ve even been more involved than romantically, depending on how you looked at it. But lovers? No, no, no. Not at all.

“Yes, Shizuki *is* very kind to me, thanks for noticing,” I noted.

“Kind, huh?” she hummed back.

“Yes, kind. Now can we please move on?”

“Kind enough to make you want to be her adopted sister?”

Not again. Where was all this saliva coming from? Still coughing, I managed to choke out, “E-E-E-Excuse me?!”

“Do you think I’m stupid, Mio?”

“Of course not, I don’t think you’re stupid, I just don’t know what you mean!”

“Then do you know what *this* means?” She held up a page of her magazine. An article about the model featured my full name: Mio SakurazakaaaAAA?!

“Th-That’s just my, you know, my stage name!” I blurted out.

“I thought you’d say that. Which is why,” this time, she stuck her laptop in my face, “I also prepared *this!*”

What was this, a message board? “What am I supposed to be reading here? ‘Miokins so cute’? The heck is that?”

“No, read the thread above that!”

Above that, okay. It was a thread titled ‘Who is Mio Sakurazaka? Is she affiliated with the Sakurazaka Group?’ And under it were comments saying, ‘Oh, she’s an adopted daughter,’ and all sorts of other damning comments exposing my true identity. Holy crap, there was even a comment calling out the fact that I was a real, blood-related Sakurazaka. *Well, that’s unfortunate. And terrifying.*

Cornered, I hesitantly said, “When did you start suspecting?”

“From the very beginning,” she replied. “But I only *really* started digging after you said these laptops you bought us were cheap.”

“Wait, this laptop? But I showed you the receipt and everything!”

“That receipt was a fake, wasn’t it?”

“N...No?”

How could it have been a fake? I’d asked the helpful folk at a Sakurazaka Group-run electronics store to buy those laptops for me. I gave them a budget and asked them to choose one at their own discretion and everything!

I quickly explained this to Shizuku, but her gaze only narrowed further. She tapped away at her laptop, then showed me an online shop she navigated to. “This is how much the laptop usually costs,” she divulged, gesturing toward her screen.

“Forty thousand? I mean that sounds about right.” I guessed the employees gave me a little discount, but it wasn’t that much cheaper.

Shizuku raised an eyebrow. “You’re missing a zero there, chief.”

“Huh? One, two, three, four, *five...*”

Oops. It hadn’t been forty thousand, but four *hundred* thousand. With an employee discount *that* steep, Shizuku was right to suspect something was off.

But now, caught out on a lie, I fumbled for the right words. “Um, Shizuku, I didn’t mean to—”

“Look, you don’t need to tell me what’s going on if you don’t want to.”

Shizuku’s words caught me off guard. “I...don’t?” I said cautiously. For sure I thought this would be the breaking point. I thought she would pry and pull until everyone was out in the open, but instead she just...backed off.

She shifted on her bed. “I don’t like that you’re keeping secrets from me, but you’re doing it for me, right? So, what else can I say?”

My heart sank. *How can she be so mature for her age?*

“But can you just reassure me of one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re not involved in anything dangerous, are you?”

The worry in her voice tightened my chest. I paused, then allowed a reassuring smile to surface. “I’m not.” Shizuku studied my face for a few lingering moments, her eyes searching for any hint of deceit before her expression softened as well.

“Okay, I believe you.” She paused, then looked around the room awkwardly. “Then...does this mean I’m actually a Sakurazaka too?”

Her question threw me for a moment. “Huh? Oh, um, yeah, I guess. Why, you wanna get adopted too?”

“Mmm... Nah. Mom and Dad would be sad.”

“Right...” I clamped my lips together, a fleeting image of our parents faced with the reality of losing me flashing through my mind.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to imply you did anything wrong,” Shizuku hastily added.

“Yeah, I know.” I smiled at her, then looked at the paper bag. “So... You ready to try this on?” I asked, to which she responded with a resolute yes and a radiant smile.

I stepped out for a moment as Shizuku changed and rejoined her after in our

matching outfits: a strappy off-shoulder sweater, miniskirt, and thigh-highs with garters—the version of the well-to-do lady outfit that had become my look.

“Whoa,” Shizuku said. “This feels so nice.”

“Right? I remember saying the same thing.”

She glanced over her shoulder at her feet and spun several times, giggling. I recalled commenting on the feel of the fabric to Shizuki, who mentioned it was more about the outfit being tailored to our measurements than the quality of the fabric. Which only raised the question: How did Shizuki know Shizuku’s measurements? But then again, I supposed I shouldn’t be surprised at this point.



“Hey,” I said quietly, “next time it’s nice out, do you want to show this off? Maybe we could go to a mall or something.”

She whipped around to face me. “Can I?!”

“Yeah. With the doctor’s permission, of course.”

Now that I thought about it, it wasn’t all bad that Shizuku had discovered the truth. With my new status, I could now pamper her with all its privileges. She wasn’t fit to travel long distances by train or car, but in a limousine? That might just work. “Okay, then it’s decided. We’ll go on a date—as twinsies,” I decided.

“Yes!” she said ecstatically. “I can’t wait!”

Seeing Shizuku so genuinely happy now, I marveled at what a little bit of hope could do for a person in dire circumstances. I wondered if I offered Miyu that same glimmer of hope, would she have the courage to undergo the procedure?

“Shizuku, question for you,” I began.

“*You* have a question for *me*?” she replied, sounding a bit too surprised.

“I can ask somebody else if you like?” I shot back, unamused.

“No, no. Ask me, ask me.” She shook her head. “Ask away, dear sister of mine!” she added with a dramatic flourish, before bursting out into laughter at her theatrics.

Was she always like this? I mused, smiling to myself. It might have been because I was finally asking her for help on something. Or perhaps she was still feeling the high from her new outfit. Either way, she was enjoying herself—thankfully not to the extent of overexertion, but I’d have to keep an eye on that. In the meantime, my question.

“I have this friend who has this sister—well, not a biological sister, but she’s like a sister to her,” I quickly clarified. “That friend’s sister needs surgery, but is hesitant about it.”

“Oh,” Shizuku muttered, her eyes dimming slightly. “Is the procedure a complicated one?”

“No. It’s really minor but necessary.”

I then shared more about what I had learned from my research, as well as Nonoka's efforts, but ultimately failed to convince her.

"So, she's scared then," Shizuku muttered.

I nodded. "The risk of complications is small, but it's still there. I understand that surgery can be terrifying, especially for someone so young, but the alternative could be worse. I was just thinking...maybe there's a way to make this decision easier for her."

Shizuku hummed thoughtfully, then fell silent. The thought occurred to me that this might be a bitter conversation for her—here was a girl with a shot at life yet refusing to take it, while she had been denied even that opportunity. I'd thought my promise of a cure had eased that feeling for her, but perhaps I was assuming too much.

"Listen, Shizuku—"

"Mio, I think—"

We both spoke at once. I smiled and gestured for her to continue.

"I think you might be going about this the wrong way. Tell me why you think she's scared of surgery," she continued.

"Because she's afraid of something going wrong?" I ventured.

"See that's the thing. I don't think that's the real issue."

"It's...not?" Invisible question marks began popping up above my head.

"Like, if I were in her shoes, I'd probably hesitate too."

"Because making that choice frightens you?"

I was suddenly reminded of the trolley problem. What that infamous thought experiment suggested was that people often lean toward inaction, even when it results in objectively worse outcomes. Do nothing and kill five people, or do something and kill three. I'd read that most people would choose inaction, allowing five to die rather than having the blood of three on their hands.

A similar parallel could be drawn to a personal decision involving risk. Imagine being terminally ill, and there was a twenty percent chance on any given day

that you might just keel over and die. You're presented with a button that removes this daily risk, but pressing it has a ten percent chance of killing you instantly. Would you press it? What if the odds were changed to fifty and five percent respectively? Would you press it now? It might seem like a no-brainer given such good odds, but as they narrow, more and more people might prefer to leave their fate to chance. This, in essence, was the point Shizuku was trying to raise, wasn't it? The operation was the proverbial button.

I tried to explain this to her, and...she just stared at me like I was an alien. "Mio, for someone so smart, you can be real dense sometimes."

"Did you just call me dense?!" I shouted, more in disbelief than anger.

My little sister just called me dense... Of all the shocks I'd experienced these past few months, this one hit the hardest.

"Okay, let me put it this way," Shizuku continued. "Why do you think she's afraid of something going wrong during surgery?"

"Because...she'll...die?"

"No! Okay, look. Of course, she's afraid of dying. So am I. Which is why if there was an operation that even had a fifty percent chance of working for me, I'd take that in a heartbeat."

"Okay," I nodded, following her logic so far.

"But," she added with a dramatic pause, "if it was *you* who told me I should get that operation, I would refuse."

"Why?" I exclaimed, the shock bleeding into my voice. Did she not trust my judgment? She didn't trust me, did she?! As I watched my relationship with my sister crumble before my very eyes, she said something that shocked me in a very different way.

"Because what if something went wrong and I died? You'd blame yourself, wouldn't you?"

I gasped. The image of me crying over Shizuku's lifeless body flooded into my mind. Without a doubt, I would be plagued by regret for the rest of my life if I had, even inadvertently, contributed to her demise. "That..." I swallowed. "That,

um, yeah. That might be a lifelong trauma.”

“And it’s not just you,” she added. “I’d be scared too. Scared that you might never forgive yourself after I’m gone.”

The picture Shizuku was trying to paint was now vividly clear. If our roles were reversed, I wouldn’t want her burdened with regret either. Thinking about it from her perspective, I realized I’d already given her more than enough cause to worry. I had promised her that if she hung on for three more years, she’d be able to kick this disease for good. What if she couldn’t hold on for three more years? If she passed away before that time, I’d be crushed by the weight of my regret over not having acted fast enough. She was already considering such grim possibilities, fretting over the impact on me.

“Shizuku, listen...”

I felt like I had to say something, but what? My thoughts ran into dead end after dead end. Then, amidst my stumbling, Shizuku smiled at me. It was an elusive, almost spectral smile—a smile that was hardly an expression of her own feelings, but more like an assurance crafted for me. “I know. I understand more than anyone the sacrifices you’ve made for me. So, I’m not giving up, okay? I won’t let you down.”

I sat there at first, just soaking in her words. Then, a slight shake of my head came almost involuntarily. “No... No, you won’t. And neither will I. I won’t let you down either, Shizuku.”

“Yeah. I love you, sis,” she said, the tiniest bit of emotion seeped into her spectral smile, making it waver.

Without another word, I hugged her. Feeling her arms wrap around me in return, I silently renewed my vow to myself and to her—to guide myself to whatever doom awaited me to save her. But at the same time, our earlier conversation triggered another troubling thought: What if Shizuku discovered that I had traded my life for hers? Would she ever forgive herself? Could she move past that grief?

No, these fears were naught but distractions from the real task at hand. I had to shield her from this reality forever. She could never learn of the true sacrifices I made for her sake. As my arms tightened around her with the force

of this resolution, I noticed her squirm in discomfort. “I...I can’t breathe.”

“Ah! Sorry. So sorry.” Letting her go, I redirected the conversation back to Miyu. “You make a good point, but the girl’s only in elementary school. Do you think she’s given it the same amount of thought you have? And I think it was her doctor that first recommended she undergo the operation, not my friend.”

“True,” she conceded. “It’s just my take. But if they are as close as you say, it’s at least a possibility, right?”

I suppose so... Miyu might have felt typical anxiety when her doctor suggested surgery, but Nonoka’s endorsement could have amplified it into the more existential type of dread Shizuku described. “Yeah... I think so,” I murmured to myself, increasingly convinced—after all, it sounded exactly like the kind of plot beat that would arise between a heroine and her sister. With that settled, there was only one thing left for me to do: meet Miyu and hear her concerns firsthand.

“Thanks,” I said, ruffling Shizuku’s hair. “I’m glad I talked to you today.”

“Any time, sis. Any time,” she replied, her grin wide and cheerful.

Yep, my sister truly is an angel.

AFTER leaving Shizuku’s hospital, it was straight to Miyu’s. I asked the receptionist for her room, and she directed me to the courtyard where Miyu was likely spending time at this hour. Sure enough, there she was, sitting on a bench reading a book.

I called out to her and waved. “Miu, long time no see!”

She looked up, puzzled for a moment, and then recognition dawned. “Hm? Ah. Big sister Mio,” she greeted as I approached.

“Aw, you remembered my name. How have you been?” I asked, sitting beside her.

She didn’t respond, but her head drooped, casting half of her profile in shadow.

“Are you okay? Should I go get a nurse?”

“No, that’s okay,” she replied. “I feel fine. It’s just that...I had a fight with my big sister. Oh, not you! My other big sister.”

“Ah, I see. You have another big sister, do you?”

“Yeah. Well, she’s not actually my sister.”

“So, she’s kinda like me, huh?”

“Yeah, a little bit!” Her smile flickered to life briefly, then faded as the memory of their fight resurfaced.

But a fight? That was news to me. Had it happened when Miyu refused the operation? If so, that lent credence to Shizuku’s take.

“Why did you two fight?” I asked as gently as I could. “I’m here to listen if you want to talk.”

“You’d really listen?” she asked, almost in disbelief.

“Of course I would!”

I just smiled at her and sat waiting patiently for her to speak. A moment later, she took a deep breath and said, “The truth is...I need to have an operation.”

“An operation?” I did my best to feign surprise. “It’s that serious?”

“The doctors say I won’t get better unless I have it, but it’s just so—”

“Scary?” I interjected. This was my way of finding out how Miyu felt. If she was scared of the idea of surgery itself, she’d say, *Yeah, scary!* and that would be that. Otherwise, it was something else, or *someone* else she was worried about.

“It’s a simple operation, though.”

Okay. That response was honestly a little ambiguous and not at all what I imagined she might say. I’m not Shizuki with her level of intuition, so I have no choice but to ask a little more directly!

“Are you worried about your big sister at all?” I asked.

Her reaction was dramatic—her big eyes opened even wider, her brow slightly furrowing as if to say, *How did you know that?*

Well, it seems like Shizuku was right after all.

“How?” Miyu said softly, jutting her body out toward me.

“How do I know?” I said. “Well, because that’s what my own little sister told me. She said she was more afraid of hurting me than of anything that could happen to her.”

“Your sister, she’s...sick too?”

“Mm-hm. But that’s our little secret, okay?”

She stared at me wide-eyed for a second longer, then her gaze fell away. “For a long time, I was really, really sad, and all by myself. Nobody got how I felt, nobody cared for me, but then big sister Nonoka came along. She was kind to me, she really understood me, and she made everything all better!”

“And that’s how she became your ‘big sister,’ isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“And now, you’re afraid that you might hurt your big sister, the one who made everything all better.”

“Yeah...”

Miyu was an adorable, darling of a girl who deeply loved Nonoka—that much was clear. But while I could understand her perspective, my sympathies lay more with Nonoka. *Miyu, if you really care so much about Nonoka, I truly wish you’d just go through with the operation.*

“You know, Miu, if I were your big sister, and I pushed you to get surgery that ended up being really bad for you, or worse, I think I’d have a very hard time forgiving myself.”

“Yeah,” she muttered quietly, clutching the book on her lap tightly.

Gently, I placed my hand over hers. “But even then, I’d still want you to get that surgery.”

Her head snapped to me. “What? Why?”

“Because it’s not about what’s best for me. It’s about what’s best for you.”

“But you’ll be hurt!”

“I might be. But I—excuse me, your big sister—loves you. There’s no burden she wouldn’t take on, no pain she wouldn’t bear for your sake.”

I wanted to take the opportunity to throw a subtle wrench into the moral conundrum of the trolley problem. In the hypothetical scenario where the lives of five strangers weighed against the lives of three, I must admit my actions—or lack thereof—would align with the silent majority. But if Shizuku were among those five, my hand would fly to the lever without a moment’s hesitation. And not just that, but if Shizuku were among those five and I were among those three, my resolve would remain unshaken—I would act, decisively.

Nonoka, I realized, was a kindred spirit in this regard. She exuded that sense of profound sense of love and altruism, and it was clear why Ruki fell for her. Even I, witnessing her dedication and the love she harbored for Miyu, found myself drawn to her, almost inevitably so.

“Miu,” I said softly, “the world is a complicated, sometimes unfair place. Certainties are hard, almost impossible to come by; it’s only natural to stress about things.”

The operation went off without a hitch in the game. But it felt wrong of me to use that to assure Miyu of her safety when so many other things had already gone off the rails. No, that wouldn’t work—but there was something else I could tell her. Something more truthful, more grounded, more appealing.

“Which is why I want you to take this certainty to heart, Miu: If you keep refusing the operation, your big sister *will* be hurt.”

Technically, Nonoka wouldn’t be hurting—she was already hurting. She was hurt by her own powerlessness, lamenting why she wasn’t enough to give Miyu the courage she needed to face the surgery.

“I’ll hurt her?” Miyu repeated anxiously.

I gently shook my head. “You won’t hurt her. She’ll feel hurt. Though I guess to you, that’s one and the same.”

“I don’t want her to feel hurt.”

It wasn’t just Nonoka. Miyu also possessed a kind and compassionate heart. The thought of undergoing surgery was undoubtedly terrifying for someone her

age. And while that might've been the reason she'd refused surgery at first, as time passed, a deeper, more existential dread took hold—one rooted not in concern for her well-being, but in the unbearable thought of causing pain to her beloved big sister. Hopefully, I could help her overcome that dread, or at least ease it.

“How about this? If you get the surgery, and something happens to you, I'll look after your big sister. I'll be there for her, no matter what, just as you were there for her.”

Was it gauche to mention death right before surgery? Probably. Was Miyu well within her right to get angry at me for mentioning it? Absolutely. Would she? I didn't think so. She searched my eyes with a profound intensity, as if she couldn't believe what she just heard. “Really?” she murmured.

“Really,” I replied instantly. “That's been your goal all along, isn't it? You agreed to have surgery if her class won Sports Day because you thought that way, she wouldn't feel as responsible.”

It was pure speculation on my part, but I couldn't help but think that had been Miyu's way of hedging her bets. On the infinitesimal chance that something happened to her, the blame for that would be placed squarely on 'Sports Day.' Or fate—anything but Nonoka herself.

Miyu looked at me in utter disbelief. “How did you know about that?” she gasped in wonder.

“About Sports Day? You're not to tell anyone, but your big sister and I are classmates,” I replied with a conspiratorial wink.

Her eyes widened in realization, but they still clung to me desperately. “Really?” she said hopefully.

“Really what? Are we really classmates? Yeah.”

“No, not that. Will you really be there for Nonoka?”

I smiled knowingly. “Yeah,” I reassured her. “I'll be there for her. As long as she needs me.” This wasn't just a promise to Miyu, but a step crucial to saving Shizuku as well. It was a promise I could make with no regrets. “I'll take care of Nonoka, which means you have nothing to worry about.”

“You promise?” Miyu asked.

“I promise. But you know what, why don’t we make it official?” I held out a pinky toward her. “I’ll take care of your big sister if you go through with the operation. Oh, and one more thing: Can you keep all this a secret from her too?”

“From Nonoka?”

“You can’t tell her about this deal, and that we’ve spoken. Can you do that?” I wiggled my pinky.

“If I don’t tell her, you’ll promise to look after her?”

“Absolutely, I promise.”

Her hesitation was brief. Then, her tiny pinky linked with mine, sealing our pact. “Okay. It’s a deal,” she promised.

“Okay. Well, I have to get going,” I said, standing up. As I brushed off my skirt, I made it about three steps before halting abruptly, a sudden yet wistful thought floating into my mind.

I’m not sure what compelled me to turn around that day, but before leaving Miyu in that hospital courtyard, I turned back to her.

“I’ll share another secret with you, Miu. The truth is—I know the future. And you, Miu, are going to be just fine. Go ahead and get that surgery—with my blessing.”

ON Monday, I went to school as usual. Though none were so bold as to openly stare at a Sakurazaka, the odd surreptitious glance every now and then followed me through the halls. By now, rumors of my actions should have spread far and wide. I hadn’t spoken to Rikka or Ruki since, to say nothing of Nonoka. My unexpected absence at the kibasen was a fact, providing more than enough justification for their coldness, but a part of me still wished we could have remained friends—just a part, though. The rest of me was wholly focused on my mission. This was the path I had chosen; I was prepared to accept any social isolation that came with it. Any present loneliness, I reminded myself,

was minor compared to the ultimate loneliness of losing Shizuku. As a small silver lining, Asuka and Sayaka remained by my side. In class, I still enjoyed their company, and during PE, they were my teammates. Thanks to them, I managed to keep my head held high.

On Tuesday, I overheard a conversation between Nonoka and the rest of our class: Miyu had agreed to surgery.

“Thank you all so much for your help!” Nonoka exclaimed to the group that had formed around her.

“Oh my,” Rikka noted. “Even after our loss at Sports Day?”

“Yes,” Nonoka replied. “She’d been upset about it, at first, but something must’ve changed. Yesterday, she just agreed to it all of a sudden.”

“Well, we take those victories where we can, don’t we? I’m glad, truly,” Rikka said.

Around them, a chorus of relieved voices erupted, swiftly followed by: “None of this would have been a problem if *someone* hadn’t skipped out on her event in the first place.”

This snide remark came from Natsumi, Nonoka’s friend who had confronted me that day. I didn’t think she’d said it loudly with the intention that I would hear, but there’d been a dip in the din of the classroom, and her words had echoed across the room.

Asuka reacted first, positioning herself between me and them. “Excuse me?” she exclaimed sharply. “What are you insinuating?”

Sayaka was quick to follow, standing steadfast beside her. “I won’t abide any slander against Ms. Mio.”

“Stop,” I said firmly, cutting them off before the situation could escalate further.

They looked at me in protest. I knew this felt unjust to them, as the only people who knew of the true reason behind my absence, but I shook my head and ignored them. Natsumi, however, must’ve interpreted my attempt to de-escalate as a threat, her expression hardening further. “Just try and shut me up

then if you're so powerful."

"Natsumi!" Nonoka chided in alarm.

"I'm not going to stay silent anymore, Nonoka!"

Even with her best friend calling for peace, Natsumi refused to stand down. I realized as she glared at me that this was where everything was going to come to a head.

"Where were you?" she asked accusingly.

"Not at the kibasen, clearly," I replied haughtily. "Beyond that, it's none of your business. I believe I've made myself abundantly clear on the matter. What happens to Nonoka and her ilk are of no consequence to me."

"How can you..." Natsumi whispered through clenched teeth. I was poised to fire back with another biting remark when I noticed a shimmer of something other than anger in her eyes. At that moment, I chose to wait for what she would say next.

"I could tell you were a bitch from the moment I saw you," she said quietly.

"Okay?" I replied, feigning indifference.

Her words were caustic, and deservedly so, yet beneath that harshness there lay a profound sense of...betrayal, as if I had wounded her deeply in some way.

She took another deep, shaking breath. "But Nonoka believed in you. She said you were a kind person at heart. And I love her, so I believed her. So how could you..."

Ah, now it made sense. Her anger was not her own; it was on behalf of Nonoka. She was furious that I had betrayed her dear friend's trust.

That makes you a good friend, Natsumi. Nonoka needs someone like you. Stay by her side, won't you?

My commendation for her loyalty would have to stay unvoiced. Now, I had to push back—but carefully. Otherwise, she'd be the sequel to Asuka and Sayaka nobody wanted, another victim of bullying by Sakurazaka-affiliated students.

If only Rikka would intervene, I found myself wondering, and I stole a gaze at

her. But she didn't seem willing, only observing the situation with what was sort of a scowl on her face. That was a shame. I was sure she would have arbitrated before; the fact that she didn't meant I was no longer in her good graces.

It didn't seem like I could count on Ruki either. He sported the same kind of displeased expression on his face but was feigning indifference, looking out the window.

And as for Riku, he was...glaring at me in disdain.

In that case, I'd have to ask Nonoka to step up to the plate. I shifted my gaze to her; she gasped and immediately pulled on Natsumi's arm. "Natsumi, that's enough! Can we please leave it?" she shouted.

"Are you seriously still trying to cover for her?" Natsumi asked in disbelief.

"No, I just...!" she started but swallowed her words, proof that she still wanted to believe in me, even at this juncture.

This made it all the harder, but I had already resolved myself—for the sake of my sister, I had to push Nonoka away from me. This was where it ended.

"Honestly, Nonoka, your guileless naivety was good for a laugh, but now it wears on me. Do us both a favor and grow up, will you?" With a swift flick of my wrist, I unfurled a fan before my face, concealing the mocking smile that tugged at my lips.



This was how our first meeting should've gone. The brief, misguided camaraderie we'd enjoyed had been a wrong turn turned detour that had taken too long to correct. My earlier hesitation was a failure to embrace the darkness required by my role, but now I had finally made things right.

Was I sad? When I began working part-time to support Shizuku, I watched my friends drift away one by one. Here, in this academy, I'd gotten to know Rikka, Nonoka, and Ruki. They were the closest I had to friends, and now here I stood—alienated from all of them. You tell me if I was sad.

But this was a trolley problem, and Shizuku lay on the tracks ahead. It didn't matter who or how many people were on the other set of tracks. The entire world could be there for all I cared. I would grit my teeth and pull the lever—for this was the future I had chosen.

So, steel yourself, Mio, and brush back your hair. You are the villainess. Guilt may weigh on you, but it is not yours to voice. Throw your shoulders back and smile. Smile, and face your doom with your head held high!

"Heavens, people," I said, addressing the class at large. "Help this poor girl if you must, all I ask is that you spare me your unctuous sanctimony. We are not the same. Not all of us wish to play the hero."

I felt the stares on me sharpen with disapproval. *Good.*

Without another word, I rose from my desk and walked out.

Was I still smiling? I wondered, feeling the cold air kiss my face as I stepped into the corridor.

THE trust I'd built up over months, I shattered with a single gesture—as I'd always intended. Unkind whispers and intrusive stares followed me everywhere, but none dared to challenge me openly, fearing this latest move of mine might be another trap. But it wasn't all bad; I still had Sayaka and Asuka by my side.

Yeah, I was all right—if a little confused.

You see, I couldn't help but wonder why the original villainess had acted, well,

like a villainess. Being so universally despised, as I'd come to realize, was a thankless and exhausting role. While I could motivate myself, again and again, by remembering who I was doing it for, what about her? Did she have someone she was fighting for, or did she truly make enemies of the entire world and die for the sheer thrill of it?

The conclusion I arrived at was that I would never understand what goes on in a true villainess's mind. The good part was that I didn't have to. I wasn't aiming to become a villainess, just to face my demise as one.

Yeah, none of that mattered, just think of Shizuku.

My phone vibrating interrupted my thoughts. It was a call to my Sato number, caller ID: Mom. Immediately, I picked up. "Hello, Mom?"

"Hi, Mio. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, no, you're fine."

Something struck me as odd. With the truth of my family situation out in the open, there was no longer a need for me to have my calls with my family in secret. Mom knew this, which made it unlikely she was asking if I was in an appropriate setting to take this call. Then what, was she just asking if I had time to talk? That was a little odd, considering it was pretty late in the evening. If I wasn't at home, with plenty of time to talk, where would I be?

But then again, Mom rarely ever calls, does she?

"Did something happen?" I immediately asked.

"No, not really," Mom replied. "I called just because I wanted to hear your voice, see how you were doing."

"Aw." My heart melted. "I wanted to hear your voice too, Mom."

The word "mom," a name I'd feared I'd never say again, tasted so sweet as it rolled off my tongue. Once again, I found myself so, so glad that that particular term of my adoption had turned out to be nothing but a feint. Almost instinctively, I felt myself wanting to break down, to let down my guard and pour out every worry and hardship I had endured to my mother. But, I managed to hold back the flood.

“I wanted to ask you, though, Mio—are *you* all right?”

My voice shook. “What?” I had confidence in my ability to maintain a facade. It was a skill I’d honed through months of villainess prep. While it was far from perfect, I didn’t think I’d do something as blatant as let my anxieties show over a few lines on the phone...

Mom just laughed. “I’m your mother, sweetheart. I’d know in a heartbeat if something was off.” She paused. “Just kidding. That Ms. Shizuki told me.”

Welp, I thought we were having a moment there. “Wait, *my* Ms. Shizuki?”

“Yes! She contacted me, told me in confidence that you were feeling down and that I should give you a call.”

“Wait, Mom?” I almost chuckled in disbelief. “You know ‘in confidence’ means you’re not supposed to tell me, right?”

She laughed knowingly. “Does it now? Well, pretend you didn’t hear that then.” We shared a quiet moment. “But on a serious note, what’s more important to me, her trust or your happiness? If I knew something’ll make you happy, I wouldn’t keep it from you; I’d tell you in a heartbeat, sweetie. I’m sure she knew I’d spill.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that,” I replied jokingly.

Shizuki struck me as the kind of person who valued loyalty and trust. Though perhaps that only extended to her business relationships? She certainly seemed more than capable of adding a more personal touch when the situation called for it. In that way, she was so considerate it was hard for me to imagine her as a villainess, even hypothetically. She seemed more like a protagonist, like Nonoka, but with a bit more nuance.

“So? What happened?” Mom’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Oh, um...” I didn’t know what to say, but I didn’t want her to think I was suffering for Shizuku’s sake.

“Something happen at school?” Mom started to guess. “It must be hard adjusting to private school all of a sudden.”

I hummed in thought. “School’s okay, I guess. All my classmates are really

nice.”

“Oh, that’s good. People you can get along with then.”

A wry smirk crossed my face. “Yeah, people I can get along with.”

If only I wasn’t the enemy, that is. Before mom could continue down this line of questioning, I changed the subject. “So um, did you know Grandpa was a Sakurazaka?”

“No, of course not. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have been so worried about sending you off to be adopted, would I?”

“Ah, yeah. Right.” My deal with Shizuki stipulated that I cut ties with my family forever. It wasn’t just me who’d been devastated; my parents had been too. Remembering the emotions they’d shown that day, I knew they hadn’t been pretending.

“But you didn’t suspect anything? Not even a little?” I asked.

“I suppose there were a few things during my upbringing that stood out to me, but only in hindsight,” Mom replied.

“Really,” I muttered back.

Then it seemed like Shizuki was the only person who knew. But did she always know? Or was it only after she bumped into me? I had a sneaking suspicion she wouldn’t tell me even if I asked.

I was glad I got to talk to Mom that night. The next day, I went to school as normal, then the next, and the next, and the next. I continued to be the target of rude and speculative rumors, but besides that, nothing much happened. Days turned into weeks, and soon it was that dreaded time of year: finals.

From the grades delivered to my phone, I could see that I had climbed slightly in the rankings since midterms. Reaching the villainess’s baseline had been tough, but maintaining it was easier. She had high stats but slow growth, which wasn’t surprising given her less-than-industrious attitude toward, well, *everything*. This left me with enough free time between studying to call Shizuku and relax.

At school, I often found myself studying with Asuka and Sayaka. I still hesitated to appear too hardworking in public, but I made an exception for them since they were the ones who approached me for help.

During one of these study sessions at a school café during lunch break, I heard hushed conversations from a nearby group of students. They were careful enough not to name names, but not careful enough to talk about us within earshot. *Well, I knew this day would come sooner or later*, I thought with an internal sigh. I wasn't exactly hurt, just resigned. It hurt when I'd betrayed Nonoka, Rikka, Ruki, and Riku, but not so much when faceless strangers gossiped about me. Pretending not to hear them, I conveyed another forkful of shortcake to my mouth. Sayaka and Asuka froze, looking like they'd explode at any moment.

Swallowing my food, I told them to stand down.

"But Ms. Mio," Asuka said, looking at me pleadingly.

Sayaka and Asuka. It was funny; I used to think of them as nothing but two mindless stooges, one-dimensional and identical in all but name. But after spending time with them, I quickly realized they were quite different. Sayaka was reserved, while Asuka was outgoing. This meant in situations like these, Asuka was the one more affected and likely to get carried away.

"I don't care," I said. *So, neither should you*, I added with my eyes.

She maintained her gaze on me for another second before nodding and returning to her notebook.

But then the hushed conversation beside us grew less hushed.

"And I just can't fathom what those two are thinking, cozying up to her," one of the gossiping girls said.

"Really," the other replied. "Like, goodness, have a little shame!"

Hm. So they were talking about Asuka and Sayaka now, were they? You know what? Fine. If they were so eager to offer themselves up as sacrifices as to gossip right in front of me, who was I to deny them?

I took my fan out of my pocket, snapped it open, and held it in front of my

mouth. “Asuka, Sayaka.” My voice carried, ensuring the entire café could hear. “What is it that you’re after by cozying up to me? Power? Protection?”

Almost instantly, the bustling café’s chatter ceased.

“What?” Asuka proclaimed, alarmed. “Neither!”

“Neither’s right,” Sayaka added—the classic Asuka-Sayaka one-two punch. “We’re no longer the girls we used to be.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said. “But I do wonder. Would it truly be so wrong for either of you to curry favor with me just because I hold a position of great power and influence?”

They began to speak at once. “Of course, that’d be—”

I shushed them with a wave of my hand. “Oh, but I wouldn’t mind. In fact, some would say it might even be the wise thing to do. But then again, I suppose there wouldn’t be much benefit to you, would there? It’s not as if, say—” I flicked my fan shut with a snap and locked eyes with the first girl. “Your families’ livelihoods hinge on my favor. Or say—” Then I locked eyes with the second. “The Sakurazaka Group bankrolls your parents’ companies.” I turned back to Asuka and Sayaka. “Imagine you opposed me then. Now that would be foolish at best and maliciously incompetent at worst, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Asuka replied. “Crossing you would be foolish indeed.”

“Never again,” Sayaka added. “Never again will I find myself on your bad side, Ms. Mio.” They shared a look, a smile, then a giggle.

Nothing I’d said was a joke, despite them finding it funny. The first girl was a daughter of a managing director, and a hefty chunk of her parents’ company’s business came from the Sakurazaka Group—not out of any necessity but rather a courtesy, an acknowledgment of the fact that they had a daughter around the same age as Shizuki. The second girl’s family owned a moderately successful small business; they were trying to expand (rather unsuccessfully) to a new market and had been heavily reliant on Sakurazaka Group investments to do so. A single word from me, and that financing would vanish. We wouldn’t miss them; we weren’t getting a return from them anyway.

I shifted my gaze to see if my two little busybodies got the message. Sure

enough, they stood up and dashed out of the café, their faces as pale as sheets. The chatter in the café never returned to normal after that, and the glances toward us became more furtive.

That went about as well as it could have. As I silently expressed my appreciation to the retreating girls for unwittingly taking part in my demonstration, I suddenly noticed Asuka and Sayaka were still staring at me, their eyes glinting with some unknown emotion.

Uh. What was going on now? I might have silenced our detractors, but quite heavy-handedly. Surely that wasn't praiseworthy behavior by any standard?

Suddenly, two heads were bowed low before me. "Thank you for standing up for us, Ms. Mio!"

"What are you talking about?"

"There's no need to be shy. You were angry on our behalf, weren't you?" Sayaka insisted; Asuka nodded.

So that was how they interpreted the situation.

Was it just me, or were Asuka and Sayaka slowly turning into Nonoka clones? At least these two were *supposed* to be clingy, so I chose not to dwell on it.

And now, back to my shortcake.

A deathly hush fell over the classroom as last period homeroom ended. Our homeroom teacher had just added, as a closing remark, for me to report to the student guidance office. I yielded without a word, aware of the eyes on me as I made my way to the door. As for the known faces, Riku ignored me; Nonoka glanced at me and then back at her desk; Rikka and Ruki seemed like they had something to say, but didn't; the only person to intervene was Asuka, who jumped up from her desk to block my path.

"Ms. Mio, this is my—"

I stuck out a hand to cut her off. If she revealed the real reason for our absence on Sports Day, she would anger the Akizukis and imperil her family. It was an unhelpful gesture, not just for her, but for me as well. I gently touched

her hand to reassure her of my intentions.

Sparing the blushes of the Akizuki family was the excuse. In truth, this needed to happen simply because it was a good look for me, and Asuka revealing that I was taking a bullet for her wasn't.

I held her gaze firmly and spoke firmly. "Asuka. We just laid the issue to rest and now you want to dig it up again? After all that? After our *promise*?" With that, I strode past her and left the classroom behind.

Asuka owed me a debt of gratitude and wouldn't disobey me. Sayaka knew better than to make trouble for Asuka's family without permission. Reassuring myself that everything would be fine, I solemnly made my way toward the student guidance office.

Standing in front of the student guidance office, I gave the door a light rap and a familiar female voice invited me in. I opened the door, and who do I find sitting there at the other end of the coffee table but Ms. Chiaki—our PE teacher and the only member of the faculty to realize that something more complicated might've been going on between Nonoka and me. Shizuki should have settled that little episode between me and her, so this encounter was a surprise.

"Ms. Chiaki, to what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked coolly, narrowing my eyes to show my displeasure. She jumped slightly in her seat.

"Sports Day," she replied calmly. "Let's have a little chat."

A smirk floated to my lips. "Don't tell me you're here to scold me for 'failing' Nonoka too?"

"Not quite. While I do find your approach to teamwork leaves much to be desired, I'm not looking to place blame," She stared at me firmly. "I just want to hear your side of the story."

I scoffed. "Guileless and Guileless. You and Nonoka really are two of a kind."

But Ms. Chiaki didn't flinch this time. Clearly, she already had her own theory and was just looking for any slip-up from me. Despite knowing I was playing right into her hands, I had no option but to press on. *Sosei Academy faculty—I've underestimated you for the last time.*

I sighed. "And what makes you think I even have a side to tell?"

"Azumaji had called in absent that morning. Yet there she was by your side during your little quarrel at the end of the day."

"Something, something curiosity, something, something cat. I advise you to drop this dangerous line of thought, Ms. Chiaki."

My threat was clear, but she only smiled. "I know the risks of crossing you, Ms. Sakurazaka, but it's my duty as an educator to understand my students."

"Goodness, what is this, a teen drama? So what, I'm just supposed to tell you everything because you asked?"

"Not at all. You can share if you want, but I know you won't."

Now thoroughly confused, I lowered my voice. "Then why call me here at all?"

"Because it'd be suspicious if nobody chewed you out after everything that happened, wouldn't it?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You're helping me?"

She paused, and her face grew suddenly serious, eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that was...telling. "I'd be in trouble if I couldn't pay my mortgage."

I blinked. Then an almost unbelieving smile crossed my lips. It was true that I'd threatened her with unemployment, but that had been to leave me alone, not join my cause. So why was she here, reaching out to me and implicating herself? "What am I, a comic book villain?" I retorted.

"Maybe you should be. It'd make you more believable," she replied.

"Believe what you want, the fact is I'm a self-important rich girl."

"A real self-important rich girl wouldn't feel the need to say that."

With that, she got up and poured me a cup of coffee.

"What's this?" I eyed the paper cup suspiciously.

"I called you here to chew you out, it'd be strange if you were only here for all of two minutes. Stay, finish your coffee."

I paused. "What brought about this change of heart, Ms. Chiaki?"

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’ve always put my students first.”

Realization settled across my face. Indeed, she has. There was no denying that seasoned educator Chiaki Urabe always had something up her sleeve. With that amusing thought, I took the proffered cup and tentatively took a sip.

After what felt like a safe chunk of time later, I left the student guidance office. As I closed the door behind me, I caught the sight of several students dashing down the hallway that led away from the office. It was as if they’d been camped outside the entire time, curious to see what had become of me.

So, this is what I’ve been reduced to, I thought wryly. A spectacle for ridicule and spite.

But this was exactly what I wanted, so instead of frowning, I let a smile spread across my face. Everything was going according to plan. As long as it stayed this way, Shizuku’s life would be secure. And the only ally I needed, the only person I needed to understand me, was Shizuki.

With that smile still plastered on my face, I started the walk back to my classroom. Suddenly, a lone figure blocked my path. Who was this nameless character so daring to confront me? I looked up, ready to face my next challenger—and promptly froze.

Before me stood not just any random adversary, but the final boss of the entire game.

“C-Cousin Kyosuke, what a surprise.”

“Hardly. I warned you, didn’t I? That if you ever proved poisonous to Shizuki’s name, I’d personally ensure your elimination.”

Episode Four

“**IS** our way of life a joke to you, Mio?”

I had *just* established myself as the villainess. I was at the starting line finally. So why, just as I felt for the first time that I might actually complete my mission, did Kyosuke show up? This was the last thing I needed—the heir to the entire Sakurazaka fortune, who once said he would personally ensure my elimination should I sully Shizuki’s name, coming to make good on his word.

He was the one person I couldn’t afford to make an enemy out of. In retrospect, it irked me that I hadn’t anticipated this encounter at all. Taking on the mantle of a villainess meant engaging in dubious deeds—naturally, Kyosuke would come a-knocking.

But there was no point agonizing over what-ifs. It didn’t matter who he was. If he dared step in my path, I had to overcome him for Shizuku’s sake and Shizuki’s. *Stand tall, Mio. You are a villainess!*

“I’m sorry?” I countered. “Whatever could you be referring to?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Kyosuke snapped. “Your actions have earned you nothing but contempt, and you’ve dragged Shizuki’s name through the mud. You disgrace the Sakurazaka name.”

Those...were more direct accusations than I had anticipated. My usual defense of deflection and denial wouldn’t work on someone like him, but neither would a more straightforward rebuttal of his claims—not when they were absolutely true. Still, I forced myself to respond.

“Cousin, it was *Shizuki* who adopted me—”

“So, I have no voice in the matter? Do you presume to look down on me? You think ‘heir’ is just a title?”

This was bad. Kyosuke was every bit a formidable opponent as Shizuki made him out to be. But what was my alternative? Throw in the towel without putting

up a fight? Tell Shizuku that her hope for a cure was dashed? And it wasn't just Shizuku anymore. I had wronged many in my quest. Failing now would invalidate their suffering. I had to complete my mission—and afterward let those I had wronged exact their justice.

“Not at all, cousin. You're entitled to your views. I was merely curious if you've thought about how it would reflect on Shizuki if I were to suddenly vanish without explanation.”

He shifted his stance. “Are you threatening me?”

His gaze seemed to penetrate my very soul. He was right, “heir” was not just a title. My shoe squeaked against the floor as I instinctively pulled back, feeling the sudden urge to escape, to cry out, *why me?* But I didn't. I stood firm and clutched the fabric of my skirt as the thoughts of all those I had hurt, Shizuku, and Shizuki, steeled me against my fear.

“Perish the thought,” I managed. “I'm just asking questions, is all.”

“Just asking questions, eh?” A smirk appeared on his lips. How could he remain so composed? It felt like he was taking out the trash while I was confronting Death itself. “Then, Mio, let me pose one to you. You're right. Ending your adoption would be a bad look for Shizuki. But...how many ways are there to skin this cat, I wonder?”

My voice faltered. There were many possible fates for a villainess that didn't involve disowning me—cloistering, an arranged marriage, complete erasure from history. They were all grim options, and Kyosuke was dead serious—he had the means to enforce any of these.

This was dire. I needed to speak, to do something, or everything I'd worked for would go up in smoke. I needed to remain here, but how... *How?!*

“Well, well, well, what do we have here? A little family feud?”

A new voice cut through the tension. I turned, my breath catching at the sight of Ruki.

Ruki?!

Ruki had come?! Why?! Wasn't he utterly disillusioned with me?

Catching my stare, he chuckled. “You’re always making that face, aren’t you?”

“What face?” I asked.

“Go look in a mirror,” he replied curtly, then turned his back to me—but only to stand between me and Kyosuke. “You know, when I heard the Sakurazakas had a prodigious heir, I expected someone with a touch more...vision.”

Kyosuke’s eyes narrowed. “Vision?”

“It’s true that all sorts of rumors are going around the school, painting Mio negatively. She’s guilty of failing to quell suspicious speculations about her character and...what else, exactly?”

“What exactly are you implying?” Kyosuke shot back, an eyebrow quirking.

I couldn’t help but be impressed. All my attempts to provoke Kyosuke had been ineffective, deflecting off of him effortlessly. Yet here was Ruki, piercing through his defenses in the opening gambit. True to form for the Yukishiro heir.

Suddenly, Kyosuke’s eyes flicked to me, then back to Ruki. “Taken a liking to her, have you?”

“I have,” Ruki replied instantly. “She’s interesting.”

“Interesting?” Kyosuke echoed, then shot me another glance, more quizzical this time.

No, I’m not interesting at all, I rebutted silently.

Then Kyosuke’s expression softened, and he hummed in thought. “Perhaps I have been too hasty in accepting these rumors as truth without subjecting them to further scrutiny.” Stroking his chin, he then looked at me. “All right. Mio, I’ll give you a chance to explain yourself.”

The situation was almost perfect. If Kyosuke and I were alone, I might not have hesitated to divulge everything. But Ruki’s presence complicated things immensely. The irony wasn’t lost on me that after handing me the perfect moment to clear the air, Ruki now stood as the largest obstacle to my confession. This might have been the best, maybe the only opportunity I had to plead my case, but how? Lie? No, Kyosuke would most assuredly follow up on whatever I told him and I’d be outed in an instant. Then what do I do? Tell the

truth? In front of Ruki?

My gaze involuntarily drifted to Ruki's broad shoulders. Was this his intention all along? To corner me into disclosing my plans under pressure? Uncertainty clouded my judgment, but one thing was clear: I needed to convince Kyosuke of my intentions as much as I needed to keep them hidden from Ruki. Now, how to achieve both?

Kyosuke was as sharp as a tack; Ruki was arguably sharper. Both were masters of reading the unsaid—of understanding the weight of words and the silence between them. How could I, against targets so wily, craft my words so cleverly that one would understand my true intentions while the other remained oblivious?

It seemed impossible. Panic began to claw its way up my throat. *What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?* Revealing everything to Ruki would spell the end of my run as the villainess. Fail to convince Kyosuke and it would be just as catastrophic. Either failure meant I wouldn't be able to fulfill my promise to Shizuki—and Shizuku would pay the ultimate price.

No, no, no, no, stop panicking, I commanded myself internally. *You made a promise to Shizuku. You swore that you would save her. That's why you spent all that time learning to become a villainess, isn't it? Remember what Shizuki told you. This isn't a game—this is real life. If the paths before you led to dead ends, forge a new one! There must be something you can exploit!*

There was.

The imbalance of information. Ruki had only joined the conversation midway; he lacked critical context that could work to my advantage. If Kyosuke and Ruki were astute enough to decipher subtext, I could use that same skill against them.

"Cousin," I began, locking eyes with Kyosuke. "You asked me if I considered 'heir' merely a title."

"So I did. What of it?" Kyosuke replied.

Perfect. He was following my lead, but Ruki, having missed the earlier part of our discussion, would be in the dark. "Allow me to address that. I don't think of

it as ‘merely’ a title. The world bends to your will, that is beyond dispute. It is my earnest hope, however, that the trajectory you choose mirrors your true intentions.”

Kyosuke’s concern for Shizuku was the root of his wariness toward me. The message I was trying to tell him was simple: he had every right to dispose of me, but he needed to weigh the consequences for Shizuku. Ruki, lacking the background, shouldn’t get any of this.

The vagueness, as well, was part of my plan. By not explaining the full reason, I left room for Kyosuke to interpret Ruki’s presence as the cause for my discretion. But that was just a sideshow. What mattered was that I had dangled Shizuki’s well-being before him. Given his protectiveness, I had no doubt he would tread carefully, using the vast resources at his disposal to uncover the truth instead of ridding me without a second thought. Of course, I couldn’t leave him to his own devices and just let him figure everything out, but I had at least mitigated the immediate threat to my safety. I now had time to consult Shizuki for advice and plan the next steps. And who knows, maybe those next steps involved gaining Kyosuke’s trust and cooperation. We were technically on team Shizuki, after all.

Yeah, this would work. I held Kyosuke’s gaze unwaveringly as he scrutinized me, searching for any hint of my true thoughts. After what felt like an eternity, he finally spoke. “Very well. You’ve bought yourself some time—for now.” With that, he turned and strode away.

As he rounded the corner, the tension that had coiled tightly within me began to unwind. My legs gave out and I pitched forward only to find myself caught by Ruki, who had swiftly stretched out his arms to support me. For a brief moment, I allowed myself to lean into his solid frame, savoring the unexpected comfort. Realizing what I was doing, I pushed him away and regained my composure.

“I help you, and this is my thanks?” he asked dryly.

“I don’t recall ever asking for you to help me, thank you very much,” I retorted sharply. But then I softened, biting back my harsher words. “Regardless, I suppose you have...helped me. Consider yourself in possession of

my favor.”

“Well, look at that. She can be gracious when she wants to, can’t she? A favor, eh? I’ll be holding you to that.”

He certainly doesn’t work for free, does he... But, I had to admit, without his intervention, I would have been hard-pressed to extricate myself from Kyosuke’s jaws. A favor seemed a fair price. However, there was one thing I still needed to understand.

“Why *did* you help me?” I pressed, my voice laced with genuine curiosity.

“What do you mean why?” he echoed, looking puzzled.

“I’ve proved myself to be irredeemable, haven’t I? So why still bother with me?”

He looked around, then back at me with an expression of disbelief. “You really still think so little of me?”

“I don’t think I do, but perhaps you could explain what you mean by that?”

I had always been playing the role of the antagonist. Poorly, at first, but with this latest episode, I had cemented my reputation by mocking Nonoka and her unwavering dedication to Miyu. Someone as devoted to their sibling as Ruki—who would come to love Nonoka precisely because of her loyalty to Miyu—should have found my behavior unforgivable. I had never once tried to explain myself, never hinted at the truth of that fateful day. So why was he still here? How was it that, unlike many others who had failed to prove their innocence, I stood here without even attempting to defend myself, yet still found belief in his eyes?

Ruki studied my face intently, then turned his back to me. “Come.”

“Where?”

“Shush. I distinctly recall saying you owe me one.”

“What? Oh, I mean, I *did*, but you’re cashing that in now? No, no, no. I’ll come, but the favor still stands. I just want to know where we’re going.”

Without a word, he strode off, leaving me with no choice but to chase after him. We navigated through the winding halls until we stopped before a

seemingly unused Corporate-only party room. He opened the door to reveal pitch darkness inside.

“Why have you brought me here?” I asked, unease creeping into my voice. Alarm bells were ringing in my head—entering a dark room alone with a guy wasn’t the smartest move, but this was Ruki. He wouldn’t do anything to me... would he?

As I stood in the doorway trying to make heads or tails of the situation, Ruki gave me a firm shove from behind. I stumbled into the room. “What are you—”

The lights suddenly flicked on, blinding me. I squinted against the brightness, and as my eyes adjusted, I saw that the party room was fully decorated. A long table near the center was laden with an array of dishes, and at the end of it, most conspicuous of all, was a cake with sixteen candles thoughtfully arranged in a circle.

“Happy birthday, Ms. Mio,” said a familiar, mellifluous voice. The pop of a party cracker split the air, and confetti rained down around me. As the wall of streamers parted, a familiar face emerged. My jaw dropped open.

“Ms. Rikka...”

She was another person I thought I had alienated for good. We hadn’t spoken since Sports Day. While our relationship wasn’t overtly hostile, it certainly had deteriorated enough to rule out birthday celebrations, or so I thought!

“What is this?” My voice came out as a weak, breathy whisper.

“What does it look like? The celebration of a dear friend’s birthday,” she replied, a playful smile on her lips.

“But...why? Even after I...”

I had said horrible things to Nonoka, ridiculed her efforts. The entire class despised me, so what were Rikka and Ruki doing celebrating my birthday?!

“Even after you...tried so hard to play the villain and push all your friends away?” Rikka said, almost as if she were teasing me.

“That’s not—!” I drew a sharp breath and pursed my lips shut. Reacting strongly would only prove Rikka right. But so did cutting myself off so abruptly,

didn't it?

Watching me fumble, Rikka laughed. "We know you're playing the role of the antagonist. For what end, we can't say, but don't worry, your secret's safe with us. Neither Nonoka nor the rest of the class will find out. You have my word."

"And mine," Ruki added.

Speechless. I was utterly speechless. How could they be so convinced that I was playing the antagonist? It was only then, in my shocked and dazed state, that I noticed two more people standing behind Rikka: Asuka and Sayaka. Asuka in particular looked like she had been up to no good.

"Was it you?" I asked, pointedly looking at her.

"I'll apologize for breaking our promise, and bear the consequences for that, but I won't apologize for telling the truth. It wasn't right, what was going on," Asuka said.

"I see," I muttered weakly.

I had to hand it to her. She had understood the assignment I'd given her about as well as she could have. By disclosing the truth to only Rikka and Ruki, she allowed me to claw back some semblance of normalcy while sparing the Akizukis the humiliation.

If only sparing the Akizukis the humiliation was the actual assignment!

Why was this happening to me...? Seriously, I struggled for months, painstakingly inching toward even the slightest resemblance to the villainess I needed to be, and now this?! All my efforts go up in smoke, just like that?! Sure, this setback wasn't insurmountable. With enough time, I could maybe regain the ground I had lost, but the thought I even had to just. Freaking. Hurt. Shizuku was depending on me. It felt like I was finally about to reach her lifeboat as she drifted away, only to watch someone kick it further out of reach.

So why... Why did I feel *relieved*?!

My life had lost all its prior meaning. Every bit of it I'd signed away the moment I agreed to save Shizuku. I should have been depressed, infuriated to learn that I had failed her yet again, but instead, I felt...relief. Joy, even, to be

understood, even though none of that should've mattered to me anymore.

"Ms. Mio," Rikka's voice snapped me from my thoughts. "I beg you not to judge Asuka too harshly. I must confess, I told her and Sayaka you were playing the villain."

I glanced at her; her face was pulled into a frown out of concern. Then Asuka and Sayaka; both looked pale, as if genuinely worried about my reaction and what I would do to them.

But as we all know by now, I...wasn't truly angry. Even if I so desperately wanted myself to be.

I couldn't blame Asuka. Or at least, I couldn't find it in myself to. It had been my plan, my initiative to rescue her from the clutches of an arranged marriage in the first place. I had deemed it necessary to preserve the plot, and thus I bore the consequences. She had broken our promise knowing better than most what happened to people who crossed me, and that was...kind of admirable, honestly.

"Be assured, Asuka, I won't criticize you for your actions," I soothed. "You went to Rikka out of concern for me, didn't you?"

At my words, she nodded eagerly, and tears began to well up in her eyes.

Just how terrified had she been? And she still took action, all for me?

How could I blame someone like that? Not to mention I was in no position to find fault with anyone in the first place. If I hadn't appeared so weak, so in need of other people's validation in the first place, Asuka wouldn't have gone to Ruki and Rikka.

What happened, happened. But that all ends here.

"Though I must correct this enduring delusion of yours here and now," I said.

I am the villainess.

I have committed myself to evil.

If there are still those who would show me kindness, I will reveal to them the folly of their actions.

For my sake, for my sister's sake.

With a sweep of my hair, I let out a haughty, refined laugh.

Now then, let's get to villainessin'.

RIKKA, Ruki, Asuka and Sayaka. *You may all be kind people, come to celebrate a good friend's birthday, but I will show you that there is nothing worth celebrating about me.*

"Me 'playing' a villain? Don't make me laugh, girls."

Sayaka made the first move. "Why is that act so important to you?"

I tilted my head. "Act? This isn't an act, dear."

"A real bad person wouldn't feel the need to go around proclaiming they are one," she replied.

"Just like how a good person wouldn't go around proclaiming they're a good person?"

Sayaka nodded.

"Generalizations, really? That's what we're going with today?" I countered. "Are we suggesting that we live in a world so simplistic that bad people never say they're bad and good people never say they're good?"

Complete B.S. I didn't even know what I was saying. But it didn't matter; the goal was to muddy the waters.

Asuka seemed poised to speak. "But you invited us to your house! We practiced so much for the kibasen! That was all for Nonoka, wasn't it?"

"It was to uphold my pride as a Sakurazaka. I believe that was made abundantly clear?"

Two targets down; Rikka stepped up to the plate. "Are you saying you don't care at all what happens to Ms. Nonoka's heart sister?"

"You mean a complete stranger? Heavens, am I supposed to care for every single person in need?"

Suffering is ubiquitous. We can't save everyone, so we prioritize loved ones. To Nonoka, Miyu was important—perhaps the only family she had left—but to me, she was nobody.

Next to try and probe for holes in my defense was Ruki. “By that logic, you’d save your own sister, wouldn’t you? What did Shizuki promise you?”

And, uh, find one he did. As expected of Ruki. But I knew this day would come, so I’d prepared an excuse beforehand. “Yes, I did request that in exchange for my adoption, Shizuku be transferred to a hospital with better care, but that was the extent of our deal.”

The most believable falsehoods are those seasoned with a grain of truth. Though that line didn’t exactly establish any villainous motivations, it didn’t preclude any either, leaving the door wide open for me to build on that. Unless Nonoka somehow learned about what I did for Miyu, I should be in the clear.

Yep, just keep laying it down. “Sayaka, Asuka, I befriended you because I just so happened to need a few pawns to carry out my will. The inherent power imbalance in our relationship ensures your inability to betray me.”

“That is *not* true!” Asuka yelled; Sayaka nodded silently next to her.

You two are good girls. I’m sorry I ever painted you as nothing but unthinking stooges. But sadly, this mental note is as close to an apology as you’re going to get.

“Yes, very good,” I said. “That level of unquestioning faith was precisely what I aimed to cultivate in you.”

My words seemed to have the intended effect, as the girls gasped in shock, any potential rebuttals they had evaporated into silence.

Seeing their stunned expressions, I couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret. Honestly, it was a little disappointing how things ended up this way. Had it been up to me, I would’ve kept them by my side, and not just because I had to. It was just too bad the circumstances were far from my control. If dropping Asuka and Sayaka was required to convince Rikka and Ruki of my intentions, I would drop them as readily as a gecko dropped its tail.

But just as I was about to continue, a sudden commotion drew my attention.

There seemed to be a disturbance outside the party room, breaking the tense silence that settled over us.

“This is a Corporate Legacy exclusive facility. Do you have a permission slip to enter?”

“No, we don’t. But you have to let us in, my friends are in there!”

“Well, I’m very sorry. But friend or not, I can’t let you in without a permission slip.”

It sounded like a conversation between the facility manager and a girl whose sweet and bubbly voice was unsettlingly familiar. *Don’t tell me that’s...*

“Nonoka, come on, you heard her, let’s go.”

It was. And she wasn’t alone. Not good. She was the last person I wanted to see right now.

Actually...no. This was a chance. A chance to close the book on the chapter of our relationship. Making that decision, I motioned for one of the attendants and told them to grant Nonoka entry. A moment later, the attendant returned with Nonoka and Natsumi in tow.

“Nonoka,” I said. “This place isn’t meant for the likes of you and your ilk. Kindly take your friend and be on your way.”

“Ms. Mio. I owe you everything!” she said.

Hm? That’s strange. I swear I just said something unequivocally dismissive and mean, didn’t I? Censured her with all my resolve, and yet, what was that? “I owe you everything”?

“Are you listening to me, Nonoka?” I asked.

“I am! Miyu’s surgery was a complete success!”

“Is that so? Good for her, I suppose?”

“I am!” my butt. You weren’t listening at all, were you? It took a special kind of person to declare their attentiveness so boldly when it was clearly absent.

“Oh, come on, Ms. Mio, there’s no use playing dumb now! You were the one who convinced her to go through with it, weren’t you?”

Wha—?! My whole being shook. I pretended to play it off, but Rikka, Ruki, Asuka, and Sayaka were already staring daggers into me. Stop it... Stop it! All my hard work... Not again!

“Wh-What on earth are you talking about, girl?” I deflected with a sweep of my hair. She had no proof.

“I don’t understand. Why don’t you want to take credit? You also asked Miyu to keep it a secret, didn’t you?”

“What?!” I yelled.

Wait, wait, wait... What?!

Miyu? We made a promise. A pinky promise. A pinky promise not to tell Nonoka!

“Oh, right! She wrote you a letter. Here.” Nonoka handed me an envelope.

I snatched it from her hands and began reading. I didn’t care that accepting the letter was as good as proof of our acquaintance. It was already blown when Nonoka produced that letter in the first place. I needed to know. I needed to know why she broke our promise!

Dear big sister Mio,

I’m all good now thanks to you!

I’m sorry for breaking our promise, but the truth is...my name is Miyu, not Miu! Which means your promise with “Miu” didn’t count. Tee-hee.

Who taught her that?! Who taught her she could break a promise over a technicality like that?! And seriously, “tee-hee?!” Who ends a letter with “tee-hee?!” The future of Japan might be in jeopardy now, all because of a “tee-hee!” “Tee-hee!”—the phrase that ruined a country!

I trusted her... I actually trusted her...

“Oh, but, she said she’d keep the other secret,” Nonoka said. “What other secret?”

The other secret? Shizuku?

“None of your business,” I snapped.

“Hmph. Fine, I get it. You like Miyu more than me,” she pouted.

You’re getting jealous? You’re seriously getting jealous?!

“You... I... Do you know how hard I...” I started to babble incoherently. *I swear Nonoka. I understood your concern for Miyu better than anyone else in this room. So do you know how hard it was to pretend I didn’t care?!*

“Nonoka, I think we should go,” Natsumi said, tugging on Nonoka’s arm.

“Oh. Yeah, let’s go.” Nonoka nodded at her, then looked at me. “Thank you again, Ms. Mio. I really do owe you everything. And just for the record, I never doubted you. I never doubted for a second you wouldn’t do the right thing.”

My heart softened. But I had to act otherwise as I stared into a wall, pretending I hadn’t heard.

“Um, yeah,” Nonoka added awkwardly. “Anyways, would you go see her again when you have the chance? It would really mean the world to her. She’s been asking to see her big sister Mio ever since she got out of the operating room.” She turned to Rikka and Ruki. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“Oh, not at all,” Rikka said. “In fact, we’re appreciative, aren’t we, cousin?”

“Indeed. That was thoroughly enlightening. Thank you, Nonoka,” Ruki added.

I could hear the smirks on their faces. Nonoka, with no idea what was happening, tilted her head in confusion before she excused themselves and left with Natsumi. As they reached the door, Natsumi paused and turned around.

“Ms. Mio, I apologize for my behavior on Sports Day. I reacted emotionally and lashed out at you, and I deeply regret it. Nonoka was right about you all along.”

Then, without another word, without even waiting for my response, she closed the door behind her. I was left all alone with a hungry pack of wolves.

Rikka snapped open her folding fan and giggled coquettishly.

Yep, here we go.

“What was that you said earlier, Ms. Mio? ‘Nonoka? I couldn’t care less about that girl!’” she said in a mocking tone.

“The lady certainly doth protest too much, doesn’t she?” Ruki said with a sly grin.

“I knew it!” Sayaka and Asuka added.

Well, let’s see; what could I possibly say here? First, a quick recap. I was on a mission to get my hands on a cure for my sister’s terminal illness. To do so, I had to unite the zaibatsus. To accomplish that, I had to set Nonoka up with the love of her life. And to achieve that, I needed to be denounced as the villainess and face my downfall.

Yep. I needed to be a despicable villainess who did despicable things. Otherwise, why would I try so hard to fight against my conscience trying to do things I obviously found uncomfortable?

Okay. Good recap. But where did I stand now? I had just been thoroughly and convincingly exposed to *not* be a despicable person. At this rate, I’d never earn the infamy I needed to be denounced. What was worse, any other wicked deed I committed from this point onward would be seen as some front for another good deed, and that meant I was *really* screwed.

On the other hand, what were my options, realistically? Admit that I’d been playing a part this entire time? No, absolutely not.

Thus, even at rock bottom, my only option was...to keep digging.

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not like I did that to help Nonokaaa!” I yelled, fleeing from the party room at full speed.

BACK at the Sakurazaka estate, Shizuki had returned. We found ourselves in her room, seated opposite each other, with an interesting video playing on the large monitor for the both of us. The video showed a high school girl in her uniform, her face beet red as she ran from the room yelling:

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not like I did that to help Nonokaaa!”

Yeah, I know. She got my most embarrassing moment on video somehow.

She paused the video, freezing the frame to catch me mid-stride. Carefully, she laid the remote control aside, her eyes slowly drifting from the screen to meet mine. “I’m curious, do you have to try to be that tsundere, or does it just come naturally to you?”

Elbows on my knees, I buried my face in my palms. “Just kill me now.” I shook my head. “I...I have no excuse.”

I mean, there was nothing better I could say to clear up what was captured in high-definition right in front of us. You know, it was really strange because I *swore* people who reincarnate as villainesses usually struggle in vain to escape their doom. Why was I the only one who had trouble shaking off what seemed like boundless trust the game’s characters placed in me? *What happened to that restoring force I was so confident wasn’t strong? I believe in you now; please, do your thing!*

Shizuki’s half-smirk faded. “In all seriousness, Mio, your knack for getting into trouble is becoming a problem. I know you’re trying very hard, but I’m starting to think you can’t bring yourself to be evil.”

My heart fluttered. “W-Wait, please! Give me another chance. I can do it. I can prove myself!” Desperate, I shot up and slammed my palms on the coffee table before us. Shizuki couldn’t give up on me now! If she did, Shizuku would...!

“Calm down, I’m not saying you need to go,” Shizuki said calmly. “I only meant that you aren’t fit to be evil.”

“I...I don’t understand. What use is a villainess who can’t be evil?”

“Have you already forgotten what I told you? This world might be based on a game, but it isn’t one. We can think outside the box to accomplish our goals.”

Right, she’d said that before, back when I had struggled to reach the villainess’s grades before entrance exams. While missions in a video game were hard-coded and inflexible, missions in the real world were significantly more malleable.

“You mean the means don’t matter as long as we reach the right end?” I ventured.

“Precisely. Consider it this way: Nonoka has assimilated well at school,

demonstrated a strong drive for self-improvement, and—if the data on her latest outing is to be trusted—exhibited a fashion sense leagues better than before.”

“I see. So, she’s bettering herself just like she would’ve in the game.”

Now that I thought about it, she was more outgoing than before, carried herself more gracefully, earned better grades, and had a trustworthy circle of friends...

But wait, does that mean... “The good ending—is it possible without a villainess?” I dared to hope.

Shizuki gave me a transient, unreadable smile. “I suppose that depends on how you define ‘good.’ Good for whom, exactly? For instance, if ‘good’ were defined as ‘advantageous to the Sakurazaka Group,’ then yes. We can weather the impending storm with or without your involvement.”

“Right. You know the future, after all,” I said with an air of resignation.

It would be beyond easy for Shizuki to save the Sakurazaka Group. All she needed to do was secure a substantial short position on vulnerable stocks—which she could because she reincarnated. Then when the crisis hits and the markets plummet, she and her family would profit immensely and laugh all the way to the bank as the only financial stronghold left standing in the wake of an era-defining economic collapse.

Though the amount of everyday people who would suffer from such a self-serving strategy was...unthinkable.

“On the other hand,” Shizuki continued, “if ‘good’ were defined as the survival of your sister, that ending is also easily achieved. I could buy the pharmaceutical company spearheading the research tomorrow if I so wished.”

“But you wouldn’t, because you would see no benefit in it.”

“Well, I suppose,” she replied with a noncommittal sigh.

Shizuki’s goal, though I hadn’t heard her say so outright, was no doubt to ensure all of Japan made it through the financial crisis. Saving Shizuku’s life was just an afterthought—my reward for a job done right. In other words, what

Shizuki was trying to tell me was that a “good ending” couldn’t just be good for just me or just her, but for everyone.

“Is there no other way to save Shizuku and all of Japan?” I asked.

“No, the Ruki route is the only way,” she replied, then turned thoughtful. “Although, I suppose that’s not entirely true. There are other ways, though they are far more treacherous than our current path. There very well may come a day when we have no choice but to brave such peril, but fortunately, that day is not today.”

“Far more treacherous, how?”

“The Sakurazaka Group *could* be mobilized to pursue complete dominance over the other zaibatsus. If we could stand at the helm and call the shots, there’s a good chance we can withstand the crisis.”

“Complete dominance over the other zaibatsus? Is that even possible?”

“Not for me.”

If not you, then who?

“There is a third option,” Shizuki said after a pause. “But it involves making a sacrifice—Nonoka.”

“I don’t think that...”

“No, I don’t think either.”

I nodded quietly. It wasn’t that I hesitated at the thought of sacrificing others for my goal. If I wasn’t willing to go that far, I couldn’t claim to be truly determined to save Shizuku. I had already deceived many for this cause.

But that did not mean I would sacrifice Nonoka to save myself. Sacrificing anyone was a last resort reserved for moments of crisis.

“Given that none of the other options work for us, that leaves us with our original plan,” I said.

“Indeed,” Shizuki agreed. “You signed up to be the villainess, and be the villainess you shall.”

“But it kind of feels like we *have* to change something, don’t we?”

“Nope. Stay the course. The one you just set, that is.”

I felt a twinge of unease. “Sorry, but just so that I’m absolutely sure I heard what I think I heard—you *want* me to lean into the tsundere bit?”

“Correct,” she replied instantly.

I grunted in discomfort.

I get what she was saying. It was a fine plan for me to play the tsundere until the very end, where in one, foul move, I overturned everyone’s perception and became the bad guy. You know, like so:

“You tricked us!”

“Have I? From day one, I’ve been nothing but honest about my cruel intentions. Perhaps now you’ll take my words seriously.”

I had considered that possibility. Come to think of it, I was pretty sure we had even discussed such an approach. While it suited our goals, it didn’t exactly scream “villainess.”

Hm.

I snuck another glance at the monitor. Continue that? Continue being *that* trainwreck?

“This is going to be an embarrassing three years,” I said quietly as my cheeks turned a rosy pink from the shame.

Shizuki’s face hardened. “Mio, the potential embarrassment isn’t what should concern you. You realize that this means you will now be actively forging a bond between Nonoka and the others—a bond that you will eventually have to break.”

“Right... I’ll still have to betray them, won’t I?”

Betraying them now was already hard enough. It had taken everything I had and more just to do what I had done at the kibasen. The thought of having to betray them again, with an even stronger bond, made my chest tighten with pain.

Still...

“I’m prepared to do what I must. I am the villainess, and I will lead everyone to their happily ever afters.”

Even if that meant facing my own doom.

I smiled softly. Shizuki’s reaction was muted, as if she had expected this from me all along. She regarded me quietly, an almost imperceptible look of concern creased her brow.

Epilogue

A few days had passed since the party room incident. In the intervening period, my standing at school had become incredibly...complicated. What I mean by that is...remember how my actions at Sports Day had alienated everyone, making me persona non grata?

Well, that was still the case, except that...Nonoka had reverted to her habit of, well, being my number one fan. As you might imagine, this left everyone in class thoroughly confused.

In the end, Nonoka had to explain to everyone that I was the one who convinced Miyu to get the surgery. This revelation slowly restored things back to the way they were pre-Sports Day, but not entirely.

While my classmates now knew I had convinced Miyu, they still didn't understand why I had been absent. Some believed I might have had a noble reason for missing it, while others suspected I had somehow duped Nonoka.

In all honesty, this hung jury situation wasn't at all disadvantageous. Maybe I was good, maybe I was bad. Being caught in the middle made it easier for me to eventually sway to the bad side and make it believable.

Though, I still had to worry about Rikka and Ruki. They were the only ones who knew everything—both the reason for my absence on Sports Day and that I helped Miyu on Nonoka's behalf. They had remained oddly quiet about it, which I was grateful for because it meant I didn't have to start over and act like a tsundere in front of everyone, but...not knowing why they kept quiet unnerved me.

It was entirely possible that when Asuka blabbed on me, she had divulged the whole rationale I had fed her about not wanting to hurt the pride of the Akizukis, and Rikka and Ruki had accepted that. But I couldn't quite believe they would buy the excuse. Not that it was entirely flimsy; the potential hit to the Akizukis' reputation was very real. Still, I couldn't be sure.

Ugh, why are unknowns so stressful? At the end of the day, it didn't matter. I had a more pressing matter to devote my attention to—mustering up the courage for the eventual betrayal of my closest friends. So, I shelved my thoughts and focused on the missions delivered to my phone.

That being said, I wasn't exactly attempting rocket science this time of year. It was finals season, so besides the occasional modeling job, it was all studying all the time. Then, one day, Nonoka invited me to a group study session.

"We are holding a group study session, and wondered if you'd like to join us?" Nonoka asked me.

Seriously, this girl... I thought with a sigh. Glancing past her, I sized up what "we" meant. Behind her were Natsumi, Mizuki, and Riku. A four-person study group, eh? Natsumi and Mizuki looked rather flustered, while Riku was...pretty stone-faced. This certainly didn't seem like a genuine "we wanted to" moment.

"Nonoka, have you asked the other members of your party whether they would appreciate my presence?" I asked.

"Oh, uh." She turned around. "You all don't mind, do you?"

Of course, they would, I thought internally. Maybe they heard my thoughts, maybe they didn't, but they stuck to their silence. A beat later, however, Natsumi said, "I don't mind." That paved the way for Mizuki to nod and for Riku to acquiesce.

"And there you have it," Nonoka said. "So, what do you say, Ms. Mio?"

A strained smile crossed my lips. Before, I wouldn't have hesitated to rebuff her with a choice "get real," but now...

"All right. If you need my help *that* desperately."

No more running. No more fear of hurting others. I would get as close to Nonoka as I could...and destroy her trust in the end. Nobody seemed to have expected a positive response from me; Nonoka's jaw dropped in surprise.

"What?" she whispered.

"Don't need me? Never mind then," I said.

"Wait, wait, no! We would be so glad to have you!" she scrambled to say, her

face lighting up with pure joy, completely innocent of the fact that one day I would have to hurt her again.

But such thoughts weren't allowed to me, were they? If I faltered now, how could I muster up the courage to do what I had to when it mattered? Villainesses mustn't be soft. I needed to embrace the feeling of using kind, good-natured people like Nonoka for my benefit.

Telling myself that, I forced the better parts of my brain to switch off. "Then you wouldn't mind if Asuka and Sayaka joined us as well, would you?" I posited, glancing at the girls in question.

The villainess was my role; I had to face my doom—but not Asuka and Sayaka. They had to—I needed them to—walk their own path. To that end, I would set them up now. I gave them a look that said, *apologize*.

They nodded and stepped up to Nonoka.

"Ms. Nonoka, we are truly sorry for what happened on the day of the entrance exams," Asuka said, bowing her head deeply.

"Can you ever forgive us?" Sayaka bowed as well.

The din of the classroom quieted, all eyes swiveling to us—but when were we ever not the center of attention? Nonoka snapped out of her shock and hastily said, "Please, don't bow!"

Asuka and Sayaka slowly raised their heads to look at her. "You...forgive us?" Sayaka asked.

"I mean, *yeah!*" Nonoka replied. "That was so long ago, of course, I forgive you."

"I see. Then, thank you, Nonoka," Sayaka said.

Just like that, my two girls were on speaking terms with Nonoka—officially, now. I flicked open my fan to cover my face. "So, what's the venue?" I asked.

"We...don't have one yet," Nonoka answered.

I swear to... But I bit back my words and instead offered a more diplomatic, "Then how about using one of the Corporate study rooms?"

“Oh, that’d be perfect!” she replied. Happily, but still not as happily as when I told her I would be joining her. Seriously, just what made me so trustworthy in her eyes? I didn’t get it.

With the venue decided, I promptly reserved a study room. It wasn’t long before we gathered there—me, Nonoka, her friends, my underlings, and Riku. Seven people in total, six girls, and one guy.

Now hold on a minute, you might say. What is this, a harem? But honestly, I wouldn’t be so quick to envy Riku. He looked pretty uncomfortable among this crowd. Nonetheless, his presence was indicative of his interest in Nonoka—or so I wanted to think. I would’ve liked to support him, but unfortunately, it was the Ruki route we were aiming for. Sorry, bud. In fact, wasn’t it about time for me to do something to get Ruki and Nonoka closer? Ideally, I wouldn’t have to do anything, and they would just drift closer naturally, but yeah...

Just then, Riku, noticing my gaze, looked up from his notes. “Is it true you were the one who convinced Nonoka’s friend to get the surgery?”

Really? You’re going to ask that? I wanted to retort but bit my lip. “Hardly,” I said.

“It’s true,” Nonoka said immediately after.

“Which is it?” Riku asked.

“It’s not true,” I said.

“It *is* true,” Nonoka interjected.

Oh, boy. This was liable to go on forever. I then noticed Natsumi and Mizuki were watching this exchange with conflicted smiles on their faces. Did they think I was being difficult like I wanted them to? If so, great.

“All right. Who am I to believe?” Riku asked.

I responded with a dismissive, “Believe who you want, but don’t come crying to me when you’re left holding the bag.”

“All right,” Riku said. “Look, I owe you an apology for how I treated you the other day. I jumped to conclusions without knowing the whole story, and that wasn’t fair of me.”

“My, whatever could you be talking about? I haven’t the foggiest,” I said curtly, moving my pencil across the pages of my notebook.

How was that for tsundere? I wasn’t the most well-versed on the trope, but I at least thought it sounded like the kind of line that might foreshadow an eventual heel-turn.

The moment I pondered this, Nonoka, who had been watching our exchange, opened her mouth. “Ms. Mio.”

Her voice had a bite to it that was completely out of character. There was no way she was...jealous of me, right? That would be bad. She was supposed to like Ruki, not Riku. That fear, however, proved founded with Nonoka’s following remark.

“I don’t understand this part. Could you help me?” she asked, pushing herself between me and Riku.



Oh. She was jealous of...Riku? Maybe it wasn't the misstep into the Riku route I should be worried about, but the villainess route? Just kidding, because that wasn't an actual route...right?

Sighing conspicuously, I continued with my best tsundere impression. "All right. *This* time, but don't think you'll be making a habit of it."

Underneath, though, I was having fun. It felt so liberating to finally be able to interact with Nonoka in a positive manner instead of tearing her down all the time. There was still the eventual betrayal to keep in mind, but as long as I didn't think too hard, yeah, I was having fun. Shoving that worry to the back of my mind, I continued to jot away in my notebook.

HEAPING spoonfuls of prickliness with just a sprinkling of affection here and there—this was the perfect recipe to catalyze Nonoka's growth, now as a supportive friend instead of a cruel adversary. Days passed, finals came and went, and then our grades came out. During lunch break, I headed to the corridor to check the bulletin boards where the exam scores were posted.

I scanned the bulletin boards and there it was—Nonoka's name, in the top fifty. And she was solidly in there too, not just barely managing to squeak in like her character had in the game, meaning we were doing better than expected. I said "we" because I had also improved. By adjusting my targets to keep up with her growth, I could maintain that perfect gap between her rank and mine—not too large as to be insurmountable, not too small as to give her the impression she could catch up with ease.

I then spotted Rikka and Ruki's names up there, which was no surprise, but also Asuka and Sayaka's. Those girls had clearly put in the work. They weren't in the top fifty, but had improved significantly since midterms—thanks, at least in part, to our joint study sessions.

It was frankly heartening to see them do so well. They might have been my underlings in the game, but here in the real world, they deserved so much more than to suffer a fall from grace alongside me.

The goal was to spare them that fate, but that was a concern for way further

down the line. The immediate goal, the one I should be devoting all my energy to in addition to motivating Nonoka to better herself, was to bring her closer to Ruki. Currently, the two were no better than classmates. I carried myself to the courtyard to better ponder this question—of how I might bridge the gap between. As I stood there against the trunk of an ancient tree, the afternoon sun softly dappled my face through the leaves, I heard footsteps approach.

Just as I hastily fixed my hair and smoothed my uniform, Ruki appeared.

“Mio, funny running into you,” he said.

“Indeed, what business have you out here?” I replied.

“I was ruminating on a particularly thorny problem, but—” He took a step closer to me. “I think I may have just found my answer.”

“And what you mean by that is?”

“Summer break is coming up.”

“Yes, I’m well aware. What of it?”

Peering over my face, Ruki propped an arm on the tree I was leaning on. “I need you, Mio.”

My heart skipped a beat. But then I realized the odd phrasing. *“I need you?” Yeah, as in, “I need you to come shopping with me,” right? Come on, big boy, give me your best shot. You can’t fool me. Your heart belongs to Nonoka, not me.*

To center myself, I swept my hand through my hair and switched into villainess mode. “You’ll need to try harder to get a rise out of me.”

“Hm?” Ruki said before catching on. “My apologies, I left out some important context there, didn’t I? I need you, Mio—to be my fiancée this summer.”

Hah. That’s what I thought.

Wait.

What?

“Y-You need a...a...what?!” I said. Maybe yelled.

In contrast to my outburst, Ruki was completely unruffled. “A fiancée. Wife-

to-be, a woman to whom I'm engaged to be married."

"I-I-I know what a fiancée is! Just...why do you need one? And why are you asking me?!"

"Because why not you?"

"E-Explain yourself." I hugged myself tight, now thoroughly on guard against Ruki.

"Remember when you said that getting in with me, the Yukishiro family's future head, was the obvious choice?"

Did I? I thought to when I took his hand to dance at the new student mixer. "I suppose I did. What of it?"

"You forgot, didn't you?"

I didn't respond, just turned away in a sulk. The nostalgia with which I now held that memory surprised even me. But now that I thought about it, those were the good old days, weren't they? Back then, I had the freedom to make choices, to deviously manipulate Nonoka and Riku by cozying up to Ruki. Now, I was just this emotionally constipated, unable-to-be-honest-with-herself trainwreck of a girl.

"Well, this is your in," Ruki continued. "So why are you so hesitant to take it all of a sudden?"

Ruki was right. This was my "in"—if an in was what I had been after! At the time, I had only wanted to say that to seem irredeemably self-serving, not to actually have him offer me this chance or whatever!

Another thought popped into my head.

"All right. There's something in it for me, but what's in it for you?" I asked.

Ruki looked at me like I was the sorriest thing in the world, and sighed. *Really?!*

"What are you plotting?" I pressed.

"Plotting,' really. I'm hurt. But I'll admit, I may have omitted a few choice details. The true request is that I would like you to pretend to be my fiancée at

a party this summer.”

“It’s a request, is it?”

“Mm-hm. And I believe you owe me one, don’t you?”

Well, now I really couldn’t say anything. That darn favor—I knew it would come back to bite me in the ass someday.

Ruki must have thought he had me cornered with this move. That I’d be the kind of person who would honor my word no matter what. And maybe, in most cases, he would be right. I would uphold my promise to most people, to Rikka, even—but not to you, Ruki.

You were destined for Nonoka, not me. You were the other half of the key needed to unlock this good ending, and if there was one thing that was absolutely off-limits for me, it was to do anything that might jeopardize your future relationship with her.

So yeah, sorry Ruki. You really thought you had me there, huh? That I would be a woman of outstanding integrity and honesty? That’s just too bad for you, because that just isn’t the kind of girl I—

My phone buzzed. *What now? I was just about to reject Ruki to his face.*

It was the notification of a new mission being added to my app. I quickly excused myself from Ruki and opened it.

[Accept Ruki’s proposal, and earn the trust of the Yukishiro zaibatsu.]

You’re kidding me. How did she even know about this? But that tired line should’ve been the last question on my mind. Why was she instructing me to get close to Ruki? Wasn’t that completely counter to my mission of bringing him and Nonoka together, the pairing I’d been hired to facilitate in the first place? Or was there something she knew that I didn’t?

Then again, none of that mattered. Because ever since that fateful day, I had pledged to trust Shizuki completely. Blindly, even. She would be the one to save Shizuku. So, whatever she commanded, I would obey. Reaffirming this to

myself, I calmed my racing heart and, as always, swept my hand through my hair.

Now then, let's get to villainessin'.

Side Story 1: What Happened That Summer

A few days after Ruki approached me with his proposal, he brought another idea to me.

“Ruri won an award at one of her junior piano recitals. You might think that’s a ludicrous reason to throw a party next weekend, but—”

“No, not at all,” I interrupted. I understood completely his love for his younger sister and his desire to celebrate her achievements. “What could be a more fitting cause for celebration? Despite her frailty, Ruri not only persevered but triumphed in her recital. You must be over the moon.”

His eyes crinkled fondly—thinking of his darling sister, no doubt. “Indeed, I am.”

That look of pure affection... Print it, frame it, put it on an event CG, and no doubt it would make every girl who has ever wished for a doting older brother swoon their heart out. This guy never missed a day to prove his worth as the main love interest.

“But you still haven’t answered my question,” I said. “What role do I have to play in all this?” I tilted my head in confusion. He hadn’t mentioned anything about a fiancée yet, had he?

“Right,” he replied. “As it turns out, Ruri is rather mortified by the idea of a party centered around her. So, I told her that if she agreed to it, that might be her chance to see her beloved big sister Mio again.”

“How...uncanny...” I muttered.

Eerily reminiscent of what had happened with Miyu, Sports Day, and the operation. Coincidence? I think not. To my knowledge, a similar event never transpired in the game, which made it likely that this was some scheme Ruki concocted based on precedence after seeing what happened with Nonoka. He probably thought he could get me to agree if he set up a similar scenario as if the key to getting me to do anything was to invoke the word “sister.”

It was just too bad that the magic word was actually “Shizuku.” If it was anyone else’s sister and they tried to hamper my efforts for Shizuku, I wouldn’t hesitate to throw them under the bus. Though on the flip side of that, maybe Ruri wasn’t off the table as long as she *didn’t* get in my way?

Then the crucial question was: Was she in my way or not? I wasn’t sure I had a good answer, considering how far off we’ve veered from the game’s storyline at this point. This seemed like an ask Shizuki for advice kind of deal.

“Do you mind if I hold off on my RSVP for now?” I asked.

“Of course not. But do try and tell me by the day before.”

“I will. Just need to check my schedule.”

Later that night at home, I went to see Shizuki who was back from overseas. I told her all about Ruki’s party for Ruri; she looked rather unamused as she took everything in.

“Do you want to attend, Mio?” she finally asked after I had finished explaining.

“I’m not sure I would say I *want* to, but you did assign me the task to accept, no? I still don’t understand why you wanted me to agree, but still...”

Sure, I hadn’t pressed her immediately for details, but I hadn’t done so because I trusted she would clarify in due time. Now, the situation necessitated that I seek more context to make an informed decision. What about that was strange enough to warrant me that look?

“Yes, you’re right, I did tell you to accept *that*, but *this* is...” Shizuki began.

“What?”

“Never mind. This is a golden opportunity. I want you to figure it out for yourself.”

“Wait, huh? Did I miss something?”

Well, that was cryptic! And scary! I racked my brain to see if I had overlooked some crucial detail, but she interrupted me before I got very far. “If you’re wondering, the fiancée thing is completely fine. Ruki doesn’t have a lot of choice in the matter.”

“He doesn’t?” I replied. “Is this about the game’s restoring force, or whatever?”

“Right. I mentioned before how Nonoka can’t just waltz into Ruki’s life and marry him, yes? Just as how one might need to trigger a condition or hit a certain requirement to clear a mission in a game, one must gain the Yukishiro family’s approval before they can even consider marrying Ruki. However, therein lies the notable exception of—”

“Him taking a fiancée as a performative deterrent...”

A decoy could be very useful in warding off unwanted advances—it seemed like the only relevant option. It seemed like a significant matter, but Shizuki’s calm demeanor assured me that this probably wasn’t as big of a deal as I thought.

“We don’t live in a game, Mio,” Shizuki continued. “Do you know why I’m not worried if Ruki takes a liking to you instead of Nonoka?” She looked at me straight in the eye.

“Because in real life, Ruki could easily have a change of heart?” I ventured.

“Precisely. Fictional romance takes certain liberties when it comes to depicting relationships. Real life isn’t nearly as dramatic. People’s feelings are transient, often changing for reasons that seem inexplicable.”

“Right...”

While readers of the genre would despise a story with a fickle love interest, reality was replete with them. But why was she telling me this now? The only possible reason I could think of was...

“Are you worried about me?” I asked.

“I don’t want you to get hurt any more than necessary,” she replied quickly.

Everything clicked into place. Her earlier question about not worrying if Ruki liked me was a veiled warning. She wanted me to realize the inevitable outcome if I let my heart get entangled: heartbreak.

“You’re right,” I asserted, my voice gaining strength. “Ruki’s incredible. Every day, I’m reminded of why he’s the main love interest. I think he’s attractive,

considerate, an all-around catch.”

“Mio...”

I shook my head, cutting her off. “But so are you. I think you’re stunningly beautiful, and you never even boast about it. You’re the kindest person I know. You’re an amazing sister, one who I love with all my heart.”

She studied me for a moment. “Are you trying to tell me you love Ruki as a friend, and nothing more?”

I didn’t answer directly, just smiled vaguely. “I love Rikka, Nonoka, even Sayaka and Asuka. They’re all dear friends to me. But make no mistake—” I straightened, my eyes fierce. “I may have many friends, but I only have one real sister. When it comes down to it, my choice is clear.”

This was my declaration of determination. I wasn’t saying I wouldn’t be hurt or that everything would be fine—just that I was prepared. I understood the risks, and I knew that with my intentions hidden as they were, I didn’t deserve to call myself a true friend. But for my sister, I’d face whatever came my way.

“The closer you get to someone, the harder it is to hurt them,” Shizuki conveyed. “You understand this as well?”

“I do,” I answered instantly. “If they say, ‘You tricked us!’ I’ll smile in their face and respond, ‘Yes, what of it?’”

Seeing the villainous grin that had spread across my face, Shizuki’s own composure cracked. “Very well,” she replied with a wry smile. “It seems you’ve thought things through. In that case, go—attend the party. Do me proud, won’t you?”

“Of course. I won’t let you down.”

And so, my new mission was officially sanctioned, and my presence at the Yukishiro’s party was confirmed. A few days later, I received a package from Ruki.

“Well, this is definitely a ball gown,” I muttered to myself, holding up the garment. It was a passionate, scarlet affair. While strapless, its layered fabric made it not as revealing as one might expect. I quite liked it—which only made

me wonder how he managed to buy me something so in tune with my tastes.

“Not to mention my size, as well...” I muttered, holding it up to myself.

“I heard the dressmakers at SIDUKI received a request for a custom ball gown,” Shannon noted as she helped me get dressed.

“That makes sense. I didn’t know they made gowns as well. Wait, they just give out my measurements to anyone who asks?” I glared suspiciously at Shannon, but she didn’t so much as flinch.

“Of course not,” she replied. “Master Ruki’s order was to have a dress made in your size, everything after that was handled in house.”

“Ah, okay. I guess that’s fine, then...”

It still seemed a bit off to me, but if this was how the elite did things, then who was I to question it? I’d heard it wasn’t exactly rare for clothing to be gifted either.

“Did you know, milady?” Shannon continued. “When a gentleman gifts a lady a garment, it carries with it the implication that he wishes to undress her from it later,” she said as dryly as possible.

I looked at her with an eyebrow raised in amusement. One thing was for sure: Whatever talents Shizuki saw to hire Shannon as her right-hand woman, acting certainly wasn’t it. “Did Shizuki tell you that if that line were to rattle me, you should stop me from going? Has she always been such a worrywart?” I gave her a teasing smile.

Her eyes fell away slightly. “Only when it comes to you.”

“Yeah. I know.”

She had every reason to be. Though recently, I couldn’t help but feel she was being just a touch overprotective. I mean, I had signed on to face my downfall in the first place. Shizuku’s life depended on it. So any care between now and then just felt kind of...unnecessary?

But then, Shizuki’s words from a few days ago echoed in my mind:

The closer you get to someone, the harder it is to hurt them.

Could it have been that she was actually telling herself that? If so, how could I ease her pain? Simply telling her I would be fine would be easy, but it seemed like a hollow reassurance, especially given that we were both well aware of what awaited me.

I felt a little helpless. Though, maybe there was nothing I could do but take things one step at a time and see this mission through. Fortunately, I could do just that with this new task at the party. Succeeding in it would bring us closer to our goal. Yes, that was it. Striving to face my doom with dignity was the best way to repay Shizuku's kindness.

BEFORE I knew it, the weekend arrived, bringing with it the day of the party. I was clad in Ruki's gown and en route to Ruri's celebration. As the limousine glided to a halt, I stepped out to the grand facade of a luxury hotel under the Yukishiro Group's ownership. I flashed my invitation to the doorman, who then escorted me to the event hall on the top floor, and...wow. There were easily over a hundred guests in attendance. By then, I should have gotten used to how zaibatsu families did things, but *really*? All this for an award at a piano recital?

This extravagant setup must have been why Ruri was so apprehensive about the party—she probably anticipated the excess. Yeah, it completely made sense now. In fact, I'd wager Ruki did something sneaky in getting her to agree to it. Something elaborate such as getting Ruri to agree to the party by telling her I'd be attending. I didn't peg Ruki for the kind of guy to disregard his little sister's wishes, but he was definitely the kind who would resort to chicanery to ensure he wasn't "technically" disregarding his little sister's wishes. *Yep, can't be too careful around a guy like him.*

Composing myself at the event hall entrance, I took a deep breath and stepped inside. The first thing I noticed was the abundance of family groups. Almost no guests appeared to have come alone, or like me, alone but with a maid (Shannon) in tow. I then realized something else:

"They're all keeping to themselves..." I muttered.

The families—they all stayed together. That was why I had recognized them as such. They weren't scattered about, mingling with other guests and blending

in as solo attendees, but stayed within their own circles. Curious, I asked Shannon why that was.

She replied, “The star of the party is the Yukishiro heir’s beloved younger sister. Should any son or daughter gain her favor, it could secure the future of their parents’ enterprises. Conversely...”

“If they slighted her in some way, all they had worked for might crumble overnight...”

You know, before, I believed those at the top of the corporate world acted responsibly, almost to an inhuman degree. I imagined them as stoic stewards of the economy, calculating and unfeeling, never letting something as capricious as mood or personal feelings get in the way of a good business deal or decision. However, since becoming a Sakurazaka, my take on the matter has become a shade more nuanced. Yes, these were logical and rational businessmen and women who wouldn’t ruin lives over a hurt feeling or two, but that didn’t mean that interpersonal relations, favors, and things like that didn’t factor in at all when making a decision.

But, of course, this was Ruki we were talking about. Kids will be kids—surely, he would overlook minor, accidental slights against—

Ruri. This is Ruri you’re talking about, I reminded myself. You know what? Never mind. When it came to her, all bets might just be off the table.

Anyway, the point is—it was only natural the parents were being watchful of their children at a party like this. Better safe than sorry, after all. On the other hand...

“Shizuki really is quite bold sending me here, isn’t she?” I muttered.

“A sign of her trust in you, I’m sure,” Shannon replied. “Whatever it is about you that attracts trouble like no other also seems to make you exceptionally likeable.”

“I would love to take that as a compliment, but...” *I am the villainess,* I thought with a sigh. Even if I did make a blunder, that would just mean I’d be back on the villainess route once more. *Classic Shizuki, always coming in clutch with the backup plans.*

Just then, a nearby family of attendees noticed and approached me.

“Yukishiro-affiliated folk, if I’m not mistaken?” I whispered to Shannon.

“Indeed, they are,” replied Shannon as she filled me in, and the name immediately rang a bell. Besides my main objective tonight, Shizuki had given me a few additional tasks—people to meet if the opportunity arose, but not at the expense of the main mission. And here was one of them, walking up to me now. Well, this was a welcome way to kick off the function. Drawing on the details I’d memorized, I resolved to share an enjoyable and engaging conversation.

After that, I mingled with gusto, checking off person after person on Shizuki’s good-to-meet list. While I didn’t have the most experience at these kinds of high social functions, it wasn’t exactly my first rodeo, either. Using the information I had memorized about the industries and products my conversational partners were involved in, I managed to create what I thought were meaningful chats. Most of the people I talked to were respectful; if any of them harbored prejudice against me for being adopted, they kept it well hidden. Then again, Shizuki wouldn’t make me talk to anyone who was openly hostile, would she?

It was then, after a few rounds of mingling, that Ruki and Ruri appeared. Seeing me, Ruri yelled, “Mio!” and dashed toward us. This completely took my current conversational partner by surprise, but Ruri quickly stopped and straightened up. “Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said, bobbing a small curtsy.

“Lady Ruri, you’re acquainted with Ms. Mio here?” the company president I was talking to asked. His eyes gleamed with warmth, but a probing sharpness lay behind them.

Whether Ruri picked up on this remained to be seen, but Ruki certainly did. “Yes, Mio here once came to my sister’s aid in a way that’s not easily forgotten.”

He...He knew exactly what he was doing, didn’t he? Framing my simple act of retrieving her forgotten scarf in such a way would easily lead someone to believe that something deeper was going on behind the scenes between

Yukishiro and Sakurazaka, like a business deal, or something even more insidious. *You sly dog*, I glared at him.

He only smiled blandly back at me, then turned to the president. “I apologize, but Ruri has been very eager to speak with Mio. May we borrow her for a moment?”

Might as well have grabbed me and ran—no one would have said a word all the same. Ruki, Ruri, and I moved over to a round bar table in the corner of the hall. Swirling my glass of non-alcoholic champagne, I asked Ruki, “What was that all about?”

“Don’t you ever get the desire to start rumors that the Yukishiros and Sakurazakas are fostering deeper ties sometimes?” he replied.

No, I don’t, I retorted internally. While it was true that my efforts to expand connections benefited from Ruki’s public display of favor, I somehow loathed the idea of acknowledging that to him. It felt like a silent acknowledgment of the fact he could see right through me.

As I kept silent and my face taut, Ruri tugged on Ruki’s arm. “Ruki, you promised me you wouldn’t be up to any scheming today!”

“Oh, did I now?” Ruki replied. “Then the unwanted brother who can’t keep his word shall make himself scarce.” With that, he moved to leave, but not before turning to me and giving me a final, “Ruri’s all yours—do look after her for me.”

After he disappeared back into the crowd, Ruri turned to me with a bright smile. “Mio, it’s been so long!”

“Indeed,” I replied. “It’s been what, half a year?”

Ruri blinked in surprise.

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing, just that... I was wondering if you could talk like you did before...”

“Ah...” Back when we first met, I was a commoner and thought Ruri to be one as well. Of course, then, I had spoken to her more casually, but now...

“Then how about this? A happy middle ground,” I suggested, trying to balance the poise expected of a lady with a touch of approachability.

“Thanks. That’s a lot better.”

“You’re welcome...dear,” I said with a playful smile.

Getting closer to Ruri was a personal wish, one permitted as long as it didn’t interfere with my efforts to save my sister. Shizuki understood this well, and her mission for me tonight was simple:

[Befriend Ruri. Invite her to this year’s cultural festival.]

Ruri’s appearance at the academy’s cultural festival was the pivotal event that unlocked Ruki’s route for the player in the game. It was supposed to occur in either the second or third year, but given recent circumstances, Shizuki deemed it wise to expedite the timeline and facilitate Nonoka and Ruri’s acquaintance as soon as possible.

I agreed with this approach. Nonoka had put in so much effort into bettering herself, and devoted as she was to Miyu, would undoubtedly bond well with Ruri. Their friendship could ease the strain on this twisted timeline and pave the way for Ruki and Nonoka to get to know each other.

“Something on your mind?” Ruri’s voice jerked me from my thoughts.

“No, not at all. What makes you say that?” I replied.

“Nothing,” she said a little too hastily. “If not, then that’s good. Oh right, I, um, I wanted to give you this.” As she said this, the maid behind her handed her a flat, wrapped package, which she then handed to me.

Taking hold of it, I cocked my head. “What’s this?”

“It’s a present,” she replied, “for returning my favorite scarf to me.”

“You shouldn’t have. But since it’s a special occasion, I’ll accept. May I open it here?”

At my question, she only smiled. Around us, the subtle tension was palpable; it was evident we were under scrutiny. Whether or not the party’s attendees could overhear our conversation, it was clear that Ruri and I appeared to be on

amicable terms.

But this wasn't at all a problematic image to cultivate—in fact, it was quite the opposite. I handed the package to Shannon, asking her to unwrap it. When she did, my eyes widened in surprise.

“What a lovely stole,” I murmured. It was a lightweight, fabric stole suitable for warmer seasons. The design, strangely enough, seemed to match the gown I was wearing perfectly, so much so that I would swear the two were crafted as a set. To those in the know, the implication was clear.

“Would you mind trying it on?” she asked politely.

“Of course not,” I replied immediately, but internally, I cursed her name.

Playfully, of course. I was sure Ruri meant nothing by it; this was her role in the original game after all, wasn't it? Carefully, I draped the stole over my shoulders, letting it settle around my neck.

“Wow. You look stunning,” Ruri said. “I'm so glad I checked with Ruki first.”

And with that statement, the gazes around us sharpened even further. To those who heard, it might well seem as though the gown had been a gift from Ruki. But I supposed his mere invitation was enough to spark rumors of a special connection between us.

“You two do make a pair of thoughtful siblings, don't you?” I replied warmly. “Consider the favor repaid. I'll cherish this dearly.”

That was my attempt to quell some of the more rampant speculation going on around us. By framing the gift as merely a returned favor, I subtly suggested that our relationship wasn't as intimate as it might appear. I let that notion linger for a moment, then expressed my gratitude to Ruri.

Now then, it was time to get to work. Ruri's gift, while unexpected, provided the perfect segue into tonight's mission—nothing too villainous, but the villainess's mission nonetheless. In other words, it was time to get to villainessin'.

“I've also prepared a little something for you, to celebrate your achievement.” I snapped my fingers, and Shannon handed me a wrapped present. “Ruri,

congratulations on winning at the recital,” I said, extending the gift toward her.

She looked taken aback. “Can I open it now?”

“Absolutely.”

With careful fingers, she loosened the ribbon and peeled away the wrapping. Inside was a small, velvet box. Opening it, she found a barrette inlaid with lapis lazuli—a stone otherwise known by its traditional Japanese name, ruri.

“It’s beautiful...” she whispered, then looked up at me in wonderment.

“I could put it on for you, if you’d like.”

“Would you?” she asked, almost in disbelief.

“Of course.”

I gently took the barrette and snapped it into place just above her temple. It was a simple design but a fitting one I thought, seeing her lustrous raven hair now glinting with a dot of blue. “It suits you,” I said.

“Does it? I’m so happy to hear that!”

“If you’re happy, then I’m happy. Though, I hadn’t been expecting a gift from you tonight, too. Now my gesture feels a little lacking in comparison.”

“Not at all! I just wanted to give you a little something, it doesn’t take away from your gift at all!”

“No, I insist. Let’s see, what else can I...” I touched a finger to my cheek, pretending to ponder. In truth, I already knew my next move after her gift, but pretending it was a spur of the moment thing felt better.

“Ah, Ruri,” I said, breaking from my feigned contemplation. “It’s still a little bit away, but there’s a cultural festival coming up at the academy. I could show you around our campus on that day, if you’d like?”

“Huh?” she gasped, her eyes widening in surprise. A smile briefly lit up her face before it fell dark again, as if a heavy thought had suddenly burdened her. “But I... I’m sick, and I—”

“That’s all right,” I interrupted gently, reaching for her hand to give it a comforting squeeze. I let the mask of the villainess slip away and offered her a

smile—the same one from the day we first met. “Listen,” I said, lowering my voice. “I...have a sister who’s sick too. So, I get it. Don’t worry. I’ll be there to make sure you don’t overdo it, and you can always cancel if you’re not feeling well.”

My tone, unexpectedly casual, seemed to surprise her. “Is that... Do you mean it?” she asked, a fragile hope flickering in her eyes.

I nodded firmly. “So, what do you say?” I asked, the playful edge of my villainess persona returning.

“I...I want to go.” Her voice trembled slightly. “But I really might cancel. Like even at the last minute. Is that still okay?”

“Of course,” I assured her. “In fact, I’ll show you around if, and only if, you are feeling your best.”

“Okay... Okay, then!” Her spirits lifted, a tentative smile breaking through. “Then, will you come to one of these parties again sometime?”

“Of course. It’s a promise.”

Extending my pinky toward her, we locked our fingers in a pinky promise, sealing the deal. And with that simple gesture, Shizuki’s mission was complete.

...Or so I had thought.

As the party wound down, I made my way to Ruki to say my goodbyes. “That’s my favor to you fulfilled. We’re square now.”

His lips curled into a sly half-smile. “You really didn’t suspect a thing?”

“Excuse me?” I shot back, cocking my head in disbelief.

He expelled air through his nose, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. “It’s almost summer break.”

“Yes. And?” I tilted my head even more, genuinely confused.

He let out a soft, knowing laugh. “My original request, if you recall, was for you to play my fiancée during the summer break. Since it’s not summer yet, and I haven’t once mentioned ‘fiancée’ tonight, I’m not sure how you’d consider my request fulfilled.”

I paused, the gears turning. “Now that you mention it...” Cold, horrifying realization gripped me. “You’re kidding. The party tonight—it wasn’t related to your request at all?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“You— What?!!!”

My voice echoed through the hall. Ruki’s smile widened, sweet yet devilish, reveling in the moment. It turned out tonight had been a mere prelude. The real challenge lay ahead. As the daunting prospects of the weeks to come floated through my mind, I couldn’t help but sigh. Yet, despite everything, my path forward remained clear.

Now then, let’s get to villainessin’, shall we?



Side Story 2: My Sister Mio

“MIO’S been acting strange lately...” I murmured to myself.

My sister has always been the most beautiful girl in the world, as far back as I can remember. When she was younger, she was as cute as a button. As she grew older, that cuteness blossomed into pure beauty. By the time she reached middle school, her looks were so striking that she regularly turned the heads of passersby.

When I got sick, however, that stopped being the case.

Since I’ve been in the hospital, Mio doesn’t dress up anymore. Her hair doesn’t shine like it used to, and her skin doesn’t glow. I knew it was because she started working part-time to help pay for my hospital bills.

She worked so hard for me, but she never admitted it. Whenever I asked, she’d brush it off saying, “I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing this because I want to,” or something like that.

Those words always stung. They felt like a wall, saying, “Don’t tell me how you really feel because I don’t want to hear it.” So, while I was grateful to her, I also felt guilty.

A few years later, several big things happened all at once. I was told I had three years to live, I was suddenly moved to a super expensive private hospital, and there was talk of an experimental cure that might save me. I didn’t really understand all of it, but I knew one thing: Mio was once again working hard for me, even more than before.

Despite that, Mio started looking prettier. She started to look the way I imagined she’d be if she hadn’t been working herself so hard for me. She had once again become the most beautiful girl in the world, and that made me happy.

Happy, but at the same time, *Why?* I couldn’t help but wonder.

And not just why, but *how*?

It didn't make sense. Mio loved me so much; I felt it every day. She always said she was doing all this for me, giving up so much of her own life because she wanted to. So where did she find the energy and money to make herself look so pretty?

That question stayed with me until one day, I found out she had become a model for a fashion magazine. *Okay*, I thought. *Maybe that's how she's making money*. But then I looked up how much magazine models earn and realized it didn't add up. Sure, models earned a decent hourly rate, but with only one or two jobs a week, it didn't seem like enough.

I mean, to buy me a brand-new laptop? And not just for me, but one for herself too? The price on the receipt looked suspiciously low, so I checked it, and sure enough, the real price was in the six-figure range. Mio's part-time job was clearly not ordinary, and when I thought about what kind of job could pay a high school girl so much money while also requiring her to dress up...a shiver ran down my spine.

I tried doing reverse image searches of her modeling photos, I searched for "Mio Sato" in every way I could think of, hoping to find some clue about what she was really doing, but nothing.

It was only later when I searched for "Shizuki Sakurazaka" and "Mio Sato" together did I get a hit. It was a forum post about a girl called Mio Sakurazaka. Immediately, my heart made a disconcerting thump. But despite the bad feeling in my chest, I clicked on the link. The thread was titled, *"The Modern Sakurazaka Cinderella Story."* The body of the original post read, *"Y'all hear the news? A Sakurazaka branch family, the one as powerful as the main family, the one led by Lady Shizuki adopted themselves a new daughter."*

There was an hour-long gap between the original post and the first reply asking for more details. The thread quickly picked up from there.

Her name's Mio. Used to be a commoner. Quite the hometown heroine from what I heard.

You mean she was the cutest girl in the neighborhood type heroine or what?

No, not quite. Wait, hold on. Someone's at my door.

The original poster left the conversation, but after that, others who knew about the adoption started chiming in and filling in the details. They said that this girl, Mio Sakurazaka, had been adopted into the Sakurazaka family. And not just that—her grandfather was a Sakurazaka who had eloped and been disowned, making Mio an actual Sakurazaka descendant.

“This has to be her...right?” I muttered to myself.

The original poster mentioned that this girl was a hometown hero, and by that definition, so was Mio. Almost everyone in town knew about Mio, her sickly younger sister, and how hard she worked to take care of her. This thread had to be talking about my sister. There just wasn't any other explanation.

There wasn't any other explanation, but...

“She let herself get adopted...?”

Mio didn't just love me; she loved our whole family. There was no way she'd abandon them for some personal whim, which meant...

“For my sake...?”

It all clicked. The transfer to the new hospital, the expensive laptops, the experimental treatment that had seemed out of reach but was suddenly possible—it was all because Mio had sacrificed her own life once again...to help me.

I wanted to cry, but the tears stopped just short. The thought popped into my mind that if Mio was doing well enough to buy two expensive laptops, what were the chances that she was actually doing better than she had been before?

Pretty high, I thought. Don't get me wrong, I never believed for a second that Mio was living it up while throwing me under the bus, but maybe, just maybe,

she was able to help me and still live a good life herself.

That hopeful thought made me feel a little better, and I was about to close the thread when I noticed the original poster had made another post. Quickly, I scrolled down to it.

I'm back...

Welcome back. So? You were saying this girl was some kind of hometown hero or something? Some other folks talked about the adoption, but no one else knew about her life before it.

Yeah, about that... Lady Mio of the Sakurazaka family is an upstanding citizen with absolutely no mysterious past to speak of.

Uhh...lol? you okay dude?

And that was the last post the original poster ever made.

Well, that was weird. If I didn't know any better, it almost seemed like some men in black suits showed up at that person's doorstep and forced them to retract their words. But that couldn't be...right? In that one-hour gap between the original post and when they suddenly excused themselves, could someone from the Sakurazaka Group have tracked them down and silenced them?

It sounded like something out of a manga, not real life. But then I looked around—this fancy hospital, this expensive laptop—everything felt surreal, so maybe that theory of being doxxed and gagged wasn't as far-fetched as I first thought.

“But to cut them off right when they were about to reveal that Mio worked part-time jobs for my sake...they must really want to keep that a secret. But why?”

Muttering that aloud didn't bring me any closer to an answer. But Mio always went to great lengths to hide the fact that she was doing something for me—sometimes way too much. Now, it was clear that not only was she in on it, but the entire Sakurazaka family was dedicated to covering it up.

I clenched a fist in front of my chest. *Just what could be so bad that it needs all this secrecy?*

Afterword

MAY your monochrome world be filled with color. I'm Hiironoame, and lately, I've been utterly fascinated by the world of VTubers.

VTubing—what a phenomenon, wouldn't you agree? It's been, what, maybe ten years since the very first VTuber stepped into the world? Now how many are there? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Although, I've heard that half of those VTubers call it quits before their first-ever stream (scary).

What surprises me most is the diversity among VTubers. From mangaka and illustrators to novelists, idols, voice actors, and musicians—the list seems endless. Honestly, it might be quicker to name the professions that *aren't* represented in the virtual world at this point.

Recently, I've found myself watching a certain singing-songwriting VTuber, and their voice is just lovely—something that left a lasting impression from the moment I first heard it. Turns out, they're a professional musician. And not just any professional musician, but one who composed the opening theme to a nationally beloved anime. And then there's a former idol from a well-known group who time-traveled from 2001 and is now a VTuber—that's also pretty cool.

I think that if VTubers became more mainstream, light novels featuring them would also gain popularity. With that in mind, I think I'd love to write a story exploring that world someday.

Oops, I got sidetracked. Thank you so much for picking up the second volume of *Let's Get to Villainessin'*! A second volume that was only made possible with your support, and I'm truly delighted that we've made it this far together!

First and foremost, I'd like to thank the illustrator of the series, Misumi—your work has been nothing but wonderful since the first volume! As I write this, I've only seen your rough sketches due to the deadline for the afterword, but they're already breathtaking.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude to everyone involved in the production of this book. And to all the light novel influencers who reviewed this series—your contributions played a crucial role in making this publication a reality. Thank you. Of course, my deepest thanks go to everyone who read the first volume and decided to pick up this second one.

Until next time, this has been Hiironoame on a serene February day.



Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato Illustration by Meiji

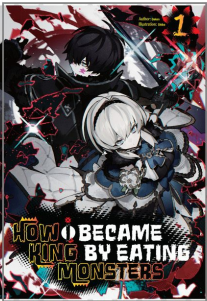
When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue Illustration by Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken Illustration by Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.



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