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Hiroro
Akizakura



Cross-Dressing
Villainess
Cecilia Sylvie

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Hiroro Akizakura

Illustration by **Dangmill**


NEW YORK

Copyright

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Hiroro Akizakura

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AKUYAKU REIJO, CECILIA SYLVIE WA SHINITAKUNAI NODE DANSO SURUKOTO NI SHITA. Vol.2

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Name: Cecilia Sylvie



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Name: Cecilia Sylvie



Oscar Abel Prosper

Crown prince. Cecilia's fiancé and a love interest in the game.

Gilbert Sylvie

Cecilia's younger adoptive brother and a love interest in the game. Helps her dress as a boy at school.

Cecil Admina

Cecilia's male alter ego, the son of a baron. Known as the school prince.

Cecilia Sylvie

Daughter of Duke Sylvie. A villainess who appears in Holy Maiden of Vieugel Academy 3.

Cross-Dressing Villainess Cecilia Sylvie

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Characters

Grace Martinez



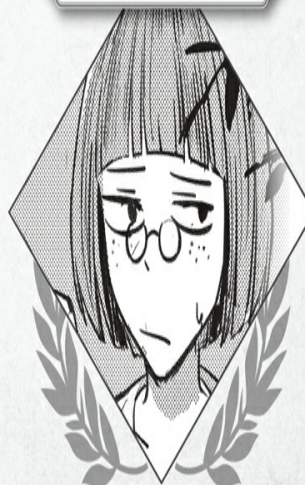
An academy student. She is conducting audio research in a school laboratory.

Mordred



The school doctor. His younger sister is hospitalized on campus.

Bernard Broussais



Ticky's lackey.

Ticky Coulson



A character who appears in Holy Maiden of Vieugel Academy 3. Gilbert's biological older brother.

Prologue

If all the resentment and pain in the world were crammed together, I bet it would look like this.

So the man thought as he regarded his face in the mirror.

Only a pale, bluish light illuminated the dark room. Devoid of furniture, it felt not the least bit lived-in; there was only the man and the mirror he gazed into.

Neither indignation nor despondency possessed him.

And yet, a hatred that left him practically breathless permeated his soul.

“They shouldn’t exist. Holy Maidens should not exist...”

He equally resented both Holy Maidens and the women selected as candidates for the position. He longed for their disappearance from the bottom of his heart.

The man addressed his reflection. “I should just kill them all myself.”

No, came a rational voice from inside him.

He knew he shouldn’t. That much he comprehended. You weren’t supposed to kill other people. That was something even small children had internalized. But nevertheless...

“If I don’t, then they won’t pay for what they’ve done! For how they messed up my life!”

The Holy Maidens would go on to live a carefree existence under the protection of the state.

“How can I possibly just allow that to happen?!”

Something in his brain snapped.

“Yes. That’s why I have to eliminate them!”

Once he said it aloud, he grew even more frenzied.

“Yes. No one’s going to do it for me if I don’t. That’s exactly it!”

He punched through the mirror, shattering the glass with a tinkling sound. His fist turned bright red.

As he stared at the blood dripping from his fist, the man’s face gave an eerie twitch. “Yes. I’m going to eradicate them.”

His voice was rough with an exhilaration he hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

“I’ll kill them all! I’ll kill them all! *I’ll kill them all!*”

Now that his mind was made up, he couldn’t bear that he hadn’t taken action until now.

Why had he hesitated despite the solution being so obvious?

“Ah, but how should I do it?”

As his eyes began to slip shut in rapture, his gaze fell to his still-bleeding fist.

CHAPTER 1 **Where Is the Third Holy Maiden Candidate?!**

Vleugel Academy had its very own prince.

He excelled in both sports and his studies, he was handsome, he was brave, and he was magnanimous of spirit.

Flowers burst into bloom as he passed, and when he smiled, the sun would shine even in the midst of a storm.

A soft whisper from his lips would make anyone weak in the knees, and whoever he touched would experience exquisite bliss.

The academy students, girls especially, considered it a stroke of fortune if he spoke to them.

And once again today, a lucky individual had been blessed...

“Ah, you dropped this,” rumbled a sweet voice that lingered in the ears. When the girl turned to look, she beheld a beautiful boy, the likes of which would make even Aphrodite, goddess of love, turn green with envy.

“Oh! Prince Cecil!” cried the student, surprised. She blushed with sparkling eyes.

He placed a handkerchief that she must have dropped into her hand, which he enclosed with both of his own as he did.

“Thank you so much!” she squeaked.

“Be careful, okay? If you cry into your handkerchief, it will get too soaked for me to wipe your tears away with,” he murmured, rubbing a finger against her cheek to brush away a droplet that had gathered at the corner of her eye.

Shrieks rose up from out of nowhere, and the girl fainted on the spot, still clutching the handkerchief.

The prince’s name was Cecil Admina.

As of yet, only one of the female students knew that he was actually a girl.



“You’ve really been playing up the prince act more and more lately, huh?” insisted Gilbert, seated next to none other than the prince, whose cheeks were stuffed full of sandwich. They were the only people in the school’s glass greenhouse.

“What? Really?”

“And while I’m of the opinion that you can do what you want as far as that’s concerned, don’t overdo it, or you’ll just get yourself into trouble later. I mean, you’re dressing as a boy to keep a low profile in the first place, but how exactly is strutting around as the prince of the school avoiding attention? Do you have a few screws loose or something?”

“Hey...”

Gilbert’s acerbic scolding hit him—er, her—right in the heart.

Her real name was Cecilia Sylvie, Duke Sylvie’s only child. She had transmigrated into this world, which bore a striking resemblance to the *otome* game *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3* from modern-day Japan.

In this country, a woman known as a Holy Maiden protected the citizenry from entities called Obstructions. When the Holy Maiden’s power grew weak, a Selection Ceremony would be held to choose one of several candidates to succeed her. *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3* is set during one of those Selection Ceremonies and allows the player to romance the knights who guard the candidates.

In the game, Cecilia is the heroine’s rival in love, a character archetype commonly referred to as a villainess. No matter the route the player chooses, however, she is always doomed to die. To avert her fate, Cecilia had elected to cross-dress, spending her days as a boy named Cecil.

Currently, the students were in the middle of a short break period that fell between the end of exams and the publishing of the exam results. Teachers would visit the homes of anyone who received poor scores for a parental

consultation.

“So what do we do now? Is the plan still to keep trying to get Lean together with the knights?” asked Gilbert, Cecilia’s one and only coconspirator.

“Hmm, well...” She frowned.

Lean was the original heroine of *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3*. But in a wild twist of fate, her true identity was, in fact, someone who’d also transmigrated into this world. The real shock, however, was that this individual was none other than Ichika Kisaragi, who had been best friends with Hiyono Kanzaki, Cecilia’s previous incarnation.

Lean had actually rejected Cecilia when she’d asked her friend to become Holy Maiden. According to her, *“If I become the Holy Maiden, I can’t keep dating Huey! I don’t want that! Not one bit!”*

That was the word on that. It was true enough that if Lean became the Holy Maiden, she couldn’t stay with Huey, because he wasn’t a knight.

But can’t we figure something out...?

Cecilia wanted to support her friend’s love life, but she also didn’t want to lose her *own* life.

Furthermore, Lean had returned the Sacred Artifact that Jade had given her. If something didn’t change, Cecilia—who was currently in possession of Gilbert’s Sacred Artifact—was as good as the next Holy Maiden. And if *that* happened, she’d get waylaid by bandits on the way to the church for her baptism and killed. But unlike in the game, Cecilia was dressing as a boy this time around. She couldn’t imagine what sort of unfortunate end that would send her hurtling toward.

“Cecilia, you can be the Holy Maiden, no problem! You’re not gonna die! Well...probably!”

She recalled Lean’s blithe words of comfort and forced a smile to her lips. Gilbert gazed at her with concern. “What is it?”

“Uhhh...”

She wasn’t sure how to explain it to him. Lean had insisted that Cecilia keep

the fact that Lean had transmigrated into the world, and that she had been Cecilia's best friend in the past, a secret. Naturally, this meant she had to keep it from Gilbert, too. She wanted to tell him, but Lean had made her swear up and down not to, so she couldn't.

Evasively, Cecilia said, "I think from here on out, it's going to be kind of impossible for Lean to be Holy Maiden..."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, things are going oddly well between her and Huey, right? So I guess she doesn't want to date anyone else!"

"Then what are you gonna do?"

"Mmmm..."

What indeed? That's what Cecilia herself honestly wanted to know. She was racking her brain for some sort of clever solution but just couldn't manage to come up with anything.

"In that case, should we start looking for the third one?" suggested Gilbert after a moment of consideration. Cecilia blinked at him, and he clarified, "The third candidate for Holy Maiden. The key part of all this is keeping you from getting the position, right? Then why don't we just push it onto this other candidate, who might still be alive? Won't everything work out then?"

"That's it!" she cried, pointing an involuntary finger at him. This world and the *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3* game that she'd played differed in a number of ways; they diverged on everything from Oscar's and Gilbert's personalities, to relationships between characters, to how various events played out.

Among these, there were two points of difference for which she had no explanation.

The first was that the murderer targeting the potential Holy Maidens—the Killer—had not yet shown up.

The other was that the third candidate, who bore an azalea-shaped mark, still drew breath.

In the dating sim, she gets done in during the prologue, before the story even

starts. But in this version of that world, no one had heard of the murder of someone with a candidate mark, and the papers hadn't reported anything lurid enough to resemble it, either.

Based on that, they could presume that the potential Holy Maiden with the azalea mark might still draw breath.

"Maybe she had a reason for not putting her name forth as a candidate. There's no harm in looking for her, is there?"

"There isn't! Gil, you're the best! So smart!" Cecilia beamed, hugging him. "A clever little brother really is the best thing to have!"

"Yeah, yeah," Gilbert responded unenthusiastically.

She cocked her head at his attitude. "Hmm? Gil, you don't hate me hugging you anymore? Is your rebellious phase over?"

"It wasn't a rebellious phase to begin with."

"Really? I totally thought it was just you being an embarrassed teenager!"

"Being a teenager might have had something to do with it, but the root cause wasn't what you're imagining."

"Hmm. I don't really get it!"

"Yeah, I suppose you don't." He sighed, a shadow coming over his face. "Anyway, I decided to think of stuff like this as a side benefit."

"A side benefit?"

"You wouldn't do this with His Highness, would you?"

"No, but what does this have to do with Oscar?"

"I wonder."

Now he looked a little pleased. Lately, Cecilia couldn't quite get a handle on Gilbert. All she could tell was that he seemed a bit more at ease in his mannerisms and expressions, which she interpreted as him growing up. He'd always acted mature for his age, but now it seemed like he was ready to leave the nest. It made her feel a little sad.

"Well, let's just say I've let go of a lot of hang-ups," he added.

Cecilia just nodded, without really understanding what he meant.

Where should we start looking for her?

After school, Cecilia wandered around campus. The Vleugel Academy grounds were huge. The institution functioned much like a modern-world university, so the quad even encompassed research laboratories and an annex for research-track students. Since this included medical research, the campus was also home to all types of medical institutions as well. Cecilia had yet to even walk from one end of the grounds to the other.

The elementary school and middle school are elsewhere, so this is about the size of it, but it's still way too big...

The elementary and middle school buildings were located on a separate campus. However, because they accepted both commoner and aristocratic children, most noble families elected to educate their children at home through middle school before sending them to the academy from the high school level on.

Vleugel Academy operated on a five-year system. Years one through three were general education, and four and five separated into different research tracks. The majority of students graduated at the end of the general education course, but those who wanted to conduct specialized research could continue onward to that track. Furthermore, they could select any field they wanted to study. There was a rumor among the students and teachers that some people attended classes while conducting research.

Oh, right, that comes up in Dr. Mordred's route, doesn't it?

The school doctor, Mordred, was actually a researcher of Obstructions. As a Holy Maiden candidate, the heroine ends up helping him with his research at his request...

How does Dr. Mordred's route end anyway?

In Cecilia's previous life as Hiyono, she hadn't played through the section that focuses on him. In fact, she'd died partway through it. She'd gotten to the romantic part right before passing away in a fire.

I guess that counts as a pretty big regret. I wonder what kind of story it was?

She'd read online that his route was fun and intriguing.

Cecilia also hadn't romanced the twins, Eins and Zwei, but for an entirely different reason. Specifically, she wasn't a fan of their character types. *Off-putting* would be one way to describe them.

Come to think of it, there's a lot I don't know about Holy Maiden 3.

The common route takes up a good chunk of the game, so she had a solid grasp on each character's personality, and she'd also read their profiles. However, she didn't have a clue about the romantic events and true endings that happened afterward for the characters she hadn't pursued.

I even blocked anyone who was sharing their thoughts about the game online. Now I really wish I'd just spoiled myself completely.

Evidently, Lean was the same way; she'd only played Oscar, who was the main love interest, and Dante. How very *her* to rack up three hundred hours playing Dante's route just for Huey. Which was why when Lean first saw Cecil, she simply thought, *I never saw him in the character sheet, but maybe he's someone who comes up in other guys' routes.*

I guess the one thing we do know without playing all the routes is that I die in every one of them...

At any rate, the Cecilia of the game would kick the bucket no matter what. A walk-through blog Hiyono had used a lot had that written right at the top in big red letters. Cecilia had a death mandate.

"What are you doing around here?" came a voice out of the blue, and she looked up. It was Mordred. "This is the research annex. Are you here for something?"

"Oh, no, I'm just looking for something..."

"Looking for something?" He frowned suspiciously. And with good reason—she was a student puttering around an area she didn't look like she had any business in after class. The annex conducted very important research for the country.

"Ummm, what are *you* doing here?" she asked with a smile, changing the

subject.

“Me? I’m about to head in for a hospital visit.”

“You are?”

“Yes. My younger sister is actually staying there,” he informed her, pointing to a facility within the academy grounds. It was one of the top medical institutions in the country, and it accepted patients with serious health conditions as well.

So Dr. Mordred has a sister...

She hadn’t known. Neither his sister, nor the fact that she was hospitalized, had come up in the game. Or at the very least, it hadn’t come up in the parts Hiyono had played through.

“Does that mean she’s sick?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. She just hit her head a little.”

“Hit her head?” Cecilia asked, confused.

His expression remained placid, but Mordred looked down and away. “The truth is, someone attacked her a while ago.”

“What?!”

“She escaped death thanks to someone finding her, but she was injured so badly that she’s still in the hospital recovering. They haven’t caught who did it yet, but the person who found her testified to seeing someone flee from the scene. That must have been the perpetrator.”

“Wait, so does that mean—?”

This story sounded oddly familiar. To confirm her hunch, Cecilia asked, “Is your sister a student here?”

“Yes, she is. We’re not very close in age, and she’s exactly a year younger than all of you.”

“How long has she been in the hospital?”

“It happened in March, so I suppose it’s been three or four months now.”

“March?!”

“Yes, what about it?”

Cecilia’s eyes were practically bugging out of their sockets now.

The same month the Azalea Holy Maiden died?! Then this girl has to be—

If Mordred’s sister was the third Holy Maiden candidate, then it all made sense why there hadn’t been news of a girl with a Holy Maiden mark dying and why, if she *wasn’t* dead, she hadn’t been at the Selection Ceremony.

So the Killer attacked her, but she managed to survive?!

Cecilia zoomed right up to Mordred. “Um, does your sister happen to have a —?”

Then she froze, catching herself. Right now, she was a boy. It would be suspicious enough if Cecilia, a duke’s daughter, asked the school doctor if his sister had an azalea mark on her body. But as Cecil, it would border on sexual harassment.

“A what?”

“A...uh...a seal! Yeah, does your sister have a pet seal?”

“Um...a pet seal?”

Mordred wore an obviously flummoxed expression. No surprise there. Cecilia herself didn’t even know what she was babbling about.

“I am relatively certain that she doesn’t... Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason! I just really like seals, so I was wondering if we had that in common.”

It wasn’t the smoothest of saves. She didn’t care one way or another about the animal, of course.

Although the doctor still looked faintly baffled, when the school bell rang, it seemed to make him remember the visit to his sister. Glancing up at the reddening sky, he set off for the hospital.

“I’ll be on my way. You get back to the dorms now.”

“Oh, okay...,” Cecilia responded, watching him go with an awkward smile.



After arriving early to school the next morning as a favor to Gilbert, Cecilia spent the time before first period started by spacing out in the classroom. No one else had shown up yet, and the room was silent. She was going over her conversation with Mordred the day before.

“The truth is, someone attacked my sister a while ago.

“We’re not very close in age, so she’s exactly a year younger than all of you.

“It happened in March, so I suppose it’s been three or four months now.”

The timing and the details all lined up.

Maybe his younger sister really was a potential Holy Maiden. The developers must not have mentioned her in Mordred’s profile because they wanted to surprise the players. This happened occasionally in *otome* games. But in his route proper, his sibling would *absolutely* come up. And a story that went something like, *Mordred holds deep resentment toward the Killer for murdering his sister and is hell-bent on revenge*, did sound kind of fun.



Well, it probably wouldn't be all that enjoyable in real life, but...

No matter what it is, I have to meet her to find out the truth...

But that would be pretty difficult. Not only did Cecil not know Mordred's sister, but "he" was also someone of the opposite gender. A girl who'd just been assaulted by someone would naturally be wary of a guy she didn't even know suddenly showing up to her hospital room. Plus, Mordred probably wouldn't even agree to it anyway.

As Cecilia, I'd be a fellow girl, so she wouldn't be too suspicious of me at the start, but...

That would just incite problems of a different nature. Cecilia had decided not to show up on campus as herself unless it was truly unavoidable.

This one's a real toughie...

"Worried about something?"

"Oh...Lean!"

Freshly arrived, Lean set her schoolbag on her desk. Since no one else was around, she spoke to Cecilia plainly, with none of the deliberate formality that came along with the persona she usually projected.

"You're here early today," Lean observed.

"A teacher asked to speak with Gil. Seems like it's about something home-related..."

"Hmm," she murmured, seeming utterly disinterested. She sat down in the seat in front of Cecilia. "Anyway, what were you worrying about just now?"

"You could tell?"

"How long have we been best friends?!" Lean cried, pressing an impassioned hand to her chest. The gesture was such an Ichika thing to do that Cecilia couldn't help snorting.

She explained to Lean about the third candidate and the events of the day before. Once she finished, Lean stroked her chin and responded, "I see. That's definitely compelling."

“Do you think it’s possible that Dr. Mordred’s sister is the third candidate?”

“Sure, why not? It’s pretty standard in *otome* games for there to be a love interest whose family member gets murdered, after all!”

“Yeah, you’re right!”

If this were Gilbert, that would be his cue to frown and say, *What the...? Otome games are that intense?*

“So anyway, I want to find out more, but I can’t think of a good way of doing it.”

“You should just go and visit her in the hospital!” Lean suggested brightly.

Cecilia sighed and slumped over her desk. “You make it sound so easy, but I’m a boy right now. Wouldn’t she be frightened if I just suddenly showed up at her door? Plus, she’s a victim of a murder attempt. Even if I do go, I bet she’ll be super wary and won’t talk to me...”

“Oh, come on. What a pathetic prince of the school you are. You just have to make her fall for you with your charming antics!”

“In front of her brother? The school doctor?”

“Yeah, you’d have to be prepared to risk your life.”

“No way! I can’t stick my neck out over something like that!” Cecilia objected, so frustrated that she could cry. What if he had a borderline unhealthy obsession with his little sister or something? Then she’d be in major trouble.

“Then how about I go with you?”

“Huh?”

“It won’t be so weird if a female student goes with you, right? Plus, I can say I’m his sister’s friend! There’s no way Dr. Mordred has a full grasp on his sister’s social life!”

True, it wouldn’t be so strange for Cecil to visit with a female student as a sort of chaperone, and it should prevent the sister from getting suspicious for no reason.

“You’d do that?”

“Of course I would. We’re deeply connected from our past lives, you know.”

“Ichika...,” Cecilia responded, surprised at how her voice had gone wobbly with emotion. She hadn’t thought Lean would help her. She was the sort who acted only in her own interest. Normally, even if Cecilia could use the help, Lean wouldn’t offer. She’d probably volunteered this time because her friend was truly in a bind.

Lean twirled a lock of pink hair around her finger. “My name is Lean now. But hmm, in return...”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Cecilia had a very bad feeling.

Lean whipped out a sketchbook from who knows where and smiled at her. “Will you help *me* out, too?”

Her grin widened. After staring at Lean in shock for a few seconds, Cecilia shook her head, a dark look on her face. “In that case, forget it...”

“What?! H-hey!”

“You of all people should know better! I *just* pissed off Gilbert doing that sort of thing! I don’t wanna get in another fight with my brother!”

Earlier, Cecilia had agreed to help Lean with some sketches in exchange for advice about Gilbert. Oscar had ended up getting involved, too, and Lean had arranged them in a very embarrassing and compromising position. Gilbert saw it and blew his top. It led to the first fight Cecilia had ever had with him since becoming siblings.

Lean shook the other woman desperately. “Come on! Forget all about that scheming little brother who’s clearly consumed with jealousy and doesn’t see his own adopted sister as family!”

“I won’t! And he’s pretty scary when he gets mad!”

“Who’s more important, him or your best friend?!”

“Wouldn’t you choose those books you make over me if you had to?!”

“Of course I would!”

“Then why do you expect me to help you?!”

“I see how it is!” she cried, puffing out her cheeks in a pout that made her look awfully adorable. Despite her cuteness, however, her request was wicked. After sulking for a bit, Lean slammed her sketchbook onto the desk. “Okay then, I’ve got it! For this one, you’ll pose alone!”

“Alone?”

“Yeah, by yourself! Without anyone else! Gilbert got so mad because Oscar was involved, right? That means he shouldn’t get upset if you’re the only one posing, right?”

“Well, sure, but...”

“It’s settled, then! I’ll help you! And in return, you’ll do whatever I say in the solo model session!”

Cecilia was no longer sure who was doing whom a favor here.

“I guess in that case...”

“You said it! It’s a promise!”

“O-okay...”

If she modeled alone, Gilbert shouldn’t get upset about it. He’d shake his head and roll his eyes, but that would be all. Probably.

“Okay then, let’s go make our little hospital visit first! I’ll talk to Dr. Mordred about it. Do you want to go tomorrow?”

“Um, sure!”

The next day was the weekend. As Cecilia nodded, the classroom door opened, and other students entered the room.



“Uh, why did this turn into a party?” Cecilia muttered outside the dorms where she’d arranged to meet Lean. There she stood—along with Oscar, Gilbert, Jade, and Huey. With the addition of Cecilia, they made a big group of six people.

“I invited Huey and Jade,” Lean explained with a smile. “And then by pure coincidence, we encountered Lord Oscar and Lord Gilbert nearby...”

Lean was on her best behavior. Though Cecilia wasn’t one to talk herself, her friend had quite the double face. It was almost impressive.

“But aren’t there too many people?”

“It’ll be fine. I have permission from Dr. Mordred. In fact, it should be the more the merrier for his sister...”

“I hope so...,” Cecilia replied. She was a bit worried about such a large group barging into someone’s hospital room, but if Mordred had agreed, then it should be all right.

Oscar came up to her as she attempted to assuage herself. “Sorry about this. I guess we’re imposing.”

“Not at all! Sorry, my phrasing was bad,” Cecilia said, shaking her head at him and looking away.

“No, you’re right to feel worried. But Dr. Mordred is always taking care of us, so I thought I’d use this opportunity to give my regards to his younger sister,” Oscar reassured. As he spoke, his lips curved into a smile.

That strong sense of duty was quite characteristic of this world’s Oscar. In the game, he doesn’t involve himself with others like this. He never shows any concern for anyone outside of Lean and his friend Dante.

“Well, anyway, it’s been a while! You haven’t been coming to school much lately, huh?” asked Cecilia.

“Yeah, I’ve had a lot to do cleaning up after the Heimat situation.”

He was referring to the incident where she’d been abducted. When he brought it up, she scratched her cheek guiltily. “I see. Sorry, that’s my fault.”

“No, it’s not your—”

“But since we haven’t seen each other in a while, I’m really happy we happened to meet up!” she insisted, which wasn’t a lie at all. She really was happy to see him.

Oscar's cheeks turned the faintest shade of red. After a pause, he added, "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

Pleased, he reached out for her face. But just before he could touch her, Gilbert grabbed his wrist to stop him. A black grin on his lips, Gilbert hissed, "Wow. I, too, am extremely overjoyed to see Your Highness."

"Don't we see each other all the time?" Oscar retorted in surprise, his amusement fading.

Gilbert's smirk dropped off his face as well. "I wish I could see you every single day."

"Don't say that with such a deadpan expression."

"What? Did you want me to beam at you and say it in a baby voice?"

"Eugh! Don't make me picture that! Gross!"

"Don't worry. Simply picturing it is the height of nausea for me, too," Gilbert spat with his fingers still wrapped around Oscar's wrist while pressing a hand to his mouth. The crown prince's face spasmed as he watched him.

Cecilia observed them from off to the side. "The two of you are as chummy as ever."

"They *are*?" asked Huey, who happened to be standing next to her, in a disbelieving tone. Beside him, Lean and Jade wore equally strained smiles.

"All right, now, all of you! Let's stop playing around and get going! Dr. Mordred is waiting!" Lean commanded, and the group headed for the hospital.

"Ah, here you are," said Mordred when they met him in front of the hospital. He greeted the group of six with a gentle expression.

As their ringleader, Lean took a step closer to him. "Dr. Mordred, thank you very much for giving us some of your valuable time. Also, I'm so sorry. I had no idea at all that Emily was in the hospital until Cecil told me, so my visit is coming very late."

Lean's eyes were downcast, her expression sorrowful. Evidently, Mordred's

sister's name was Emily. There was no telling how Lean had acquired that piece of information, but her detective skills were impressive.

It appeared that her background had been updated to include, "Lean finds out from Cecil that a friend she hasn't seen in a long time is in the hospital." That way, it wouldn't be so strange for Cecil to come along.

"Oh, don't worry. You're here now, and that's the important thing. I'm sure Emily will be very happy," he responded before setting off to lead the way. It would seem he planned to escort them to the hospital room.

At the very back of the group, Cecilia whispered to Lean, "Hey, did you really lie and say you were friends with Emily?"

"Yup."

"Is that gonna be okay?! Won't she be shocked to see a bunch of strangers suddenly come to visit? Your bluff will get exposed immediately!"

"That's no problem! All I have to do is be the first one to speak. I'll say, *Oh! It's been sooo long! Do you remember me? I'm Lean! How many years has it been since I saw you last?* and most people will be so confused, they'll simply go along with it."

"You're as socially adept as ever..."

"Hee-hee, thank you."

After walking for a bit, Mordred stopped in front of the entrance to a patient room.

"We're here," he announced, opening the door. There was only a single bed inside; it was a private suite. "She's over there."

He motioned them to follow him in, and everyone filed behind him and went over to the bed, where Emily was sleeping. Even though such a large group had entered, her eyes were still shut tight, and she showed no signs of waking.

"It looks like she's asleep," noted Jade.

"Maybe we should come back later?" suggested Huey.

As he adjusted the blankets on her, Mordred looked down sadly. "She won't

wake up anytime soon.”

“Huh?”

“Emily’s been in a coma ever since she was assaulted,” he explained. Everyone gasped in shock.

“So you mean...”

“Physically, she should be all recovered. There’s nothing wrong with her brain. But she’s just not coming to.”

He stroked his sister’s forehead affectionately. “The attack must have terrified her. Sometimes she make noises in her sleep, like she’s having a nightmare. But her eyes never open.”

Mordred looked away from her. Then he smiled, though his brows were still knitted forlornly. “I can’t wait for her to wake up. Same as all of you.”

He seemed almost on the verge of tears. Everyone was at a loss for words.

“When I was researching his sister, I happened to learn that Dr. Mordred’s parents died young, so Emily is his only family,” Lean told them on their way back from the hospital. Lean and Cecilia were at the back of the group, trailing some distance behind everyone else.

“Oh...I see,” said Cecilia.

“It must have been a terrible shock for him. I heard he absolutely dotes on her.”

That made Cecilia remember what Mordred had said as he saw them off.

“I’m sorry things are like this. But if you’re willing, please come again sometime. Somehow, it seemed like she had fun today.”

He’d said it with the same mild look on his face that he always wore. But since his expression never wavered, it hurt all the more to see.

“Even if Emily *is* a Holy Maiden candidate, it’s still impossible to just foist that responsibility on her, considering her condition,” said Lean.

“True...”

In all honesty, it was too early to even mention that. Maybe if she seemed

healthy after waking up, Cecilia could hope for some sort of development on that front. But with Emily's current state, it was unthinkable. Still, Mordred's despondent, downcast face filled her mind.

Just then, the group passed a woman. She had frizzy hair and thick glasses, and her white lab coat billowed behind her as she strode toward the facility they'd just left.

Hmm?

"What's wrong?" asked Lean, also stopping as Cecilia came to a halt and stared after the woman.

"Nothing, it's just..."

I feel like I've seen her somewhere before...

Yet she couldn't quite place it. The memory probably belonged to the in-game Cecilia, but she had no idea where she'd seen her or in whose route.

But for some strange reason...

The lady pinged something on her radar.

"Are you okay? Did something occur to you?" asked Lean.

"Oh, no, I'm fine. I think it was just my imagination!" responded Cecilia, shaking her head and turning back around. Her memory was hazy. The woman must have been a background character she'd seen somewhere. That explained why she couldn't place her.

"Sorry, let's go," said Cecilia, jogging to catch up to the group ahead.



Three days after the hospital visit, Cecilia was clinging to the wall of an empty classroom. In front of her stood Lean, a sinister smirk on her lips and a sketchbook in hand.

Yes, as promised, the day had come for "Cecil" to model for illustrations in Lean's next story. She'd even discussed it with Gilbert, who had signed off on it, reasoning, *"Well, I don't mind as long as it's just you alone."*

The issue lay in what she was wearing.

“Wh-why this outfit...?” she whined, hugging herself to cover her body. She wasn’t in her usual school uniform. Instead, she wore a tight, red satin dress with gold embroidery. Gorgeous floral buttons adorned the high collar, and slits on either side of the skirt went all the way up to her thighs. Her feet were decked out in red heels.

Indeed, this was a Chinese-style *qipao* outfit.

“Hee-hee, you should be happy. I stayed up for three nights sewing this. Now go stand over there, Cecil!” Lean chirped.

Cecilia shook her head furiously. “No! What is this cosplay getup?! It’s super embarrassing!”

“Oh, come on, you’re the one who’s always dressing up as a boy! And besides, you promised to do anything as long as it was you posing alone, didn’t you?”

“B-but this is too much! And I’m still Cecil! If you want a model for women’s clothes, I’ll just take off my wig now...”

Wearing a *qipao* wasn’t embarrassing in itself. What *was* embarrassing was wearing one while posing as a boy. This would all go over much, much better if she could wear it as Cecilia.

“Don’t be so ridiculous!” Lean shouted, angrily stopping her from doffing the dress and her wig. Lean’s eyes were bloodshot from repeated all-nighters, which frightened Cecilia even more. “Nothing is exciting about a girl wearing this! The whole point is for a boy to look ashamed while wearing it!”

“You’re a pervert!”

“Yes, I am! So what?!” retorted Lean. It was actually strangely comforting how she would get defensive and fight back once things escalated to a certain point.

Lean moved away from Cecilia and formed a frame with her fingers, capturing her thoroughly humiliated friend inside it. “Heh-heh... Hmm, I wonder what pose I’ll have you make.”

“Eek!” Cecilia yelped, a shiver running down her spine at Lean’s lascivious gaze. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes.

“Come on now, Cecil. Girls all over the country are waiting to see you look embarrassed!”

“All over the country?”

“You know how Jade acquired a print shop? Recently, he figured out how to start selling books nationwide!”

Cecilia had known for a long time that Lean came up with outlandish, crazy ideas, but she was really going in a wild direction this time. And now Jade had even gotten a bizarre upgrade from “cocreator buddy” to “business partner.”

“It might come across as too eccentric to go with a cross-dressing boy right off the bat, so I’ll probably put these illustrations in my second or third book, but don’t worry! I’ll turn these into something truly wonderful!”

“Nooooo!”

“Your sacrifice will not be in vain!”

“I didn’t want to do any sacrificing in the first place!” Cecilia cried, shaking her head desperately as she continued tearing up. When she thought about people all over the country seeing her dressed like this, she felt only fear.

“Rejoice, Cecil! For this is your national debut!” Lean enthused, sidling up to her with sketchbook in hand.

A tiny scream escaped from deep in Cecilia’s throat. “S-sorry! I really, really can’t do this!”

“Hey! Hold on!”

Still clad in the *qipao*, she took off sprinting. Lean immediately gave chase, but there was no way someone fresh off all-nighters could beat someone who’d trained their leg muscles for twelve years.

Fortunately, no one was in the hallway, so she was successfully able to shake Lean off, but...

Oh no. I don’t have my uniform...

She’d bolted without a plan, wearing only the clothes she had on, so naturally she didn’t have her uniform to change into. Since she didn’t want the whole

country to see her in this getup, she definitely didn't want anyone at school to see it, either. Especially the Cecil fangirls—if they caught sight of “him” like this, it would all be over.

If I go back, I'll just end up butting heads with Lean...

The outfit had to be in the classroom she'd just fled. If she went back for it, it would be tantamount to stepping into enemy territory.

And at the moment, her archnemesis was her best friend, Lean.

Best friend *means the friend you're closest to in the whole world, doesn't it?*

A bitter smile curled her lips. She knew Lean had an extreme personality, but she hadn't thought it was quite this extreme. Still, Cecilia could never bring herself to dislike the girl for it, since she was so much fun otherwise.

Anyway, my first order of business is getting out of this thing.

Only storage rooms and empty classrooms lined the hallway, which was perhaps why it was so deserted despite the fact that it was lunchtime. But since she didn't know when someone might come by, she had to either quickly find something that could serve as a uniform or devise a plan to take her clothes back.

What should I do?

“Hey,” came a voice from behind her all of a sudden, startling her out of her thoughts. She shot up in fright.

“Whoever you are in that foreign outfit, you look very suspicious. Where did you come from?” the person chided.

When she turned around, she saw that it was Oscar. The moment their eyes met, his opened wide. “What are *you* doing here?! And what are you wearing?”

“It's a very long story...,” Cecilia muttered, averting her gaze as she tried to cover herself up.

The dress *was* an unusual one; the crown prince's gaze raked over her from head to toe, which was too humiliating to endure.

Although it was a relief that it was only him, her heart would have stopped by

now if some female student she didn't even know had found her.

"Lord Cecil! That's enough—come out already!" shouted a faraway voice. Cecilia flinched. Lean's voice had taken on a special, fake-sounding inflection because she didn't know who was listening.

"It's Lean! We need to hide!"

"Whoa! Hey!"

Cecilia grabbed Oscar's arm and dragged him into the nearest empty classroom, locked it, and crouched down so she couldn't be seen through the hallway-side windows.

"Oh, Lord Cecil!" called Lean, making her way down the hallway before passing over the spot where Cecilia and Oscar had just been. Cecilia hunched even more so Lean wouldn't notice her as she went past.

Scary!

Never could she have imagined that a day would come when she would dread the sound of her best friend's voice.

"Hey," Oscar said, annoyed.

"Shhh!" she hissed, clasping a hand over his mouth. His low grumble was still audible, but they both stayed perfectly still until Lean was gone. Cecilia couldn't even spare enough attention to notice how loudly her heart was throbbing in her ears.

After a while, Lean moved farther away, and all the energy drained out of Cecilia's body. "Phew!"

"Hey...Cecil."

"Oh yeah, sorry about all that."

"Could you just move away from me?"

Oscar's statement made her realize for the first time what position they were in. Cecilia was on top of him, pressed flush against him and pinning him down with her body weight. Her head was resting on his chest. He pushed her hand away from his mouth to glare at her, crimson down to his neck.

“Please,” he gritted out in a strained voice, and Cecilia instantly flushed red, too.



“It’s Lean! We need to hide!”

“Whoa! Hey!”

Suddenly, Oscar was dragged by the wrist into a classroom. The momentum made him lose his balance and fall on his backside. Before he could even figure out what was going on, Cecil shoved his shoulders down until he was lying flat on the ground. Cecil had fallen on top of him.



With a soundless scream, Oscar froze. A sweet, feminine scent wafted down from the top of Cecil's head.

What in the...?

His thoughts were swimming from the unthinkable situation they were in. After a while, he heard a familiar voice ring out, "Lord Cecil!" and it all finally clicked.

Cecil was hiding from Lean, which meant that this strange, foreign dress he was wearing had to be some scheme of hers.

But even for all that...

Oscar glanced at Cecil. The arms peeking out of the red satin outfit were so fragile, they seemed on the verge of breaking, thin and delicate. The considerable slits up the sides of the skirt left his ivory-white thighs completely bare; his legs lay between Oscar's own, pushing them apart. The way Cecil was pressed against him, plus the softness of the thighs brushing against his knees—it was all making his heart pound out of his chest.

Calm down! This is a guy! he yelled at himself. Unaware of Oscar's inner turmoil, however, Cecil only pressed himself closer.

This idiot!

"Hey," he whispered, unable to take it any longer, but Cecil only covered Oscar's mouth mercilessly. With a serious look on his face, he hissed, "Shhh!" Of course, it was easier said than done to comply with that.

But if I make a fuss here, Lean will probably find us...

And if she did, who even knew what she would write or create next.

Biting his tongue and his bottom lip, Oscar fell silent. But all he could think about was the soft body on top of his, so he desperately recited prime numbers in his mind. Despite that, Cecil's breaths and his needlessly sweet scent caused Oscar's brain to short-circuit time and time again.

After a while, Lean retreated. With a sigh, all the tension drained from Cecil's body.

“Phew!”

“Hey...Cecil.”

“Oh yeah, sorry about all that.”

“Could you just move away from me?” Oscar managed, his throat ridiculously dry. “Please.”

The moment he made his request, Cecil flushed bright red, as if just now realizing the compromising position they were in. Then he appeared to lose his composure, exactly as though he were a young and innocent girl.

Oscar turned away. To be entirely honest, he couldn’t gaze at him like this. If he did, he’d really start to see Cecil as a woman.

“S-sorry,” the other boy muttered, red-faced, as he slid off Oscar. The crown prince kept catching tantalizing glimpses of his bare thighs; he was at his limit in so many senses of the word.

“Oh, and I’m sorry. I think I crushed something you had in your pocket...”

“Don’t worry about that! Seriously, don’t think about it!” Oscar burst out in a louder voice than he’d meant to use.

Cecil froze, his eyes wide, thinking he’d gotten yelled at.

But Oscar wasn’t angry. There was just something he didn’t want Cecil to realize.

Sucking in a deep breath, Oscar sat up.

It was just a physiological response. It didn’t mean anything at all; it was pure biology.

Even as he thought that, though, guilt filled his chest—guilt toward not just Cecil but also his fiancée, Cecilia.

“Um.”

“Sorry. Could you just get out of here?”

“What?”

“Please...,” Oscar entreated, his voice tight and hard.

This clearly flustered Cecil, who must have thought Oscar hated him now or something. “But we should leave together...”

Cecil held out a hand to Oscar, who knocked it away on instinct. Cecil’s eyes filled with hurt, but Oscar didn’t say anything to smooth things over. He only mumbled an apology, which Cecil awkwardly nodded to.

“Okay, I’m leaving, then. I’m really sorry about that.”

“It’s fine—don’t worry about it,” replied Oscar.

Soon enough, Cecil was gone. Oscar watched him go and then flopped back onto the floor, his limbs splayed out. “Ahhhh...”

Never before had he plunged into a pit of self-loathing this deep. “I mean, he’s a guy and my friend. How many times do I have to remind myself that I have Cecilia...?”

His feelings for his fiancée hadn’t faded. He didn’t have the slightest intention of calling off their engagement. But it was also true that Cecil kept on messing him up inside, which was only intensifying his guilty conscience.

“Augh, dammit!”

Frustrated, he dug his fingers into his hair and churned it violently.



Oscar seemed pretty upset.

Cecilia trudged along the corridor, staring at the ground despondently. She couldn’t get her friend’s annoyed face as he told her to leave out of her mind.

I thought we’d gotten close, but now I’ve messed it up...

Anyone would get angry if someone dragged them into an empty classroom to be used as a human mattress while they still had no idea what was even happening. It was only natural. And to top that all off, she’d covered his mouth, refused to listen to his objections, and flattened herself against him. The weight of her on top of him had probably made him feel sick. But despite all that, he’d magnanimously stayed quiet until Lean was gone.

I have to give him a proper apology later, she thought as she walked along. Suddenly, she heard a very familiar voice say, “Huh?” from behind her. She looked up to find a wide-eyed Gilbert coming her way.

“Oh.”

Her brother’s gaze darkened the instant their lines of sight met. Cecilia broke into a full-body sweat.

Crap, crap, crap!

He strode right up and threw his uniform jacket over her. Although the action was sweet, the look on his face wasn’t at all. He was incensed—seething with fury over finding his sister in a weird costume.

Involuntarily, she started to shiver. Obviously, she couldn’t bring herself to meet his eyes, either. “I-I’m sorr—”

“Let’s just get you changed first, okay? Immediately,” he interjected with a smile that made her want to burst into tears. Frightened tears.

Gilbert *strongly* recommended that Cecilia be allowed to pose for Lean’s illustration in her regular school uniform, which got her off the hook for that. Nevertheless, Lean still asked her to do a bunch of weird poses and faces she didn’t understand.

Of course, Lean wouldn’t be satisfied with just that, which was why she got in one last sharp remark when she left: “You better remember this!”

She had even looked like she was about to cry. Cecilia really did feel bad for refusing to wear the dress her friend had lost sleep to sew, but she just couldn’t bear to do it.

Cecilia returned to her classroom, getting her uniform in order again as she did. Hoping to apologize to Oscar on her way back, she peeked into the classroom she’d dragged him into, but he was long gone. All she could do was search for him again later.

But anyway, what do I do now? If Emily would just wake up, everything would work out...

Her thoughts turned in a more serious direction as she pondered that. As

both Mordred's little sister and the third Holy Maiden candidate, Emily waking up would make everyone happy—Cecilia, Mordred, *and* Emily herself.

Of course, it *was* possible that she might hate the idea of becoming Holy Maiden, but it represented the highest position of power a woman could reach in the country. The vast majority could only dream of it. Cecilia and Lean were anomalies for having no interest in the title at all.

That's why Cecilia thought it was extremely unlikely that Emily would object and say, *No! I don't want to be Holy Maiden!*

But how do we get her to wake up?

There was nothing wrong with her brain or body. So then what was the issue?

I bet the key is in Dr. Mordred's route, Cecilia thought as she took her seat. Lunch break was almost over, so the classroom was a bit noisy.

"How'd you do, Cecil?" asked Jade.

She frowned. "On what?"

"The midterms. The results are posted up on the bulletin board."

"They are?!" she cried, leaping to her feet.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that these exams would decide her fate. If she didn't do well enough, a teacher would visit her parents at home. But her mother and father had no idea their daughter was cross-dressing, so that was the one thing she wanted to avoid at all costs.

"I'll go look!"

"Sure." Jade nodded, and Cecilia dashed to the bulletin board.

When she saw her place in the rankings, relief washed over her.

Oh, thank goodness!

She exhaled strongly, fears allayed. She was tenth in her year. Since she'd been eighth the last time, all she'd done was drop a little. But the ranking wasn't enough to make her worry about a home visit.

But wow, look at everyone else, too!

The names of the original game's love interests studded the rankings list. Only Dante was missing, but that was surely just because he thought of studying as too much of a pain. His life philosophy boiled down to, *I'm not gonna go out of my way to do something I could easily pull off if I wanted to.*

Gil's in top place. I knew he'd be!

Her brother had already finished learning everything the academy taught. When he was thirteen, their private tutor had said, *"I have nothing left to teach him,"* and quit. He wasn't attending the academy to learn; he was there to make connections within the aristocracy and help Cecilia with her harebrained cross-dressing scheme.

Thinking about it like that, he totally outclasses me. In just about every way...

Gilbert had already made his high-society debut; he didn't need to be at school to make connections. In fact, he already had plenty of followers, and he was even popular among the girls, too, though not to the same degree as Cecil. His sister was about 90 percent of the reason why he went to the academy.

Once it's summer vacation, I'll have to pull out all the stops to show him how much I appreciate him! Cecilia vowed to herself.

Vleugel Academy's summer break wasn't very long—only a little less than two weeks. Since it was so short, it flies by in the game, and the characters don't even have any events.

For Cecilia, that meant she was getting a brief respite.

And I don't have to cross-dress! I don't have to worry about everything! I bet it'll be really nice to get to spend some quality time with Gilbert at home.

Her excitement was unstoppable. Earlier, there had been talk of the whole group visiting Cecilia's house, but she'd managed to quash those plans. Lean would be coming to visit for two or three days, but she would get the rest of the time to just relax with Gilbert. Or so she believed.

In the real world, however, things don't work out quite so smoothly.

CHAPTER 2 The Summer Vacation from Hell Begins

“Welcome back, Miss Cecilia and Master Gilbert.”

“Hello!”

“Hi.”

With the advent of summer vacation, Cecilia and Gilbert returned to the Sylvie family estate. Naturally, Cecilia was wearing a dress fit for a lady.

Their parents and the house staff and servants were all overjoyed at their return.

The siblings went to their respective rooms and began unpacking. That being said, it was only a two-week visit; since the manor was already furnished with the bare minimum for both their wardrobes, they hadn’t brought that much back. Cecilia, however, had packed all her cross-dressing gear just in case, so she had twice as much luggage as Gilbert.

I really do feel so much more at ease in clothes like this, she thought, smiling as she fingered the hem of her skirt. She didn’t hate being Cecil, but she did feel the most relaxed in girl mode. Although she’d gotten used to wearing a wig and a binder, they were still incredibly constricting.

She continued putting her things away in silence. When she was almost done, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” she said, and Gilbert poked in his head.

“Did you finish unpacking?” he asked.

“Um, yeah! Almost!”

“Becky’s made tea for us. Scones, too.”

“Ooh! Really? I’ll be right down!”

Becky was Cecilia’s personal maid. Her scones were exceptional, so whenever

Cecilia was at home, she begged for her to make them every single week.

Once Cecilia heard that her favorite food was waiting, she broke into a radiant grin, which managed to make a smile tug at Gilbert's lips, too.

"Okay then, I'll be waiting in our usual place."

"Got it!" she replied cheerfully, and Gilbert left her room, satisfied.

Their *usual place* was the estate's music room. It was originally where her father had learned the violin, and both she and Gilbert had learned piano from a private instructor there. The room had a lock and was perfectly soundproofed, so they now used it to have confidential conversations.

Naturally, the private talks in question entailed Cecilia's past life.

But for some reason, everyone gets nervous about the idea of us going into this place together.

Especially Cecilia's other maid, Reina, who would always display bizarre concern for her every time she emerged from the music room. "Nothing happened, right? You're physically intact—?!"

Then she would flush scarlet before Gilbert cut her off with a dark smile, as he did every time.

From Cecilia's perspective, she'd just been trying to keep up a friendly relationship with her brother, but maybe this was yet another strange twist of their destinies. Perhaps no one saw the siblings as close, since they don't get along in the dating sim at all.

In that case, I'll just have to do a better job showing everyone how strong our bond is!

She was trying to change the bad ending that was predestined for her—her inevitable death. Beginning with the smallest of things, she would need to make steady progress toward defying her fate.

Finished unpacking, Cecilia headed for the music room. When she opened the door, she found Gilbert there, reading as he awaited her arrival.

"You're late."

“Sorry. It took a little longer than I thought,” she admitted abashedly as she sat down next to him. Her eyes lit up as she beheld the pile of pastries. “Yay! Becky’s scones! I’ve been craving them for so long!”

“I’m glad.”

“Hmm?”

“Before we left school, I wrote her a letter and told her you’d be thrilled if she made them.”

“You did? Oh, Gil, thank you!”

He really was a devoted brother. It truly upset her that people could think she didn’t get along with someone this sweet.

Cecilia took a scone. They were chocolate-filled, her favorite. That must have been Gil’s doing as well.

Yummm!

She bit into it, holding a plate underneath to avoid spilling the crumbs. With a crunch, the tastes of butter and sweet chocolate spread across her palate.

“Mmmm!”

She almost passed out from their nostalgic flavor. Utterly addicting as they were, though, she couldn’t eat too many—they weren’t exactly healthy.

“You’ve got some chocolate on you.”

“Oh, thanks!”

Gilbert swiped his finger at the corner of her lips. “You’re not a kid anymore,” he murmured ruefully, but she didn’t mind in the slightest. Although...

“All I ever do is rely on you, Gil. You’re always having to cover for me at school.”

It made her feel the tiniest bit pathetic, especially since she was supposed to be the older one.

Licking crumbs off his finger, Gilbert looked back down at his book. “You don’t need to worry about that, okay? It’s not like it’s the first time you’ve needed help.”

“Well, I guess you’re right, but...”

“Besides, it’s better that I cover for you *before* a serious incident breaks out rather than helping only after things have already reached a crisis. If I’m going to clean up your mess, I’d prefer to do it earlier.”

“Okay, yes, you may have a point, but...!” Cecilia cried, unable to get out a single word in defense of herself, even though she wanted to object.

As she rubbed at her chest in emotional turmoil, her brother looked like he was about to snort. Then, in a much gentler tone, he said, “Anyway, I’m doing that because I like to, pure and simple. So don’t let it bother you.”

“Oh, Gil...”

“That said, I do wish you’d keep a bit of a cooler head,” he added with a dark smirk.

She dropped her gaze and muttered a “sorry” after a pause. She loved Gilbert, but that face he could make was so terrifying. She wished he would cut it out.

Cecilia finished her scone, then turned back to face Gilbert. “Hey, is there anything you’d like me to do for you?”

“For *you* to do for *me*?”

“Mm-hmm. Like I said just now, I feel bad that you’re always covering for me! At least let me do stuff for you during summer vacation! I’ll take care of whatever you need!”

Gilbert narrowed his eyes. “*You’re* going to take care of *me*?”

“Yeah! I’ll even cook for you!”

He gave her a baleful look. “I’d rather live, thanks.”

Undeterred, she put her hand over her heart and proclaimed heroically, “This summer, I’ll give everything to you! Use me however you like!”

For a moment, Gilbert’s eyes widened. Then he scrutinized her. “Should you really be saying that?”

“Of course! You’re always doing so much for me and all!”

He muttered after a pause, “Why do you never understand that you need to

be smarter about things like this?”

He grabbed hold of the hand she was resting on the sofa and swooped in close until their faces nearly touched. Cecilia pulled back instinctively, but he planted a hand on the armrest behind her, locking her in. “But if you’re going to insist, there *is* one thing I want you to do. Are you ready?”

Cecilia stared, aghast.

“This is what you want?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Cecilia was sitting on the sofa with Gilbert’s head resting on her thighs. His legs were propped up on an armrest while he gazed straight up at her, toying with strands of her honey-blond hair.

“I’ve been so exhausted lately. I wanted to do something that would relax me.”

“Oh, that’s right. Hasn’t the teacher been summoning you a lot lately?”

“Yeah, to discuss my old family.”

He was referring to his birth family, the Coulsons. House Coulson, distantly related to House Sylvie, was an illustrious clan that had produced generations of government ministers and other officials that had been appointed to serve the nation. However, that had also instilled in them a strong sense of elitism, and they looked down on those outside their kin. The current head lord’s and lady’s condescending tendencies were even more pronounced. In fact, they’d claimed that *“undesirable insects would attach themselves”* to their sons if they sent them to Vleugel Academy, as most of their ilk did, so they refused to.

“Is something going on with House Coulson?”

“A lot, apparently,” Gilbert replied, lowering his gaze and declining to go into detail. While he didn’t look depressed over the situation, he did seem to be truly fed up with it.

I wonder if something happened?

Thanks to his upbringing, Gilbert undoubtedly did not think much of his birth family. He had cut off all contact with them and refused to talk about them, so

they hadn't spoken of it up to this point. But what if he'd been suffering in secret while Cecilia had been none the wiser?

She stroked his forehead appreciatively, and his eyes went half lidded in contentment.

Gil's still just a kid, too.

Pleased that her brother, who always acted so mature, would let her spoil him like this, she broke into a grin as well.

"Hey, did you mean it when you said you'd give me your whole summer?" asked Gilbert, taking hold of the hand that was stroking his forehead.

She grinned and nodded. "I did! Oh, except for the days when I have plans!"

"What plans?"

"Ummm, I'm going to get Hans to give me some lessons, and I promised Donny I'd help him with his schoolwork. And I'll have Becky and Reina to teach me cooking and go weeding with El. And..."

Cecilia rattled off her list of summer plans, counting each item on her fingers. Hans was the sword instructor, Donny was the Sylvie family butler's son, and Becky and Reina were her maids. El was a young gardener.

"And you'll still be able to make time for me?"

"I will! Um, probably."

At her vague answer, Gilbert intertwined their fingers. "Turn them all down."

"What?"

"You said you'd indulge me in whatever I asked, didn't you? Turn them all down."

Gilbert brought their intertwined hands to his lips. The softest, slightest touch to them sent her cheeks flaring up.

"You're going to let me have you all to myself, aren't you?" he insisted in a honeyed whisper that tickled her ears. Even if Cecilia tried to yank her hand back, he didn't seem to have any intention of relinquishing it.

This guy really is an otome game love interest! His charm is off the charts!

She fanned her flushed cheeks with her other hand. If he could lather on the allure like this with his sister, any heroine he turned his fancy to would be in serious trouble.

He sure does love getting spoiled lately.

If Cecilia had insisted on taking care of him like this a few months back, he would have snorted and ended things right then and there. While she was incredibly happy that he was allowing her to pet and dote on him, it also left her awfully flustered.

As he watched her fan her cheeks, Gilbert muttered, “I’m starting to feel like two weeks is enough for something to happen.”

“For what to happen?”

“Oh, I wonder,” he replied with an easy grin. Cecilia frowned, puzzled. For as long as she’d known him, she’d never had any idea what he was thinking.

“Oh! But I can’t turn down the plans I made with Lean.”



“Lean?” He blinked, sounding like he was only just recalling this.

“Yeah! She’s going to come over and spend two or three days here! We’re going to have a sleepover! I can’t wait,” she told him, beaming.

Gilbert narrowed his eyes. “You said you told her you’re really a girl. Haven’t the two of you gotten a bit too close lately?”

“What?!” Cecilia yelped, her voice cracking unnaturally. “I—I guess?”

“You have been. You aren’t keeping anything from me, right?”

“I—I am not! Nothing at all!” she chirped in a strained voice.

“What are you hiding?” he demanded. His calm attitude had dissipated; now he emanated danger.

Gilbert sat up and pressed close to her; Cecilia averted her gaze.

“You asked me to work with you, and yet, you’re keeping some of the most crucial details from me, aren’t you? If you do that, I won’t be able to help you even if I want to.”

“Ummm, but...”

“Since it entails your past life, I’ve been considerate and have waited for you to open up to me about a lot of this yourself. But I’m just about at my limit. If you’re going to keep so much from me, I’ll get my own ideas about things.”

She could feel his gaze boring into her. Even if she tried to run, she couldn’t—his arms were bracketing her in. He had her trapped. When she peeked up at him, their eyes met—and he was obviously angry.

Scary!

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Overjoyed that she’d been saved, Cecilia called out, “Y-yes?”

One of her maids entered. “Miss Cecilia, I— Ah!”

As soon as Reina caught sight of what was happening, she froze. Then she blushed faintly, covered her face with her hands, yelped out, “I-I’m so sorry!” and attempted to leave.

Meanwhile, Cecilia panicked as she saw her helping hand do an about-face.
“W-wait!”

“Ah?”

“Do you need me for something? What is it?”

“Y-you want me to tell you *now*?” Reina stammered, still beet red. Unable to meet Cecilia’s gaze, her eyes darted all over.

“Wh-what’s wrong with now?”

“Nothing, but... Ah... Aren’t I intruding?” she asked, chancing a glance at them.

Not wanting her lifeline to leave, Cecilia shook her head emphatically. “Not at all! How could you be?”

“Ah, um, but...Master Gilbert...”

“He’s fine with it! Right, Gil?”

After an oddly long pause, Gilbert nodded and muttered, “Sure.”

Cecilia pasted on a bright smile. “See! He says it’s fine!”

“I wonder about that, Miss Cecilia.”

“What? Me?” She blinked, confused at Reina’s suddenly critical gaze.

Sighing in resignation, Gilbert moved away from his sister and got to his feet. Then he asked Reina, “Has something happened?”

With Gilbert’s blessing now given, Reina explained nervously, “Ah, we have a visitor who says she’s Miss Cecilia’s friend.”

“We do? Who is it?”

“A Miss Lean, daughter of Baron Rhazaloe...”

Surprise flashed across Cecilia’s face.

“Here we are!”

“Here you are...,” Cecilia murmured, cringing as she hid most of her face beneath a folding fan.

And no wonder. It wasn't just Lean standing in the foyer of her house—behind her stood Jade, Dante, and Huey. All they needed was Oscar, and then the whole gang would be there.

As the guests looked around the grand foyer, they let out admiring sighs and whistles. With its chandelier, the foyer was as grand as a ballroom all on its own.

“Lean, could you come with me?” Cecilia asked, motioning the other girl over to the edge of the hall. There, she hissed, “Why did you bring everyone else?! And why are you here earlier than we planned on?! You weren't supposed to show up for another three days!”

Lean giggled. “I'm just too impatient, I guess.”

“Is that any excuse?”

“I told you you'd better remember what you did, didn't I?” Lean smiled wickedly. In other words, this was revenge for the Chinese *qipao* dress incident—carried out to an insane degree. Her angle here was too inscrutable to follow.

Cecilia was at her wit's end. “How did you explain things to everyone before you came?”

She needed to get a full handle on that first. Of everyone present, only Gilbert and Lean knew that Cecil was, in fact, Cecilia and vice versa. Dante had probably figured it out, but since she hadn't confirmed it to him yet, it was safest to treat him as if he wasn't aware.

Cecilia continued. “You didn't tell them I'm Cecil, did you?!”

“Of course I didn't; who do you think I am? I told them you're an old friend of mine. And then when we were all chatting, I mentioned I was going to see you, and they said they wanted to come along. And so here we are! They were all ever so curious to see what a duke's estate is like,” she explained, making it sound like it had been out of her hands. And yet, the fact that she had specifically mentioned going to visit Cecilia in front of them pointed to it being premeditated.

Cecilia cradled her throbbing head in her hands. Just when she thought she'd get to take it easy, this happened. Plus, there was also the clearly murderous

aura Gilbert had been emanating this whole time to contend with. It was too much to bear.

“Ugh...”

“It’ll be fine—don’t worry. We’ll leave this evening! I only stopped by to give you a nice big shock! I’m going home for a little bit, and then I’ll be back in three days!”

“That’s fine, then, but still...”

The fact that the group had shown up the day Gilbert and Cecilia had returned to the estate meant that they’d come here straight from the academy dorms. There was no way they could have arrived so quickly if they’d all been coming from their respective homes. While it *was* easy for them to just stop by for a quick visit, Cecilia couldn’t abide the brazen initiative Lean had taken here.

“My, my! Oh, look at all the guests we have today,” came a serene voice from the staircase leading to the second story. A woman with the same flowing honey-blond hair as Cecilia was slowly descending the stairs.

“Cecilia, are these your guests? Or Gilbert’s?” asked Cecilia and Gilbert’s mother, Lucinda Sylvie.

A dignified lady who exuded all the grace and poise of a noblewoman stopped before the group, beaming with delight. “Welcome to the Sylvie estate. I’m afraid I don’t know what business you’ve come on, but please do make yourselves at home.”

Acting as representative of the group, Lean curtsied. “I’m very sorry for the intrusion. My name is Lean Rhazaloo, eldest daughter of Baron Rhazaloo.”

She acted the picture of a fair maiden, almost unrecognizable from her usual self.

Lucinda’s eyes sparkled. “Oh! You’re Miss Lean? Cecilia’s friend?”

“Ah, yes!”

“And the people behind you?” Lucinda asked, her cheeks as flushed as a girl’s, peering around Lean.

“Ah, these are—”

“I apologize for so many of us arriving uninvited. My name is Jade Benjamin. I don’t know Cecilia, but I’m friendly with Gilbert at school. I came along once I heard we would get to see your beautiful home!” Jade chimed in smoothly with a good-natured smile, as befitting the son of a merchant.

“So you’re a friend of Gil’s, then? I suppose that means you’ll all be staying the night? You *are* staying over, Miss Lean, aren’t you?” asked Lucinda, her smile glowing. She was overjoyed that her children’s friends had come to visit.

Lean smiled again at the lady’s amiable attitude. “Ah, yes. However, I thought I’d come and do that on another day. We’re merely stopping by on our way home today.”

“We were only following her,” added Jade.

Once Lucinda heard they wouldn’t be staying the night, she took one of Lean’s hands and squeezed it. “Nonsense, I insist that you stay over tonight! We’ll take care of clothes and meals and everything for you. Jade and the other young men are invited as well.”

“Mother?!” Cecilia yelped, shocked that she was not only inviting Lean but the boys as well.

“Oh, I know! We have a lovely little cottage out by our lakeshore. You can all use that if you’d like. It has plenty of rooms, and I’ll assign some servants to it—and guards, too, of course.”

“H-hold on just a minute!” protested Gilbert, equally unable to bear his mother’s steamrolling. “I think their parents will be concerned if we jump right to this...”

“That’s no worry at all. I’ll contact each of their families myself. If anything’s amiss, they can tell me then.”

This was true authority. If a duchess contacted anyone personally, that meant the situation was as good as settled. No one would be able to object.

“You’re not worried about Miss Cecilia alone with a group of young men?” asked Dante, raising his hand to provide support.

But it had no effect on Lucinda. “Why, but Gil will be right there. I’m not

worried about that at all. He'll protect his sister at any cost. Isn't that right, Gil?"

"Well...I suppose, yes, that is true..." he hedged.

Since she likely knew about his feelings, Lucinda turned eyes full of absolute trust on him. He massaged his temples to quell his oncoming headache.

Now that she'd silenced her son, the person most likely to protest, Lucinda clapped her hands, convinced of her victory. "Then it's all settled! Every one of you should take this opportunity to become closer friends not just with Gil but with Cecilia as well!"

No matter how placid her attitude, the duchess excelled at having her own way.

Expression frozen on her face, Lean poked Cecilia. "Your mom is really something."

"Mm-hmm. She's bizarrely overprotective of me..."

"Overprotective?"

"I think she's worried that I can't make friends," she said, remembering when she was younger and completely selfish.

Her parents weren't bad people at all, but they spoiled their daughter rotten. In addition to her father, who bought her whatever she wanted and granted any request no matter how small, her mother treated Cecilia as if she were made of glass. Simply coughing once would lead the woman to call for a doctor, and if her daughter got so much as a scratch, Lucinda would blanch and faint on the spot.

While things had gotten much better lately, sometimes that overprotectiveness would rear its head, as it had just then. She was especially sensitive when it came to Cecilia's social ties.

"All right, I'm off to get everything set up. Go on and relax in our grand salon until it's ready!"

"I don't mind what's happening, but aren't you going to try and stop her?" asked Lean, pointing to Lucinda, who was calling servants over.

Cecilia shook her head. "Once she gets like that, there's no stopping her."

As if by instinct, no one else spoke up; they all just watched, resigned to their fate.

Still obscuring her face behind a fan, Cecilia felt cold sweat trickle down her cheeks.

How should I attempt to ride this one out...?

It was all but guaranteed that once the other boys got a good look at her face, they'd figure out that Cecilia was Cecil. Her hair was different, and she was wearing makeup, so she could disguise herself to some degree, but the wisest course of action would be not to spend too much time around them. This made a sleepover entirely unreasonable.

But I can't think of a way to stop Mother...

"Lots of guests here today," declared a very familiar voice from the doorway. All turned to look and found the crown prince Oscar there, accompanied by a knight as his personal guard.

Oscar?!

Immediately, Cecilia shrank back into the shadows. She completely froze. The person she most needed *not* to be here had just made his entrance.

"Oh, Your Highness!"

"Sorry, I had to take care of some things, so I'm here later than planned... Hmm? What the...?!"

He gawked at Lean and the others once he finally noticed their presence.

"Hey, Oscar! What a coincidence!" shouted Dante with a grin, slinging an arm around Oscar's neck.

"Why are you all here?"

"That's what I'd like to ask *you*, Your Highness," said a sour-faced Gilbert, pinching the bridge of his nose.

It was Lucinda who answered. "My, my. Several days ago, I received a letter from the prince expressing a desire to visit on his way home to the palace. Naturally, I wrote back to say that he was more than welcome to come."

Ordinarily, Gilbert would have nipped that in the bud.

“After all, both of you would be coming home as well. Wouldn’t you like for Cecilia to see His Highness after so many years?”

“Mother...”

Lucinda was hell-bent on doing what her daughter neither wanted nor had asked for.

Feeling that she could not meet Oscar here and now, Cecilia slowly attempted to sneak away.

The crown prince was probably the *worst* person in the world who could learn of Cecil’s true identity. In the game, he sends Cecilia to prison and executes her time and time again. Depending on the route, he sometimes kills her right there. While the Oscar in this world didn’t harbor any unpleasant feelings toward Cecilia, she had no idea how he would take finding out that she’d dressed up as a boy and tricked him; it could very well go awfully.

And besides, I still haven’t given him a real apology...

She’d yet to make amends with Oscar for pushing him to the floor when she was in the *qipao* dress. After that incident, he’d usually been absent whenever she stopped by his classroom. On the rare occasions he was there, he would be talking to someone, which made it difficult for her to approach him. He was also extremely busy and not at school more often than not. Thus, she hadn’t found a chance to apologize yet.

This meant that at the moment, Cecil and Oscar were on slightly rocky terms.

Don’t act suspicious; slowly back away...

Cecilia turned and padded out silently. She’d find an empty room and hide herself there.

But as she fled, a merciless voice stopped her in her tracks. “Are you... Cecilia?”

She flinched. With jerky, tin-man movements, she slowly turned around and locked eyes with the slack-jawed prince. She’d lost her chance to escape.

Cecilia brought the fan up even higher over her face. Her voice wobbled

nervously. "I-it's been a very long time, Your Highness."

"It...really has," he concurred, sounding soft and relieved.

She darted a glance at him over the edge of the fan. Oscar's face really had lit up in satisfaction, and his eyes were half lidded as he directed a gentle smile Cecilia's way. He didn't even bring up how rude it was to obscure her visage.

Why...?

Why did he look so happy?

Before she could contemplate it, yet another ridiculous suggestion from her mother rang in her ears. "Perfect! Your Highness, why don't you spend the night here as well?"

"What?"

"What?"

"The others have plans to stay overnight in our cottage. As far as I can tell, you're also acquainted with everyone, so I must insist you stay as well," demanded Lucinda.

"Er..."

It was so sudden that even Oscar winced.

Tugging on her mother's sleeve, Cecilia shook her head desperately.

This couldn't happen. It was too dangerous.

However, Lucinda Sylvie's policy was not to ask her daughter's opinion on things that were for her daughter's own good.

"Your Highness, there's no need to be polite. I'll write a letter to His Majesty myself about it," Lucinda reassured.

Duchess Sylvie and the king and queen were old friends from childhood. The king was also the type who could never refuse a friend's request.

"I'll just strengthen the security a little more," she insisted, making it sound like a done deal. No one present had the power to stop her.

"Now, all of you play nicely with my Cecilia, all right?" Lucinda requested

firmly, many times more the picture of a fine lady than Lean had been.

Things have gone from bad to worse...

In the afternoon, the entire party arrived at the cottage. Perhaps *cottage* was underselling it, though; it was more like a stately mansion that was situated on the banks of a lake amid the glory of nature. There were rooms aplenty for servants and guards as well, and there was even a separate annex building. Space was not an issue at all.

While the group had been taken aback at first by such a sudden development, they were now emboldened enough to settle in nicely. That is to say, that they'd begun to play around. Everyone frolicking by the waterside wore huge grins.

That looks fun...

The nominally frail Cecilia sighed from her shady spot under a nearby tree. But she wasn't sighing because she was jealous of the others' enjoyment—no, it had more to do with the person beside her.

"Are you all right?" asked Oscar anxiously. Instead of joining everyone else, he had chosen to sit next to Cecilia. Evidently, he was conscientious of the fact that she'd been left on her own.

Covered in a light sheen of nervous sweat, she smiled at Oscar from behind her fan. "I'm perfectly all right. Please, go on and join the others, Your Highness."

"No, I'm okay. I had something I wanted to talk to you about anyway."

Not only did he intercept her neatly, he also brought up a reason to stay, making it impractical for her to chase him off. She hadn't wanted to get near him or talk with him if at all possible, but now things had reached the point of no return.

Cecilia shifted the tiniest bit away from him. A few inches didn't make much of a difference, but it did wonders to calm her heart.

Why is he coming on so strong...?

Oscar had once told her he "*didn't hate Cecilia*" and that he "*wanted to*

rebuild our relationship (for my future with Lean).” Therefore, this must have been his first step toward rebuilding that relationship.

But what good will it do to repair things when Lean has Huey?

Just like in the game, Oscar still had feelings for her even though she was with someone else. Cecilia could understand that. But why was he trying to rebuild his relationship with the fiancée he didn’t even want, all for a woman whose heart was already set on someone else? That, she couldn’t fathom.

Was he still hoping he could infatuate Lean so she’d come back to him?

If so, I feel a little sorry for him...

She glanced at Oscar. Their eyes met. He must have been staring at her the whole time.

Quickly, Cecilia looked away.

I need to start with doing something about this!

She stared imploringly at Lean, who was closest, begging for help. But all she said was, “Huey, look! Those fish are huge!”

“You’re right; they are.”

“They seem like they’re having such fun swimming together! Shall we join them?”

“Cut it out. You’re not even dressed for swimming.”

“Oh, but...if it’s in front of you, I wouldn’t mind stripping down—”

“Hey! Like I said, cut it out with those jokes!”

“Hee-hee.”

She was too busy enjoying her time with her boyfriend—or was it more like she was having fun teasing him and making him blush?

But in the end, she murmured flirtatiously to him, “If I was drowning, would you save me?”

“Well...of course I would.”

It was enough to inspire jealousy in anyone.

I see your boy toy is more important than your friend!

Had Lean forgotten whose fault it was that Cecilia was in this mess now?

“Cecilia, are you feeling all right?” came an impatient voice as she was glaring daggers at her best friend. She looked over to find Gilbert, out of breath. Since the others’ arrival, he’d been tied up giving directions to the staff. Without their parents present, he was the de facto head of the cottage.

“Gil!” she cried rapturously. It was like an angel had descended to rescue her. However...

“Gil! You’re just in time!” shouted Dante as he slung an arm across her brother’s shoulders.

Jade was behind him. “Does the cottage have any fishing gear? And nets?”

“It...does, yes...,” Gilbert replied reluctantly.

“Then let us borrow them! Jade and I were just talking about fishing.”

“And if you’re free, you should join us! We just saw a catch that was this big!” enthused Jade, holding his hands far apart.

When had those two gotten so chummy?

Dante slid his arm up around Gilbert’s neck. “I’ll be borrowing your baby bro, Cecilia!”

“Hey!”

“Hey!”

“At least just show us where the fishing stuff is.”

“What should we do for bait, hmm?”

No! Gil!

They practically dragged Gilbert off. She wondered about the significant look Dante had shot Oscar as he left, but her head was already reeling from how quickly her trusty little brother had gotten whisked away. She couldn’t spare the mental energy to think about it.

“It’s unusual for him to want to get so close to others,” remarked Oscar,

apparently just as bemused by that mysterious look.

Now that they had been left all alone, Cecilia made up her mind. She had to overcome this solely through her own power. Somehow.

But what should I talk about with him?! First I'll apologize for the dress incident... No, no, I have to do that when I'm Cecil!

It felt like whatever she said would only be digging her own grave.

"Cecilia."

Oscar's voice was firmer than usual, and she turned to look at him. His gaze was serious and resolute.

"I've thought a lot about whether I'd bring this up with you the next time we met. But it's not my style to beat around the bush, so I'll just ask you directly."

She sighed.

"Do you regret getting engaged to me?"

"Huh?" she yelped, voice cracking at the unexpected question.

He went on. "Do you dislike me or something? You've been avoiding me for eleven years now. Or am I just being paranoid?"

"Um..."

His incredibly serious tone had totally thrown her off. Cecilia had never intended to avoid Oscar in the first place. She'd refused to see him because she didn't think it would be a good idea for them to meet face-to-face, but that had all happened when they were kids. He hadn't contacted her requesting to meet in close to ten years now, and by the same token, she hadn't received so much as a letter from him in all that time.

Cecilia shied away from Oscar's intent gaze. For whatever reason, he seemed to be under the impression that she hated him.

How should I answer this?

She obviously didn't hate him. But if she was going to cut ties with him, it would be wisest to say that she did.

But what if I say I do hate him, and it only makes him develop a grudge?

As of this moment, he didn't detest her. But if she told him that she resented him, that could certainly open the door to genuine feelings of hatred on his part.

And if that happened, it would bring her one step closer to her doom.

"If you truly dislike me and would prefer not to continue our engagement, then—"

"There is no need for that concern," she answered brightly, to cover her true feelings. "Naturally, I do not hate you, Your Highness!"

As she smiled at him, he blushed. Then his face softened, and he nodded once, satisfied, and said, "Good. If you really did dislike me, I was prepared to call off our engagement. But I'm very glad to hear you say that."

"What?" she said, her thoughts whirring to a stop at that unforeseen declaration.

Call off our engagement?

Once those words sunk in, she broke out in a cold sweat.

You mean I just missed my once-in-a-lifetime chance?!

She had just royally screwed herself over—quite literally. Internally, Cecilia commenced panicking.

Why did I just have to go and do thaaaaat?!

If she could get him to call off the engagement here, that would move her further away from death. So why did she keep sabotaging herself like this?

Just then, he clasped his hand over hers as it rested on the ground. "Cecilia."

"...Yes?"

Now wasn't the time for him to murmur her name so intently. Her face was composed, but she hardly heard a word he was saying.

"If you'll forgive me, then I promise that from now on..."

"Your Highness. Pardon the intrusion," interjected the knight Oscar had brought along as a guard. He was standing behind them.

Oscar let go of Cecilia's hand, heaved a long sigh, and turned around. "Yes, what is it?"

"I have captured an intruder."

"An intruder?"

"Yes," replied the knight, stepping aside to reveal an unconscious man bound with rope. Oscar caught sight of his face and instinctively recoiled in shock. Cecilia's eyes widened with surprise as well.

"Dr. Mordred?!" she cried.



"I'm so sorry. I never thought I'd lose my way out here...," Mordred said contritely while sitting with the rest of the group around the dinner table.

Mordred was not only the school doctor but also a researcher in his own right. He'd discovered stray dogs possessed by Obstructions and had tracked them out to their location. Then he'd gotten lost, which was when Oscar's knight had captured him.

Oh, that's right. He's supposed to have an absolutely terrible sense of direction...

Fan covering her face and leaving her meal untouched, Cecilia instead sifted through memories from her past life.

In the game, Mordred's sense of direction is so bad that he can't walk anywhere without guidance, save for the regular paths he traverses within the academy grounds. His tendency to get lost is actually what leads him to meet the protagonist.

Before enrolling at the academy, Lean is out doing some shopping around town when she encounters a man wandering the streets in a state of pure confusion. She asks him what's wrong and discovers that he's unable to locate the store where he wants to go. Out of the goodness of her heart, she personally escorts him there. After completing the errand, he takes her on somewhat of a date as thanks for guiding him, and then she goes home. They

reunite when school starts, and though it turns out they are school doctor and student, their feelings for each other slowly blossom.

But of course, this is the only part of the story I know. If I'd been aware his route contained clues about the third potential Holy Maiden, I would have prioritized him over everyone else...

Cecilia let out a little sigh. She was one life too late to have regrets at this point.

Even as she exhaled, Mordred was passionately recounting the story of the Obstructions. No one in the group had known he was a researcher, but they were all listening intently.

“There’s still so much we don’t know about Obstructions. Where did they come from? What do they want? Were they originally living creatures? Are they a type of curse? Despite all my studies, that incident in the auditorium was my very first time seeing one. That’s why I very much wanted to look into how they live...”

“That aside, it’s dangerous to chase after one alone,” insisted Jade with a frown. That was true. Mordred’s Sacred Artifact wasn’t exactly battle-ready. Though his healing ability wasn’t entirely useless, since it could weaken Obstructions, it would be far outmatched against a pack of possessed canines.

“So then what happened to the dogs?”

“Unfortunately, they got away.”

“That means they might still be lurking around this area,” Gilbert concluded, his voice low as he signaled something with his eyes to a nearby servant—probably an instruction to increase the number of guards.

Mordred cast his eyes down in guilt. “I’m truly very sorry. I’m an instructor, and yet, I’ve inconvenienced my students. I’ll leave first thing tomorrow morning...”

“Leave and do what?” piped up Huey. While the look on his face said he couldn’t be less interested, he was apparently somewhat concerned for Mordred after all.

“Spend a few days searching the area, I suppose. Which means I’d like to get Duke Sylvie’s permission to investigate his entire territory.”

“You’re going to look around alone? Where will you stay?” inquired Oscar, frowning.

“I’ve camped outdoors before.”

“Don’t you think it’s kinda too dangerous, though?” put in Dante.

“I’ll be fine. Should something happen, I can simply run away.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” Jade offered, no longer able to stay silent. “You don’t seem like you have a very good sense of direction. I could at least keep you from getting lost. And if the pack of dogs shows up, my Sacred Artifact will let us hide!”

Mordred shook his head. “I couldn’t allow you to do that. I must decline.”

“But...”

I suppose there’s only one solution...

Cecilia gave a long sigh. Then she stared right at Mordred. “Would you like to use this cottage as a base of operations?”

“Well...”

“If you need to go deep into the woods, we can dispatch some of our soldiers. They should be able to take care of things as long as you weaken them first.”

That would mean killing the dogs along with the Obstructions, but there was no way around that. The doctor’s life was more important.

“That does seem like the best offer I could possibly ask for...,” Mordred admitted slowly, dumbstruck by the unexpected suggestion.

Cecilia’s smile grew. “Research into Obstructions is essential for our country. Let’s call it a matter of national interest. In that case, the Sylvie family would be more than happy to assist you.”

“Thank you...very much,” he said, his head bowed low.

At times like this, whipping out the old family name did wonders for speeding things along. Implicit in that invocation was: *Get our family involved in your*

research, too, and, Once your research succeeds, you'd better be sure to drop our name.

Cecilia herself didn't care whether Mordred brought up their name, but establishing that her side also stood to benefit went a long way in assuaging any of the other party's potential doubts.

"You sure about this?" hissed Gilbert.

She whispered back, "I can't just abandon someone who needs help!"

"You're soft."

"So what? It means we gain another guest, but it doesn't really matter at this point!" she muttered, hiking her fan up higher over her face. "Besides, if it means we can get some more info on the third candidate, I'm all for it!"

"Fine. If you're okay with it, then I am, too." Her brother shrugged. He was allowing her to do as she pleased, which she truly appreciated.

Oscar, meanwhile, eyed Gilbert and Cecilia's hushed exchange with suspicion.



After dinner, the group dispersed to do as they liked. Lean and Cecilia retired to the annex next door to the main cottage, which had been designated for women to sleep in.

Cecilia and Lean went into the same bedroom. There were plenty of empty rooms, but considering the occasion, they'd decided to share. She might grumble about her, but Cecilia had still been looking forward to her friend coming for a sleepover.

"I made it through the first day!" Cecilia cried, flopping onto the bed, limp with exhaustion. Now that all the tension of the day had dissipated, she was left more worn out than ever.

"Good job," praised Lean, unpacking her things behind her. Ordinarily, the servants would do the unpacking for them, but she had refused that service. The reason for this was the bundle of notebooks occupying half her trunk—the journals where she jotted down her ideas for future stories.

“Don’t forget whose fault all of this is! Hmph!” huffed Cecilia, lips pursed at how Lean was acting like it didn’t involve her.

“Oh my. One could also say it’s the consequences of your own actions for deciding to cross-dress at school.”

“All right, you may have a point, but...”

“Although I *have* gotten some wonderful material because of that. I don’t intend to say sorry for what I’ve done, but I *do* thank you.”

“I want you to apologize, and I want you to rein yourself in.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Lean responded with a shrug, a little smile tugging at her lips. She was exactly the same as she’d been in their past lives—always walking her own path, heedless of everyone else’s. If her best friend laid in the middle of it, she wouldn’t care. Lean would steamroll right over her if she didn’t get out of the way.

But despite how she could be a complete menace, Cecilia couldn’t hate her for it, and she enjoyed spending time with Lean. That was as true now as ever.

“Hey, did you notice?” Lean asked after she’d finished putting away enough clothes for two to three days in the wardrobe.

“Notice what?”

“That it’s like we’re in the recap episode of the anime?”

Lying facedown on the bed, Cecilia repeated, “Recap episode?” in a confused tone of voice.

“*Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3* isn’t just a game. There’s also a manga, novelization, drama CD, anime, and movie. It’s had lots of adaptations. I think the anime has two seasons, so that’s twenty-four episodes and two recap episodes total. The story is based on the main route, Oscar’s, and there’s a special anime-only ending where the main girl doesn’t end up with anyone. So yeah, I think we’re between the eighth and ninth episodes. The way Mordred showed up is exactly the same! Although in the anime, things play out in Prince Oscar’s specially prepared cottage instead of the Sylvies’ lakeside manor. The episode focuses on the knights and the main girl playing around, after all, so the

rival character Cecilia isn't there. Lots of stuff is different."

"Oh yeah, I think I vaguely recall that..." Cecilia responded, rubbing at her temples. Their cottage stay resembled a recap episode, what with everyone reminiscing about what had happened up until that point and chatting about it. Nothing dangerous was going on, so it was like an extension of the characters' fun school lives.

"Cecilia, your memories of your past life are still fuzzy, right?"

"Not fuzzy exactly. It's more like there are gaping holes," she answered.

The moments from her life in the modern day were like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. Although she could recall them separately with perfect clarity, some parts were just totally empty. She could kind of remember the faces of her family members, but she was fuzzy on all her classmates besides Ichika. When it came to the schoolmates she'd recognized only by name and face, she drew a total blank.

On top of that, Cecilia's strongest memory, that of her own death, had been triggered only when a fire was about to engulf her—the same way she'd actually expired in the real world.

"Based on your reaction, is it fair to say you don't remember what happened during that event?"

"What? What event?"

"The one that happens here, between the MC and Oscar—"

Just then, a knock at the entrance interrupted Lean. "Come in," said Cecilia, and the door opened to reveal Gilbert.

"Cecilia. Could I have a moment?" he asked.

"What's up? Why are you here so late?"

"I need to talk to her," he said, pointing to Lean.



"Allow me to get straight to the point. Both you and my sister have memories

from your past life or whatever, don't you?" accused Gilbert, staring intently at Lean. They had moved to a different room to talk. Only the two of them were there, and Gilbert had cleared out the staff so that no servants were in the hallway.

Upon hearing his question, a look of surprise flickered across Lean's face for just a moment. Then a smirk he had never seen before materialized on her lips—her true colors.

He went on. "I've been suspicious for a while now. You're so close to Cecilia lately, and you're always whispering with each other. And when Cecilia got kidnapped and we went to go save her, you said something about not letting her die *this time*. That made it sound like there was a first time."

Lean had nothing to say in response, so Gilbert continued on calmly. "There's also the fact that you knew where Heimat's hideout was. You probably played through *Dante's route*, or whatever it's called, in your past life and remembered it from then. And the reason my sister hasn't told me about you must also be because you told her not to. Am I wrong?"

Her eyes glazed over as she took it all in. After heaving out a sigh, she sat down on the bed in the room and crossed her legs. "Assuming you're right, what exactly would you like me to do, Lord Gilbert? Surely you didn't come all the way here and summon me just to tell me that?"

"No, I didn't."

"Although, if you've come to ask me for information, I'm happy to tell you anything. For a price, of course," she added. Her manner of speaking was entirely different from the persona she'd projected up until now. Although he'd anticipated this to some degree, it still threw him off.

If I had to label one of the two the villain, I'd go with her...

Cecilia might have always been calling herself a villainess, but based on personality alone, Lean obviously fit the mold far better.

Gilbert coughed to clear the air. "There's only one thing I want."

"Yes?"

“Lean Rhazaloe. I would like you to become the Holy Maiden instead of Cecilia.”

“.....”

“If you do, then I will shoulder all the Rhazaloe family’s debt.”

The light in her eyes changed. With a sigh of resignation, she murmured, “I can see you wear the face of a man who knows everything.”

But despite that, her lips were just the slightest bit upturned at the corners. She didn’t look *entirely* put out.

Gilbert narrowed his eyes at her. “Lean Rhazaloe, seventeen years old. Raised in Cigogne Orphanage. Daughter of House Rhazaloe head, Cole Rhazaloe, and a former maid in their service, Angie Harrelson. No one knows whether she’s still alive.”

Gilbert had just rattled off Lean’s personal profile. In an instant, the smile vanished from her lips.

“On your seventeenth birthday, you learned you were Baron Rhazaloe’s illegitimate daughter and that the childless baron and baroness wanted to accept you into the family. Once you were taken in, you borrowed money from House Rhazaloe using yourself as collateral. You donated the entire sum of three thousand gold to the orphanage.”

“You’ve certainly done your research,” she remarked, more disgusted than impressed. She leaned back onto her wrists on the bed, her slack posture and crossed legs the exact opposite of what a baron’s daughter should have acted like—especially in front of a duke’s son.

“That’s just how suspicious I found you,” replied Gilbert.

There was no information that House Sylvie’s connections couldn’t bring to light. That being said, he was only the future head of the house, so he couldn’t make use of most of them yet. Still, it had been easy enough for him to uncover that much.

Shooting him a long-suffering look, Lean said, “It’s not like I hate my current parents or anything. Apparently, the man and woman who conceived me loved

each other and were only torn apart because of their difference in social stations. And my current mother, who my father married after that, hasn't done anything wrong. Actually, I think she's very fond of me."

Then, for the first time, Lean looked away from Gilbert. "But I didn't want to become the heroine so badly that I'd just throw away the family who raised me because some random nobleman came along claiming that he's my father and wants me to come live with him."

Lean and Cecilia had both used the term, but Gilbert still didn't fully understand what a *heroine* was. All he could tell was that it wasn't someone like Lean, which must be why discord had arisen between the heroine and her.

"At first, I asked the baron to donate money to the orphanage because he wanted to adopt me, since it was the place where I grew up. But he wasn't willing to accept, so I told him to buy me from the orphanage for a fair price. I promised that until I could pay them back the full amount, I would be theirs to do with as they pleased."

"And because of that, they're going to force you to get engaged."

"Yes. To some second son of a nobleman who I've never even met. It's unbelievably absurd!"

"I can help free you from that if you cooperate with me," said Gilbert.

Lean fell silent.

He pressed further, adding a few finishing touches. "Once I take over as duke, I'll see to it that you can be with Huey Cranebel. You won't be together officially, but as long as you carry out your duties as Holy Maiden well, the people around you should turn a blind eye to keeping him as a lover. Plus, taking the position means that the orphanage where you were raised will receive all kinds of benefits. What do you think? It's not a bad offer, in my opinion."

After a considerable pause, Lean grinned. It wasn't quite sweet—rather, it was the smile of a woman whose depths could not be fathomed. Her perfectly shaped lips formed the word *no*.

"What?"

“I said no. The answer is no, Gilbert Sylvie.”

She got up from the bed and walked over to him. “My debt isn’t so heavy that I can’t come up with the money quite naturally, even without your help.”

“Because of your business dealings with Jade?”

“There’s that. But I have other methods as well,” she revealed, her smile widening at the implication. “I care about Cecilia, too. I’m sure you don’t know this, but she saved me time and time again in our past lives. I’d do anything for her.”

“Then—”

“But I won’t hand over my life. I’m going to be happy, and so will she. I can’t accept any other outcome than that,” she insisted, as self-righteous as ever. As he listened, a little furrow developed in his brow.

She pointed at him. “You don’t have enough guts, Gilbert.”

“.....”

“You’re the type to sacrifice everything for your sister’s happiness, aren’t you? Even yourself. Somewhere inside, you’d even be willing to let the prince have her if that’s what she wanted. You rail against it with all your heart, but deep down, you’re also working out how to give up on her.”

Gilbert gritted his teeth. She’d really hit him where it hurt. He wanted to give some sort of excuse, but she was too on the nose. He couldn’t even say a word.

“I hate how calculating you are, Gilbert. The type of person I hate most of all in this world is a coward who’s given up,” she spat, brushing him aside to get to the door. She unlocked it and laid her hand on the knob. “You should learn from Cecilia. Her fate is more tragic and inevitable than you know. But despite it all, she’s fighting it with everything she has—and with a smile, to boot. Isn’t she amazing?”

Finally, she gave him a smile—an adorable, carefree grin.

Lean opened the door and moved to leave. Just on the threshold, she turned back. “But I do approve of how much you want to protect my best friend. So I’ll let you in on one thing.”

“You will?”

“Yes, I will. If I had to guess, I’d say you haven’t asked Cecilia much about her past life. Am I correct? Because you don’t want to end up hurting her.”

“.....”

It was like she could see through to his very soul. His lips contorted into a disgruntled pout.

“That’s why I’m going to tell you something.”

A pause. “Tell me what?”

“You already know that this world bears a striking resemblance to a game she and I played in our past lives, right?”

“What does that...?”

“Actually, Cecilia also had one.”

“One *what?*”

“A favorite. Like how Huey was mine... You know, the person she liked the most.”

Gilbert’s eyes grew wide. “Do you mean—?”

“And it’s someone you all know, of course. But it’s a secret who. I won’t reveal that part,” she promised, index finger pressed to her lips, eyes dancing.

Finally, her voice and expression molded into that of Lean Rhazaloo, the heroine, before she bowed. “Well then, a very pleasant evening to you, Lord Gilbert.”

He bit his lip, staring at the door as it swung shut behind her.

CHAPTER 3 The Killer's First Deed?!

The next day, Cecilia found herself in the woods behind the cottage, striding briskly through the dense undergrowth amid the green of nature. She had no set destination in mind.

Looks like I finally lost him...

Sighing, she looked behind her. The reason she'd come all the way out here was to shake off Oscar, who was trying to follow her around wherever she went.

If I head to the library to read, he follows. If I go to rest under the shade of a tree, he sits right next to me. Even when I talk to Lean or Gilbert, he's always! Right! There!

If she took a single step away, he'd ask, "Are you all right?" and attempt to trail behind her. She knew he was just being conscientious of her (ostensibly) poor health, but considering how she couldn't let him see her full face, it was supremely irritating to deal with.

He's not this clingy when I'm Cecil...

Although she was aware he didn't have any ill intentions, it was nevertheless exhausting. After telling him she was going to the powder room, she'd fled all the way out here. He was probably tearing the cottage apart looking for her right now. She honestly did feel bad about that.

Cecilia surged deeper into the forest. She couldn't see the cottage behind her anymore.

That reminds me. What did those two discuss last night anyway?

The memory of Lean and Gilbert leaving the room the night before popped into her mind. Once Lean returned, Cecilia had asked her what had transpired, but she'd refused to say. All she'd said was, *"It's nothing you need to worry*

yourself about.”

And Gil looked pretty sour-faced this morning, too...

He hadn't *seemed* like he was mad, but he also hadn't looked very happy. When she tried to talk to him, he wouldn't give her a straight answer. But his expression said there was more to the story.

What could he have needed to speak to Lean about?

Cecilia puzzled over that. After pondering it for a while, a bolt of realization hit her.

“Oh! What if he told Lean he likes her, but she turned him down?!” she cried aloud, utterly thrown.

That hadn't occurred to her at *all*. It had been a complete oversight on her part. Everyone knew Lean and Huey were a couple. Gilbert hadn't really reacted to the news, but he should be carrying a secret torch for Lean. After all, in the game, she's supposed to be his first love, the one he falls head over heels for at first sight.

He didn't let any of that show, huh? Oh, but actually, now it makes sense why both Oscar and Gilbert reacted that way to Lean's news.

Oscar's reaction had also been pretty indifferent for someone getting his heart broken, but it might just have been that the men of this world considered it embarrassing to let their disappointment show on their faces.

Still, what should I do? How should I comfort him? Or should I just let him be?

She really wanted to console him somehow, but a pep talk from his big sister might not exactly cheer him up. And while an old saying had it that the best way to get over someone was to get with someone new, she didn't have any other girls she could introduce him to.

“Once again, I just end up being the one relying on him...”

Feeling truly terrible for being useless when it counted, she gave a slightly dejected sigh. “But still, I can't believe how much Gil's grown up. He was so little when we first met.”

She stretched out a hand to somewhere around her knees, reminiscing. Never

mind the fact that back then, she'd been just as tall as he was.

"Kinda makes me feel a bit lonely." She sighed, sounding as if she were a mother whose child was leaving the nest. Did all parents feel this way? It was a little heartbreaking.

Hmm?

Suddenly, she stopped. Then, glancing all around her, she frowned.

Oh no. I may have gone a little too far from the cottage.

She could be outside the guards' range by now. Cold sweat trickled down her face.

The lookouts were positioned in numerous concentric circles around the cottage to prevent intruders getting in. However, security was at its tightest at the center. The guards on the outer edges were spread much thinner. Of course, with so many layers of security, it was impossible for anyone to slip through all of them. Normally, that would be enough to catch someone like Mordred. However...

Maybe I'm just really lucky today.

Cecilia hadn't run into *anyone* on her way here. A guard in the innermost circle had stopped her, but she'd smiled and told him she was going to pick some flowers, so he'd let her go.

But of course he had. The guards' job was to prevent outsiders from getting in. They had no orders about keeping people from getting out. Besides, few household staff could dispute their employers' wishes.

This is still House Sylvie territory, so I don't think any strange people will show up, but since I'm outside the security ring, it's a bit dangerous to be here. I've got to head back...

Cecilia turned around, but just as she did, a sharp voice called out, "Hey!"

Hesitantly, she glanced back to see a pair of young men with leaves in their hair and on their shoulders.

One had dark-brown hair and black eyes. A little taller than Cecilia, he was long, lanky, and not very broad or muscular. Although he wasn't too

unattractive, his attitude was somewhat arrogant.

The other boy had bobbed hair and spectacles. He was short and small. Compared to the boy next to him, he was trembling like a leaf.

Their clothes were of fairly high quality, so perhaps the pair were sons of nobility.

They kind of look like a neighborhood bully and his lackey.

“You live around here?”

“Um...”

They were on Sylvie territory, but this section wasn’t rented out to anyone. Her father loved bird-watching, so he’d kept this tract of land as part of a nature preserve for him to use.

“Well, yes...,” Cecilia answered vaguely, unwilling to reveal more than she needed to.

Bully approached her, brushing leaves off his shoulders. “I came because I heard Duke Sylvie has a cottage around here. You know anything about it?”

“Ah...,” she hedged, giving another vague nod. While the dwelling wasn’t hidden, neither was its existence a matter of public information. Only a select few knew of it. That meant this boy was included in that select few—or was someone who could take action against one of them.

Which means he won’t just go away if I lie to him...

He must have been the son of her parents’ friends or relatives. Whatever the case, she couldn’t help but wonder why this had to happen now.

Bully used his chin to jerk behind Cecilia rudely. “Then lead the way.”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you not hear me? I told you to escort us there, peasant.”

“.....”

This was how he acted when asking someone a favor? Even if Cecilia had been a commoner and he a nobleman, his behavior was beyond the pale. It was enough to make her worry about what his parents and tutors were teaching

him.

She bit her tongue to stifle the retort threatening to spill from her lips. Then she pasted on the biggest smile she could muster. It wouldn't be wise to anger him now. "Um, excuse me, but who might you be?"

"Ticky Coulson."

"Did you just say...Coulson?"

"Yeah. As in Duke Coulson."

"And I'm...B-Bernard Broussais..." stammered Glasses and Bob Cut in a faltering voice from behind Bully.

Cecilia was shaken to her core.

T-Ticky and Bernard?!

Both were characters in *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3*. Moreover, Ticky Coulson was Duke Coulson's second son—and Gilbert's biological older brother.

Wh-wh-what are these two doing here?!

Cecilia was reeling now that she knew why she'd been feeling such déjà vu.

Ticky and Bernard didn't appear in the game's common route, just the romantic ones. She'd only seen them in Gilbert's route and Jade's route.

And neither of them is good news...

Ticky Coulson generally appears alongside Bernard or with his older brother, Nichol Coulson. Whenever he shows up, it's usually to bully Gilbert. He smirks at Gilbert when he's walking around town with Lean, and when Gilbert is selected as one of the knights, he tacks up an anonymous sheet reading: "It was just a coincidence that you got knighted. You're the shame of the Coulson line. Pathetic shut-in!"

He gets no character development to flesh him out as a good guy or to reveal he actually has a tragic backstory. Ticky exists purely as a wall for Gilbert to overcome.

And that Bernard Broussais next to him is just as eccentric. His very first appearance is as Ticky's lackey, just like now. In reality, however, he's at the

heart of a series of violent crimes. In the dead of night or in empty alleyways, he beats women and small children until they pass out. He's a total loser who randomly preys on people he's stronger than. Jade's route largely revolves around chasing down the perpetrator of his assaults. He and Lean use exchange diaries to keep track of clues and hunches, culminating in them chasing Bernard down.

Which makes him the final boss of Jade's route... And incidentally, Bernard is responsible for half of Cecilia's deaths that occur after starting down it.

I'm guessing they're not going to just leave...

For the sake of her future and so many other things, she desperately wanted to drive them away.

But based on what's in the newspapers, Bernard isn't committing those crimes. And Ticky also hasn't tried to contact Gilbert at all. Maybe their personalities diverge slightly from in the game...

"What the hell are you spacin' out over, dum-dum?!"

"Eek!" she cried, stumbling back as Ticky shoved her shoulder. She had stayed perfectly still while lost in thought, so his push made her fall flat onto her behind.

"Hurry up and take us there!"

Excuuuuuuse me?!

She glared at him.

I take back everything I just thought! I'm chasing them off! These two are out of here no matter what!

Insults were one thing, but she would *never* stand for violent treatment.

"What do you think you're doing, glaring at me like you're some big shot? Do you think peasants like you are allowed to look at me like that?!"

"S-stop it! Ticky! Look at her clothes. They're tailored to be easy to move around in, but they don't look like anything a commoner would wear..."

"Bernard! You shut up!"

“Eep!” he shrieked, cowering in on himself.

That was when Cecilia rose to her feet. As she suppressed the fury welling within her, she pasted on the face of a well-behaved lady. Brushing off the mud on her dress, she straightened up to her full height. “Is that how someone born to a duke behaves, Ticky Coulson?”

“*What* did you just say?!” he snapped, grabbing her arm hard and glowering.

But she recomposed herself in seconds. “Oh my. Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear? Allow me to speak more plainly this time. Ticky Coulson, as a son of the illustrious House Coulson, are you certain it’s quite all right for you to treat women with such vulgarity?”

To illustrate just how calm she was, Cecilia used the arm he wasn’t grabbing to run a hand through her hair. “I dare say even a wild monkey would stop to think a little more about his behavior.”

“Listen—”

He tightened his grip on her. The pain made it difficult to maintain a placid expression. But what counted right now was guts. She couldn’t let anything show on her face until he got what he deserved.

If he knew the girl he was harassing was the daughter of House Sylvie, even this brute wouldn’t be acting so beastly.

“Ah, that’s right. I haven’t introduced myself.”

“Huh? Who gives a—?”

“My name is Ceci—”

But before she could finish saying her name, something whooshed by her ears very loudly. With a *thwack*, a familiar-looking sword stabbed into a tree in front of her. A red line appeared on Ticky’s face—his cheek had gotten cut.

“I finally found you, only to walk into this mess,” growled the man who had just thrown the sword, his voice lower and harsher than usual as he approached.

Cecilia couldn’t see his expression, but it must have been contorted with fury. Ticky let out a stupid-sounding whimper and loosened his grip on her.

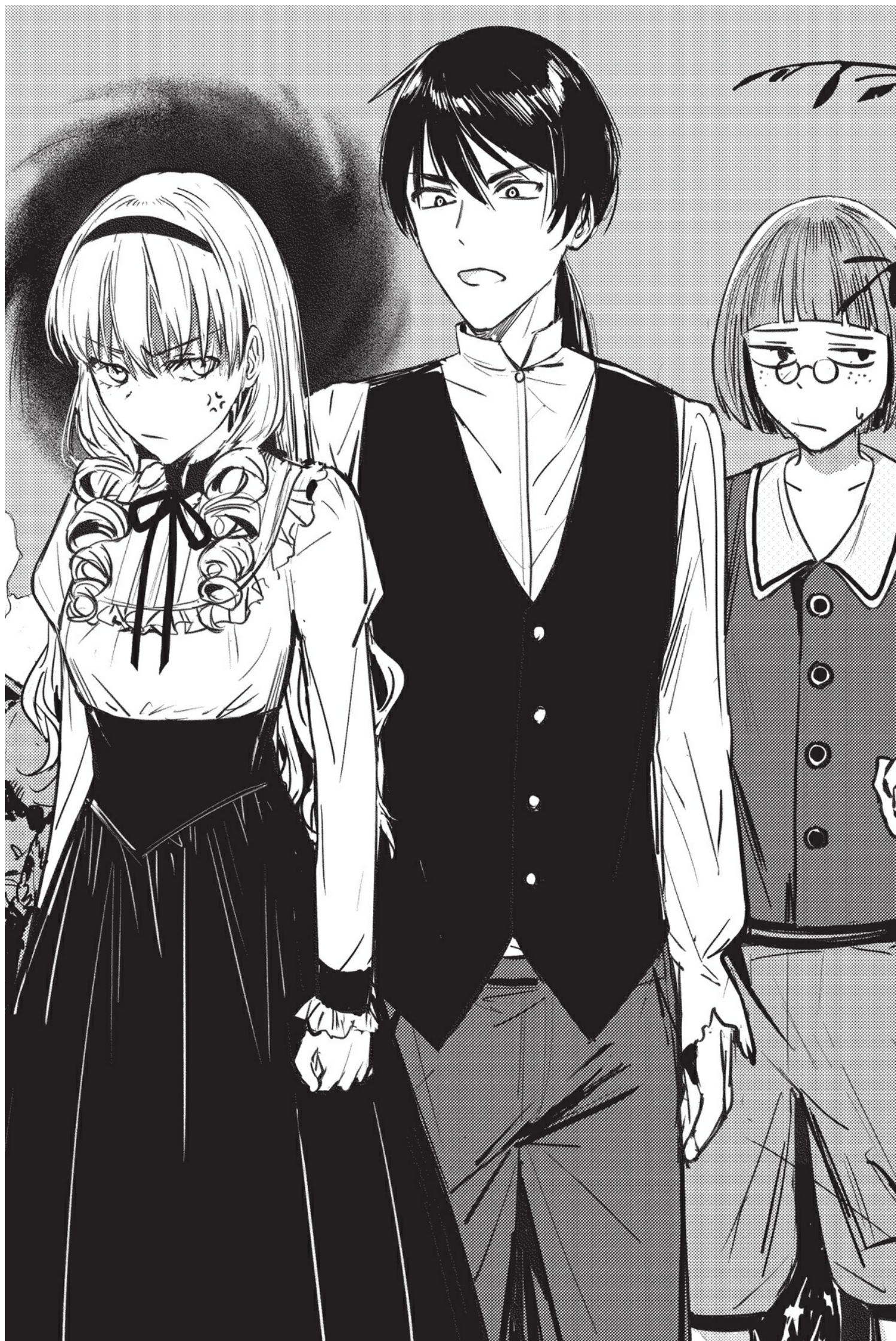
“Get your hands off her, Ticky Coulson. That’s my future wife.”

Cecilia turned around to see Oscar looking absolutely incensed.

“Leave,” was Gilbert’s first word to Ticky after hearing the gist of what had happened from Cecilia.

He sounded uncharacteristically harsh and unyielding; Cecilia’s heart lurched fearfully even though he wasn’t addressing her. Both Ticky and Bernard looked scared witless.

They were all in a room of the cottage. Cecilia was watching the situation unfold while getting her bruised wrist bandaged up. Oscar was there, too, standing by the door with his arms crossed and his eyes fixed right on the boys.



“Th-this is all your fault anyway! I wrote you so many times asking to see you, but you kept refusing! I even wrote to you at school!”

“Leave.”

“A-and besides, what happened with that girl wasn’t my fault! She’s the one who didn’t tell me her name sooner! If I’d known she was a Sylvie, I would’ve —”

“Leave.”

Ticky kept piling on excuses as Gilbert refused to listen. Apparently, the reason the teacher had summoned Gilbert at the academy the other day had something to do with Ticky.

“H-hey, Gil. Why don’t you give him a fair shot and listen to what he has to say?” Cecilia suggested, feeling a little sorry for the noble and sending him a lifeline.

He eagerly lapped it up. “See! Even she agrees!”

Gilbert turned back to her. “Please stay out of this and focus on getting treated. It’s all right. I’ll have him removed from here very soon.”

“Hey!”

“As I’ve been saying: leave,” Gilbert demanded flatly. He wasn’t budging one bit. He was in an extremely bad mood.

“I just wanna ask you to work with me!”

“And how many times have I told you that I’m not interested?” Gilbert spat back. Evidently, this was some House Coulson family dispute.

Upon asking for details, it turned out that as the second son, Ticky’s position in House Coulson was precarious. As the spare for the heir, his older brother Nichol, he had been very carefully raised to adulthood. However, their father’s health was failing, and soon Nichol would inherit the estate—and Ticky, no longer needed, would be kicked out.

Ticky dreaded the idea of becoming a commoner, so he’d hatched a plan to knock his older brother down a peg. That was what he wanted Gilbert’s

assistance for.

“I know you have info that I can use against Nichol!”

“Of course I don’t. Where would I have even gotten information like that?” Gilbert retorted. Incredulity blended with the suspicion on his face. He looked utterly harangued and sick of it.

“I mean, you resent all of us, don’t you? So—”

“So you think I’ve been gathering info to do something to House Coulson? Ridiculous,” he interjected dismissively.

“Come on!” Ticky protested, gawking at him.

“Let me tell you one thing. I don’t care one iota about any of you anymore. I also have no desire to involve myself in your business. Whatever you’ve heard is a total fabrication. So please, rest assured I cannot help you. *Get out.*”

“Heeey!”

“If you won’t leave on your own, you’ll be escorted away,” Gilbert revealed coldly. Just then, the door burst open without so much as a knock.

Oscar, who’d been standing by the entrance, jumped aside. “What in the—?”

“Hey! Have any of you seen Lean?” shouted Huey as he barged into the room.

Cecilia reacted first. “What? Lean?”

“She—she said she was going to her room to get something she forgot, but it’s been half an hour, and she still isn’t back! Do you know where she went?!”

Just then, two words scrolled across Cecilia’s mind: *the Killer*.

Everyone stepped out of the cottage into a scene of absolute chaos. Mordred had also come back with his guards, either because he’d heard what happened or because he’d finished investigating.

“So? Gil and the others don’t know anything?” asked Jade once he saw Huey come back outside.

“No,” Huey responded bitterly, shaking his head.

“There was just that kidnapping. This is so worrisome,” added Mordred.

“Do you know anywhere she might’ve gone?” Dante asked with concern.

“No idea. I watched her go inside the cottage... But...”

Cecilia glanced at the servants. “You’ve searched inside her room, haven’t you?”

“Yes, madam.”

“And you found nothing out of the ordinary?”

“Out of the...ordinary?” answered a maid, exchanging glances with the others. “Yes, let’s see... I’m not sure it counts as out of the ordinary, but the window was open.”

“It was?”

“Yes. And I’m certain it was closed when I made the rounds earlier...”

Cecilia circled around to the back of the house. She looked up and confirmed that the window in their room was open, curtains fluttering in the breeze.

I know I shut it before we left...

“Wait—”

She slid her gaze over to the woods, right toward where she’d bumped into Ticky and Bernard.

“Oh, Oscar!” she shouted.

“Wh-what?” he replied, flinching at the sudden call.

“When you came to get me, did you run into any guards?”

“Yeah.”

“How many?”

“Just the one who was watching over that area.”

“I knew it!” Cecilia cried, running off to find a servant. “Go and get a map of the section behind the cottage.”

“Pardon?”

“Now!”

“Y-yes, madam!”

“What’s going on?” asked Gilbert, approaching Cecilia as she spread out on the desk the map that had been brought over.

“I ran into Ticky and Bernard here,” she told them, pointing to the outermost ring of the concentric circles that made up the security layout. “Gil, if I walked normally from here to this spot, how many guards would I run into?”

“At least one and as many as seven.”

“What are the chances I’d run into just one?”

“It wouldn’t be impossible, but the chances would be pretty low. They’re supposed to be making the rounds of their posted areas. Oh—is that what you’re getting at?”

She appreciated how quickly he got it. A frown came over his face. “Let me go look,” he said and left the room.

“So? What did any of that mean?!” cried Jade, who’d been listening in, peering down with utter confusion at the map.

Cecilia continued her explanation. “Both Oscar and I only ran into the guard on the innermost security ring while getting from here to there. It was the same going back. We only encountered a single lookout in the whole zone that goes from behind the cottage to where security ends. Do you think that should be statistically possible?”

“To borrow Gilbert’s phrasing, the chances of that would be pretty low,” Jade agreed, sounding unnerved by the anxious atmosphere.

“A statistically improbable event wouldn’t repeat that often. But including the return trip, altogether we’ve experienced it three times,” she said.

“Once is a coincidence. Twice is a miracle. And thrice is fate...,” Dante murmured, picking up what she was getting at.

“In other words, it’s highly likely that several of your guards have been removed from their posts,” put in Mordred.

“Yes,” concurred Cecilia with a firm nod. When Gilbert had said he’d go and look, he meant that he would search for the missing guards. Dead or

unconscious, they must have been somewhere in those woods.

“So that means Lean’s been abducted, doesn’t it? By whom? Where has she been taken?!” Huey demanded.

As Cecilia stared at the diagram, memories of her past life came rushing back. This all had to be somehow related to the Killer.

Some sort of event involving them set in a waterfront or forest...

Cecilia ran her finger across the map. The Killer must have abducted Lean before going in and removing the guards. But the woods were large. There was no way he would just wander through them haphazardly.

Remember, remember, remember! she exhorted herself desperately. The Killer had murdered Lean across countless waterfronts *and* forests. But among them, there had to be some sort of distinctive place where she would get done in, a location that could only be in this region.

Suddenly, Cecilia slapped the map. “I’ve got it! It’s here!”

“What?”

“Lean is here!” she shouted, pointing to a limestone cave even farther past the spot where she’d run into Ticky and Bernard.

In the game, Lean gets whacked in this cave when the player is unable to enter anyone’s romantic route from the common route *and* when they lack the necessary affection points for the normal ending.

All of a sudden, she receives a fishy letter requesting she head to a certain location. Thinking nothing of it, she goes to the spot and is abducted. Then she comes to in the cave, whereupon someone slits open her belly and ends her life.

And since the cave where they find her body is located on House Sylvie property, Cecilia becomes the primary suspect, goes to jail, and is executed.

It’s certainly no coincidence that the Killer assassinates Lean in a Sylvie territory grotto. They must have deduced that by murdering Lean there, it would implicate Cecilia as well. That way, another potential Holy Maiden would die without them so much as lifting a finger. It also came with the added benefit

of pinning the entirety of the crime on Cecilia.

“Dante!” she cried. He was right next to her, so she tugged on his sleeve. “You’re the fastest runner out of all of us, aren’t you?! Go there right away! We’ll catch up later!”

“Uh.”

“Oh, but be careful, because someone with a knife might be in there!”

“.....”

After scrunching up his face reluctantly, he ruffled Cecilia’s hair and responded, “All right.”

For a second, she puzzled over why he was staring at her like a hapless little sister, but before she could ask, he’d taken off.

“Dante, I’m going, too!” shouted Huey, chasing right after him.

“I don’t want anyone holding me up, got it?”

“That won’t be a problem!”

They were both former trained assassins, after all. No one could surpass them in fleetness of foot or wits. They dove into the forest, leaping over boulders and swinging on tree branches. In an instant, they disappeared from sight.

“Jade, you can come a little later. Bring blankets and a first aid kit for when we find her!” commanded Cecilia.

“O-okay!” he replied.

“Dr. Mordred and Oscar, you come with me! Once we find Lean, she might need immediate medical treatment!”

“Understood.”

“Got it.”



“Lean!”

When Cecilia reached the cavern, Lean was already cradled in Huey’s arms.

She was unconscious, and at her side were cut ropes and a bit of cloth that must have gagged her mouth. Her skin was deathly pale from being abandoned in such a cold place, and her lips were blue.

Mordred, who'd arrived at the same time, ran over to her and began to heal her with his Sacred Artifact at once.

"We need to start by getting her body temperature up," he reported.

A faint glow enveloped her as color started to return to her skin.

Cecilia leaned in close to him. "How is she, Doctor?! Is she going to be okay?!"

"She doesn't have any external injuries. As for poison...it doesn't look like that, either. I think she just passed out," Mordred answered, conducting a thorough examination.

Cecilia heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, I'm so glad."

Huey must have felt the same way because he slumped back in sheer relief. But even then, he still held Lean tight in his arms.

But why...?

Why hadn't the Killer murdered Lean? If they did away with her there, they might have been able to pin the entire crime on Cecilia...

Then she clapped a hand over her pursed lips.

Oh, but in this world, the Killer doesn't know I'm a candidate for Holy Maiden.

They had no reason to implicate her in a murder. Additionally, unlike in the game, Cecilia and Lean were good friends, so her death wouldn't become Cecilia's fault simply because it happened on Sylvie territory.

So the Killer couldn't blame it on anyone else and was about to kill Lean here just because...

It was hard to believe the Killer would hesitate to strike down a potential Holy Maiden when they had her right in front of them. At least they never hold back on murdering a candidate in the dating sim. In fact, they generally only postpone an assassination in the hopes of incriminating someone else. And in the game, that's invariably Cecilia.

So is the Killer also trying to pin it on someone else this time?

That was when she heard an animalistic growl ringing out from somewhere. She looked up to find black shadows standing in the entrance to the cavern.

Wild dogs?!

She gasped. It was the pack of dogs the Obstructions had possessed during the school camping trip. They trained their bloodshot red eyes right onto Cecilia's group, snarling menacingly. A black mist emanated from their bodies.

"Hey, Doc, I found what you were looking for," remarked Dante breezily as he turned back to Mordred—whose face went ashen as he beheld the sight before him.

"Cecilia, hide," urged Oscar, moving in front of her protectively. He was already gripping his Sacred Artifact tightly.

Oh, I see...

Cecilia was the only one who understood what this meant—that the Killer *was* trying to pin the blame on something else. If wild dogs ripped Lean to shreds with their jaws, then it was a pure accident; it couldn't be anyone's fault.

But that means the Killer is—

Just then, a mutt came sliding toward her with a high-pitched yelp. After whirling around, she saw it was already unconscious, and the black mist around it had dissipated.

"Aw man, I wish I'd gotten a cool Artifact like Oscar's," whined Dante. The crown prince's attack had managed to pierce the Obstruction. Wielding a blade that could slice only the things he wanted it to was incredibly convenient.

"If you've got time for commentary, then use it to think up a plan or something! There's too many for me to take care of them all on my own!" Oscar shouted.

"So true," Dante replied, easygoing as always. The beasts had them surrounded, but he seemed more relaxed than ever. "I guess now's going to be my Artifact's time to shine."

Right, Dante's Sacred Artifact is—

But before Cecilia could plunge into memories of the past, Dante stomped his foot hard. A gust of wind whooshed up around him, forming a cloud of grit that crackled with bits of electricity and light.

“Whoa!” she cried.

“Lights out,” he announced with a smirk. In an instant, the dogs all slumped over, knocked unconscious in a matter of seconds.

I thought this while I was playing the game, too, but that Artifact of his really is cheap.

Dante’s Sacred Artifact grants him the power to render his enemies temporarily unconscious—which includes every opponent in range of him. How long they would be knocked out depends on their intelligence; the smartest don’t stay down for long. In the game, this translates to inflicting the Sleep status on humans for a single turn; for animals, three. She had no idea how many seconds of real-world time one turn encompassed, but there was no denying the utility of his accessory.

“Sometimes this thing won’t put human opponents to sleep, so I thought it was kinda useless. But fortunately, animals take about five minutes to wake up. I’ll go ahead and get the Obstructions exorcised before then,” he said, touching a dog’s forehead. Although it was difficult to tell amid its black fur, it had a mark somewhere on its body. Dante’s Artifact could knock out his foes using Sleep, but that alone wouldn’t exorcise the Obstruction.

Oscar turned to Mordred, Huey, and Cecilia. “Looks like that’s that, so all of you head back first. It would be better to heal her at the cottage instead of this place, right? The two of us can clean up here.”

“Got it,” Huey replied, getting to his feet while flashing a glance at Cecilia and Mordred that meant it was time to go.

Cecilia ran up to Oscar and Dante. “Be careful! I’ll be very upset if either of you comes back injured!”

“Oh—yeah,” replied Oscar. “Wait, I’ve been thinking for a while now that the way you talk sounds a little—”

Dante interrupted him, slinging an arm around his shoulders. “Yeah, yeah.

Okay then, Oscar, let's get this done!"

He steered away a very confused-looking Oscar.

Once the group returned to the cottage, they left Lean in Mordred's care while everyone else took over a room. Occupying it were Huey, Cecilia, and Jade, who had met up with them on the way back. Oscar and Dante hadn't returned yet.

When Gilbert rejoined them, all three were uncharacteristically quiet. After looking at each of their faces in turn, he sat down in a chair. "After Lean, we found the security guards. They were all just unconscious. Their memories of getting knocked out are fuzzy, and they didn't see whoever did it."

"So you're saying we don't know who did that to Lean," Jade commented.

"Yes, essentially," Gilbert agreed with a nod. Then he went on. "All we can do now is ask Lean what happened, but considering trained guards can't remember anything, the chances she will are fairly—"

"We don't need to do that, do we?" interrupted Huey, breaking his silence up until that point. He lifted his head and stared straight at Cecilia. "Isn't it obvious that *she* did it?"

"What? *Me*?" Cecilia squeaked, caught off guard by this turn of events. The other two looked equally surprised, eyes wide with bewilderment.

"But why would she do it?" asked Jade, utterly perplexed.

"I mean, it has to be her, right? Otherwise, how would she have guessed exactly where Lean was? There were tons of other sketchy-looking areas out in that direction! And she didn't even need to hide Lean in a cave anyway. She could've just left her in the woods."

"I—I..."

"Back when she told us she knew where Lean had been taken, I was so frantic that I just believed her. But when I thought more about it, I realized how suspicious it was. How could she possibly have guessed Lean's *exact* location?"

Cecilia instinctively shrank away.

"And you just conveniently happened to not be around when she

disappeared. You could've led her away without anyone suspecting a thing. And since you were staying in the same room, all you had to do was leave the window open."

"Um."

"Whatever you have to say for yourself, go ahead and say it!"

Cecilia's eyes darted all around. She was completely rattled.

Things were headed in a bad direction. An awful one. This happened time and time again in the game. It was good that Oscar wasn't here, too, because if he was, all the criteria for her death sentence would be checked off.

I—I need to think of an excuse! Anything!

But what could she say for herself? It was memories of her past life that had led her to guess Lean was in the grotto. Even if she *did* confess to that, though, he definitely wouldn't accept it. In all likelihood, he wouldn't even believe her.

But the longer I go without saying anything, the more suspicious it looks! I have to blurt something out!

"Um, so actually—"

The instant she piped up, the door to the room opened, and the person she least wanted to see walked in.

"We're back," said Oscar.

"It's done!" Dante sighed.

Cecilia inhaled sharply. *What do I do now?*

Now all the elements for her execution had fallen into place. She broke into a cold sweat.

Cecilia and Oscar were on good terms at the moment. However, if he erroneously got it in his head that she'd hurt his beloved Lean, Cecilia *knew* he'd start to hate her, just like in the game.

Noticing the unusually tense atmosphere, Oscar and Dante became confused.

"Did something happen?" asked Oscar.

“It feels pretty weird in here,” said Dante.

“Ummm, Huey just said it’s probably Cecilia who attacked Lean,” Jade explained, frowning. The other two instantly followed suit. Cecilia couldn’t read their expressions. It could be, *I knew it*. It could be, *Oh, I see*. It could be, *No way*.

After a while, the crown prince opened his mouth to speak. Cecilia froze up.

“Aren’t you being a little hasty?”

It wasn’t Oscar who’d said that—it was Gilbert. He unrolled a map of the area around the cottage before Huey.

“Look at this chart. Yes, you’re right in that there are lots of places to hide an unconscious girl. But all of them are open to the elements.”

“What’s your point?” demanded Huey.

“Whoever did it left Lean there for the dogs to assault her. The rain could have caused her to wake up, but the perpetrator wanted her to be unconscious during the attack. If she had roused and called for help or fled the scene, that would be pretty annoying, right?”

Gilbert pointed to the area outside the window. “Today was very windy, with storm clouds to the east. Chances of rain were high. So if they wanted to ensure Lean wouldn’t be found for a long time *and* wouldn’t get rained on, that cave was the only place to put her. My sister must have foreseen that. Right, Cecilia?”

“Oh...yeah!” She nodded, although of course she hadn’t foreseen that at all. Her brother really was a quick thinker.

Gilbert continued, driving his point home. “Besides, when Lean disappeared, Cecilia was with other people. If you want to check with them, I can take you to where they are. Do you want to?”

He was referring to Ticky and Bernard. Her encounter with them had been awful, but now she could only feel grateful that it had happened. They could give testimony verifying her alibi.

Huey fell silent. Dante clapped him on the back. “Look, I get why you’d feel

that way, but you need to take a step back.”

“Yeah. Think about it rationally,” put in Oscar.

“I...guess,” responded Huey, still looking unconvinced, which was to be expected. His girlfriend had been in a critical state. He couldn’t possibly be thinking about things with a level head.

“Plus, I believe it’s impossible for a woman to have done this,” noted Oscar. Huey looked up as he went on. “When we got back just now, I talked to the guards posted at the front and back doors to the cottage. During the span of time when Lean went missing, no one saw her.”

“The ones at the front door, too?” asked Huey.

This time it was Dante who nodded. “Yeah. Which means she was abducted from the window—and whoever did that leaped with her straight into the woods to avoid the guards spotting them at the rear of the house. That sort of stunt would be hard for any of us to pull off, so how could a delicate young girl like Cecilia do it?”

“Oh. Yeah...I guess that’s true,” Huey admitted, scratching his head. Then he turned to face Cecilia. “Sorry. I got the wrong idea.”

“Oh, it’s all right. I’m just glad you understand,” Cecilia answered politely, breathing a sigh of relief. She’d managed to avoid the worst-case scenario.

Gilbert spoke. “For now, let’s all call it a day here. I’ve exponentially increased the number of guards, so while we don’t know who abducted Lean, they probably won’t try pulling anything for the rest of the day, at least. Let’s talk more about it at dinner.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Lean still hadn’t woken up by dinnertime. Huey refused to leave her side, so everyone else held the discussion on what to do.

They decided on two major things. First, everyone would go back to their homes the following day. In other words, no more sleepover. While security was tighter now, there was still no real benefit in sticking around here.

Second, House Sylvie would take responsibility for investigating the situation.

It had happened on their territory, so that was only natural.

“But still, who in the world did that? And what was their objective?” Mordred sighed as he took a bite of food. Obviously, he was going to call off his research in the vicinity.

“Exactly. If they just wanted someone to ransom, she would have been a better choice,” noted Jade, his gaze sliding over to Cecilia.

“So then was it because she’s a potential Holy Maiden?” Dante piped up.

“What motive would they have for offing a candidate?” Oscar mused.

Who was the Killer, and why were they targeting Holy Maiden hopefuls? Cecilia didn’t know that, either. All she knew was that they had broken their silence and begun to act.

Afterward, Cecilia took in the night air on the cottage’s wraparound porch. To make it easier on the guards, she and Lean had moved from the smaller cottage next door to the main building.

In spite of her dreary mood, the stars glittering in the sky overhead were breathtakingly beautiful.

With the Killer becoming active, I’ll need to pull myself together and be even more vigilant than before.

Cecilia sighed and let her head slump. According to Huey, Lean had woken up just once about an hour ago. But she’d still seemed incoherent and foggy-headed, so she went right back to sleep soon after. When Mordred heard that, he’d bitterly postulated that she may have been drugged. His Sacred Artifact could heal only symptoms he could see and understand himself. Poisons and mystery illnesses fell out of this area.

Is she really going to be okay?

Cecilia also wanted to be at Lean’s side. But she felt like she couldn’t get in the way of Huey, who was sticking to his girlfriend like glue. All she could do was go out on the porch and look up at the room she thought Lean was in.

I sure hope she gets well soon...

“Cecilia,” a voice called out suddenly, and she looked to find Oscar there.

“Oh, Your Highness,” she replied, whipping up her fan immediately to cover her face. Behind the bulwark, her features tightened.

It's probably way too late to use this thing. I'm sure he's caught more than a glimpse of my full face by now...

When Lean had disappeared, Cecilia had been too flustered to remember to cover her face with a fan. She'd also dropped the formal speech and had started talking as casually as she did when she was Cecil. To be honest, it wouldn't be surprising if he suspected her.

Oh, but still! Even Oscar wouldn't think that a proper and respectable duke's daughter would be cross-dressing to go to school! I bet it's okay!

All she could do now was try to comfort herself with that. Giving up and telling him the truth was out of the question, and she didn't think he'd accept her story about past-life memories like Gilbert had.

While she was fretting over all that, Oscar came next to her and gently draped a jacket over her shoulders. “It's all well and good to cool off outdoors, but don't catch a chill doing it.”

As he smiled at her, it didn't seem like he suspected her of anything at all. He was the same sweet, good-natured boy as always.

Cecilia pulled the edges of the jacket together over her chest and smiled back. “Thank you.”

“Sure,” he replied, breaking into an even wider grin.

Looks like I'm...safe.

She breathed an internal sigh of relief. Of course he wouldn't end up concluding that a duke's daughter would be masquerading as a boy. Either that or he was just dense. Who could say which?

As nice as Oscar is, he's a bit slow on the uptake, after all.

If she got busted here, throwing Huey off the trail during the day would have been all for nothing. Well, Cecilia couldn't take credit for doing that, but still...

Her mind was wandering when Oscar suddenly placed his hand atop hers on the porch railing. “Even though things turned out the way they did, I had a lot of

fun spending time with you.”

“Oh, yes! I did, too.”

“Will you let me see you again?” he asked, and her thoughts jumbled. As the duke’s daughter, Cecilia, she could only say yes, but as the baron’s son, Cecil, she could only say no. But it wasn’t as if she could simply come out and say that.

“No?” he pressed.

“Ummm...”

It would be so easy to answer him with, *Of course*. But then she’d end up making concrete plans with him because he was so proactive when it came to her.

“Cecilia,” called Gilbert from beyond the sliding glass door to the porch.

She still hadn’t come up with a graceful way out, so she threw a desperately grateful look his way. “Gil!”

She attempted to run over to him when—

“Aaah!”

“Cecilia?!” cried Gilbert.

She stepped on the hem of her skirt and tripped, squeezing her eyes shut as the ground rushed at her.

But no impact came.

“You’re a bit more careless than I realized,” Oscar chided.

“Oscar...I mean, Your Highness,” she murmured.

The next thing she knew, he was holding her steady. He had his arms wrapped around her belly, taking on her full body weight. When she tripped, her fan had gone flying forward.

“Be more careful. We’d all be sad to learn you’d gotten hurt.”

“Oh—yes. Thank you so much,” she responded, embarrassed and blushing.

That was when Oscar’s eyes widened.

“I’ve got you, Cecilia,” insisted Gilbert, running up and getting an arm around her to help her walk away.

“Oh, okay.”

“Be careful, all right?” Oscar reminded her.

“I’ll see you later,” she said and left.

Oscar watched the two of them walk away, rooted to the ground in shock. He looked at his hands that had just been wrapped around her and inhaled sharply.

“I knew it. She’s...”

It was Cecilia’s bashful smile that had done it. Until then, he hadn’t been willing to believe it, but that had fully convinced him and rid him of all doubt. There was absolutely no mistaking it now that he’d seen her face from so close.

When Oscar looked up, he locked eyes with Gilbert, who was staring back over his shoulder at him. Gilbert gave him an expressionless but significant nod.

His pointed gaze made Oscar want to rub at his temple in frustration. “What does she think she’s playing at, dressing up as a boy...?”



In his mind, he saw the face of his friend Cecil, who wasn't even supposed to be here.



"Ugh, no fair! This is the worst! I was supposed to be spending more time with you, Cecilia!" cried a fully recovered Lean the next morning in Cecilia's room. She was already dressed and ready, her packed bags at her feet. "Seriously, the Killer needs to pay for that! Getting in the way of me and my fun means a pretty heavy sentence!"

"I think those charges are going to come from assault."

"That too! But what I resent the most is that the thing I was looking forward to got taken away from me!" Lean fumed, stomping her foot.

Although a wan smile tugged at Cecilia's lips as she observed her friend's behavior, she also felt deeply relieved. As everyone else had predicted, Lean hadn't been able to recall her assailant's face once she woke up. In fact, her memories of the entire experience were hazy. According to Mordred, he couldn't tell if her memory loss was due to shock or from the poison.

"Oh right, how did the event go?" Lean asked.

"The event?"

"You know, the one from the anime episode!"

Cecilia was confused, but she did vaguely recall Lean talking about something like that earlier.

"What, you still don't remember it? It's the one from the recap episode that happens out on the porch of the cottage between Oscar and the main character..."

"Ahhhh!" Cecilia yelped, pointing at Lean accusatively in her surprise.

There's a side plot at the very end of the recap episode. After spending the day reminiscing with everyone else about what had happened in the show thus far, the main character and Oscar go out onto the balcony that night, just the two of them.

And the minute things start getting interesting, Gil calls for her...

The main character trips as she tries to run to Gilbert, but Oscar is the one to steady her.

"Be more careful. We'd all be sad to learn you'd gotten hurt."

The way Oscar had murmured that in reality sounded exactly like how he delivers that line in the anime.

Which meant that her exchange with him last night counted as an event. Cecilia massaged her temples, which were now twinging with pain.

Why did I take over the heroine's role instead of Lean?!

"What? So did something happen like I predicted?" Lean asked, leaning in with avid interest. She was clearly enjoying this thoroughly, so Cecilia scowled at her.

As she shot Lean her meanest glare, Huey called out, "Lean! Let's go!" from downstairs. He was so concerned about her that he planned to escort her all the way to the baron's door.

"Coming!" she responded sweetly. Then she turned back to Cecilia with an air of finality. "Listen up. I'm going to be careful myself, but you need to be *extremely* cautious from now on. The Killer's probably targeting you!"

"Oh yeah—I will! But I don't think it'll be me they're after, right?"

"Why would you think that?"

"Because no one knows I'm a potential Holy Maiden yet..."

The Killer exclusively targeted Holy Maiden candidates. They wouldn't go after the knights, either, unless one of them got in the way, nor would they murder innocent citizens. They avoided taking lives when it wasn't necessary. On that point alone, they could be trusted.

"We don't know that for sure! We're talking about the Killer here! There's no telling where or how they get their info. One slipup and you're finished! Dead meat!" Lean exhorted, making a throat-slitting gesture as she spoke.

"Y-you're scaring me," Cecilia responded, her voice quivering.

“I’m not trying to. I’m just stating facts! In the game, the Killer attacks you way more often than me, so I really want you to be on your guard!”

“O-okay.”

“Lock your doors and windows. And don’t forget to post lots of security, got it?”

“Okay. And you’ll do the same?”

“Of course I will. I don’t plan on dying somewhere like this!” Lean proclaimed. Based on game events, the Killer shouldn’t attack her in her own home, so she was probably safe. And yet, their anxiety from the events of the day before still lingered.

“And besides, I think Huey’s going to stick with me for a while longer.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know if my parents will agree to let him stay with us quite yet, but he said if they won’t, he’s going to check in to an inn nearby and come to see me every day!” she enthused, cheeks flushed with excitement and happiness.

“Wow...he really loves you.”

“Doesn’t he? It’s mutual romance! I love him, and he loves me!” Lean flashed a shy smile as she wiggled gleefully.

Huey was originally an assassin attached to Heimat. Compared to Dante, he was still an apprentice, but he had certifiable skills. Guarding Lean and keeping her safe should be no problem for him.

Feeling slightly reassured by that, Cecilia walked her friend out to the foyer so she could see her off. Jade and the others were also there, ready to go. Off to the side, Oscar and Gilbert were having what seemed like a serious conversation.

Wonder what those two are talking about...

Both of them were whispering so as not to be overheard. After Cecilia observed them for a bit, Oscar noticed her gaze and glanced at her. Then, after appearing downright rattled, he very obviously averted his eyes.

What was that? she wondered, blinking in confusion.

Oscar joined the rest of the group without making eye contact with her. Evidently, the conversation was over.

“We’ll be on our way now. Thank you so much for having us!”

“See you around.”

“Bye.”

Lean, Dante, and Huey bade their good-byes and turned to go. Oscar also muttered, “Thanks,” and turned to leave as well.

Did I do something?

Cecilia stood there for a while, baffled as to why he hadn’t looked at her once on his way out.

INTERLUDE Gilbert's Summer Vacation

The night of their return from the cottage, Gilbert woke up feeling stifled. Lying on his back, he rubbed at his forehead and found his hand came away shiny with sweat.

It's so hot.

Heavy, humid air clung to him. Even though summers in Prosper were relatively mild, they were still plenty warm. The heat pervaded his whole body, especially on his first night back from the cooler waterside.

I'll go get a glass of water, he thought, head still muddled as he sat up to force himself awake. Then his gaze slid over to the spot next to him—and he froze.

Wh...at...is happening...?

It was no wonder he was petrified. Cecilia was in the bed with him, sleeping soundly after crawling in next to him.

Wait, I didn't do anything, did I?

Struck with horror and disbelief that he may have gotten carried away and seduced her, he frantically patted himself down to check, then timidly drew back the sheets from her—and breathed a sigh of relief.

Good, good, good...

She wasn't naked.

He buried his face in his hands. This was way too much of a shock. He broke into a fresh sweat, this time for an entirely different reason.

That's right—she did say she wanted to sleep in the same bed...

Gilbert sighed, thinking back on previous events. In the evening, Cecilia had shown up at his room with her pillow in hand. Though flummoxed by her flimsy

summertime nightgown, he managed to ask her what was wrong. Then she confessed to being scared of the Killer and requested that she sleep in his bed. Apparently, Lean had gotten her all riled up and thrown her into a state of fright. While the sight of her face, paler than usual, aroused his sympathy, he led her back to her own room and reassured her that he had posted more guards. He thought she had understood, and yet...

I certainly didn't expect her to sneak in while I was sleeping.

...apparently, she hadn't understood one bit.

He readjusted the covers over her, which granted him a glimpse of her ivory collarbone. He zeroed in on it. A bit of her décolletage was exposed, her skin flushed pink from the heat. Strands of her hair clung to her sweaty skin; the effect was strangely erotic. As she lay on her side, a bead of sweat formed at the mound of her breasts, sliding along her skin and disappearing between them into her cleavage. Gilbert tracked its movement before he managed to tear his gaze away.

No, I shouldn't.

He felt hot all over. Although Cecilia saw him only as her little brother, Gilbert saw her as a woman. Despite calling her his sister out loud, he'd never thought of her as a sibling.

"Nnngh—"

She must have been uncomfortable. Cecilia turned over to her other side, causing a slender leg to poke out from under the blankets. She was exposed all the way to her thigh, so Gilbert rushed to cover her up.

"Aaaaahhhh..."

All he could do was sigh. He'd only wanted to get up for a glass of water, but now he had to suffer through this? The situation was bringing all sorts of wicked thoughts to mind.

Gilbert brushed away the strands of hair stuck to Cecilia's cheek. Then he touched a finger to her lips. He pressed down lightly and felt overwhelmed at their softness.

“Cecilia, don’t you want to break off your engagement? Should I help you along?” he whispered to her. He was referring, of course, to her engagement to Oscar. He knew of one way to get it called off.

Come to think of it, it would be pretty easy...

The qualities required of a queen were intelligence, dignity, high birth...and purity. If any one of those was stripped away, she would no longer be qualified for the position. Which meant...

If right here and now, I simply...

He touched her lips again, tracing slowly along the edges.

“But she’d hate me for it.”

The act would be effortless to pull off. But it would also wound her deeply, so she would very likely never listen to him again.

But if that was what it took to take her for his own and keep her at his side every day, wouldn’t it be a small price to pay? She told him practically every day that she loved him. Perhaps, with the passage of time, she would forgive him.

“Uggghhh!” he moaned, throwing himself down on the bed. All these impulses he wouldn’t consider in the light of day were rising vividly in his mind; he was fed up with himself.

“I bet His Highness would never even dream of something like that...”

In Gilbert’s opinion, there was no man so upright and cleanhanded as the prince. Even if he were in Gilbert’s position, a solution that would hurt Cecilia would never have occurred to him—and even if it did, he would dismiss it out of hand right away.

As he stared up at the ceiling, Lean’s words from a few days earlier replayed in his mind.

“You’re the type to sacrifice anything for your sister’s happiness, aren’t you? Even yourself. Somewhere inside, you’d even be willing to let the prince have her if that’s what she wanted. You rail against it with all your heart, but deep down, you’re also working out how to give up on her.”

“I hate how calculating you are, Gilbert. The type of person I hate most of all

in this world is a coward who's given up."

"I mean, I do lose faith sometimes," Gilbert whispered weakly.

He knew that if Cecilia went on to marry Oscar, she'd be happy. He would protect her, shield her from anything, and cherish her. Anyone could see that. The whole thing was practically a done deal.

Which left Gilbert as the only one fighting it. He was the only one desperately clinging to her hand to keep her with him.

He brought the finger that had touched her lips to his own.

I don't plan on letting anyone else have her...but...

He heard her steady breathing right in his ear. When he turned to his side, Cecilia was right there, eyes peacefully closed.

Lean's voice reverberated in his mind once more.

"A favorite. Like how Huey was mine... You know, the person she liked the most."

"Is the prince the one you liked?"

Cecilia turned over in her sleep again and gave no answer.

INTERLUDE Oscar's Summer Vacation

"You only just now realized that she's Cecil? You really are dense."

The day after Oscar had begun wondering if Cecilia was Cecil, he'd interrogated Gilbert about it, only for the duke's son to blithely confirm it.

Their whispered conversation was held in the foyer of the cottage while the others chatted merrily about trivialities.

"I never thought Cecilia could keep everyone fooled forever, although she certainly seems to think she can. I guess I'm just not that optimistic by nature," added Gilbert.

"Don't you realize she's the daughter of a *duke*? How could you—?"

"Yes, I'm well aware of that," he interjected nonchalantly.

Oscar hated how he could look so unconcerned about it. And—

"But this is what she wants to do."

And he *also* hated how Gilbert acted like he was the only person who knew what was going on. Conversely, it made Oscar feel as though he were the only one in the dark.

"*Why* is she doing this?" he growled.

"I can't tell you."

"What?!"

"I don't think you'd understand even if I did," Gilbert replied. Oscar's ire rose, raging against what he took as a slight. First, Gilbert had said he couldn't tell Oscar, which was bad enough, but then he'd told Oscar that he wouldn't *understand*? It was enough to make him blow his lid.

"Fine. I'll just go ask her myself!"

If Gilbert wouldn't tell him, he would get the answer from Cecilia. The moment he took a step in her direction, however, Gilbert caught hold of his arm to stop him. "I wouldn't tell her that you know. Once you do, she'll probably flee the country or something."

"What? Flee the *country*?"

"That's how much she wants to keep this from you."

"She doesn't want me to know that she's dressing like a boy?"

"Yes. So please, give up on asking her and pretend like you're not aware. To be honest, though, I wouldn't mind if she fled the country, because I'll go wherever she does."

It didn't make any sense at all. Oscar's fury at being mocked had vanished, only to be replaced with pure and utter confusion.

What he *did* know was that if he didn't keep quiet about it, Cecilia would leave the country. And judging by the look on Gilbert's face, he was being candid.

"All right then, good luck pretending you don't know," he insisted with a smile as Cecilia and Lean came down the stairs.

That was three days ago.

"Ugh, dammit!" Oscar groaned, running his hands through his hair in frustration. He was in his study in the royal palace, and his sudden outburst startled a knight who had just brought in some documents.

"What's wrong, Your Highness?! Is there something amiss with the proposal?" asked the subordinate, who had turned pale.

"No, it's fine. My apologies," he answered, then looked back down at the piece of paper he was holding.

It was a supplemental budget proposal for the military, which he was currently in control of. On paper, the king was still the highest authority, but Oscar actually carried out the nation's day-to-day management. Of course, he had a panel of advisers and military staff who he worked with to determine things like where to station soldiers and what sorts of facilities to build. In

reality, he was still learning on the job.

Cecilia remained on his mind as he worked.

Which means that during that time—and that time—and that time, too—it wasn't Cecil; it was her? It was all her?!

Cecil, who'd wanted to sleep in the same bed as Oscar because he was scared; Cecil, who'd laid on top of Oscar while wearing a foreign costume to hide from Lean...

None of those moments had been him. It had *all* been Cecilia.

The instant he realized this, he couldn't help but remember how soft her body had felt that day, and he collapsed over his desk.

"Uggghhhhh!"

"Y-Your Highness?! Is everything all right?"

"What the hell is this meant to accomplish...? Sheer lunacy...," Oscar muttered angrily and incoherently to himself.

"D-did I do something to displease you?!" ventured the knight, flustered by his prince's eccentric behavior. But Oscar didn't have enough presence of mind to care about the poor subordinate he was frightening.

Rubbing his temples, he gnawed at his bottom lip. "Pretend I don't know, huh? How the hell am I supposed to do that...?"

He ran his hands through his hair again in exasperation.

CHAPTER 4 Time to Romance Dr. Mordred!

After two short weeks, summer vacation drew to a close, and Cecilia and the other students returned to Vleugel Academy.

“So anyway, I think that in order to wake Emily up, you *do* have to go after Dr. Mordred!”

“Who does?” Gilbert asked.

“M-me?” Cecilia asked meekly.

“Absolutely not,” he insisted flatly.

Cecilia and Gilbert were having their usual strategy meeting in the greenhouse during lunch. Her brother shutting down the plan she’d worked hard to come up with had left her flustered. “Why not?!”

“Why *not*? Is it even an option at all? You said you would go after him, which means trying to date him, right? Do you even realize who you are right now?”

He pointed at her, and she looked down at her outfit—a boy’s school uniform.

“The person romancing Dr. Mordred should be a girl, right? Because he’s interested in them. Wasn’t everyone losing their minds a while back when they found out he had an ex-girlfriend?”

“Well, I know that! But Lean wouldn’t go for it when I asked...”

When Cecilia had concocted her brilliant plan, she brought it up with Lean first. But her friend said only one thing in response: “*Nope. No way.*” She’d rejected it out of hand and completely tuned out Cecilia’s pleas.

“And so that means *you* need to do it? Isn’t avoiding situations like these the whole reason you’re cross-dressing?”

“Urgh...”

He’d hit the nail on the head. But Cecilia wasn’t giving up. She believed

Mordred's route held the key to rousing Emily.

Emily—Mordred's younger sister and the third candidate for Holy Maiden. Why she was still alive when the Killer should have assassinated her by now was anyone's guess, but Cecilia needed to get to the bottom of it.

After all, her whole goal here was to foist everything off onto this third candidate so she could live a quiet, comfortable life free from worldly cares.

She scooted up next to Gilbert. "But if I don't get close to him, I don't think he'll tell me about his sister! I'm pretty sure I just need to become friendly with him and that'll work! Even if I'm Cecil! Even if our relationship isn't romantic! I'm certain of it! Probably! Maybe!"

She gazed at him earnestly and imploringly, and he sighed in exasperation. "I guess if you're that insistent on it, I'll go along with it... But does that mean you're no longer worried about the Killer?"

"Of course it doesn't!"

For whatever reason, Cecilia puffed out her chest proudly. "But it's pointless to keep thinking about the Killer! I don't know who they are or what their goal is! And I don't even know if they're targeting me, either!"

"Says the girl who got so scared, she crawled into my bed to sleep."

"W-well, that was—that was because Lean scared me!"

She looked away guiltily. The morning after she'd crept into his bed, Gilbert had scolded her while looking angrier than he ever had before. She was slightly traumatized by it.

"But I just think I shouldn't fret over it when fretting won't solve anything. I mean, there's nothing I can do for Lean, either!" she rationalized.

Ever since Lean was attacked, Huey had been glued to her every moment of every day, which would make it almost impossible for the Killer to get to her.

Cecilia pressed a clenched fist to her heart. "That's why I'm going to get close to Dr. Mordred and wake Emily up! Then I'll leave everything to her! I declare that my goal! We'll deal with the Killer once they appear!"

"I see... All right then," Gilbert conceded with an idle nod. He didn't really

agree, but he would accept it.

“So where do you think I should start?” she asked eagerly.

He frowned. “Wouldn’t you know best? What does *‘going after’* or whatever consist of in the game?”

“Ummm, let me see. It’s essentially just spending as much time as possible together to raise his affection. Plus, going to his usual haunts and hanging around waiting for him to show up...”

“In that case, should we stop by the hospital after school today?”

“What? You mean to go and see Emily?” Cecilia blinked.

“Mm-hmm. Dr. Mordred told us to come by anytime we wanted, after all.”

“You’re right! And I’ve been curious about how she’s doing anyway!” Cecilia cried, clapping her hands together. It sounded like she was more interested in checking in on Mordred’s sister than pursuing the man himself.

At that, Gilbert relaxed. “After school, then.”

“Yup! Promise!” Cecilia nodded just as the bell for the end of lunch rang.

“But I said it was a promise...,” muttered Cecilia, a bouquet of flowers in hand as she stood in front of the hospital after school...alone.

The teachers had called on Gilbert again because of his brother Ticky. Evidently, he hadn’t given up on Gilbert yet, and this time, he’d gone so far as to phone the school.

Telephones in this world were regarded more as public property than utilities for private consumers. Although they were installed in public buildings and high-ranking noble houses, they had not yet permeated the majority of households. Most long-distance communication was still done via letter.

Up until that point, Ticky had sent letters, but now, in order to get his brother moving, he’d resorted to a phone call.

“Which means it’s probably gonna take a while.” Cecilia sighed.

Gilbert had told her: *“I’ll head over once I’m done, so go on ahead.”*

But there was no way he was going to be done anytime soon, considering

how stubborn Ticky was. He firmly believed his estranged sibling had life-ruining dirt on Nichol.

“Gil’s got it rough, too,” she mused, tightening her hold on the flowers and entering the hospital alone. “Er, where was Emily’s room again?”

She looked toward the reception desk, but no one was there. It seemed like the receptionists were all away on other business.

“And Dr. Mordred said he’d go on ahead to her room and wait for me there, so I’m not sure what to do.”

Cecilia recalled that the private rooms were on the second floor, but she couldn’t picture Emily’s exact room number. She racked her brain while climbing the stairs. If she couldn’t remember the number, she would have to take the slightly impolite route of going door-to-door.

Just as she emerged onto the landing, someone popped out from the edge of the hallway. It was all so sudden that she couldn’t dodge in time, so she ended up running straight into them.

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

Both were carrying bouquets, which collided in midair—and then both fell back onto the ground.

“Owww...”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” apologized Cecilia, jumping right to her feet and running to the person she’d bumped into. “Are you hurt? Do you feel okay?”

“Um, I’m fine,” answered a girl wearing thick, round glasses and a floor-length white lab coat. She was short, had curly hair, and looked younger than Cecilia.

For her part, Cecilia stared saucer-eyed as recognition dawned on her. “Oh! You’re the one from—”

“Hmm? Have we met before?” asked the girl, baffled. It was little wonder she wouldn’t remember—Cecilia had crossed paths with her only once, on the day she’d first gone to visit Emily. When they passed by each other, Cecilia had felt the strangest sense of déjà vu. That was the extent of their connection.

“Uh...,” she hedged, fumbling for what to say as she picked up the girl’s bouquet from the floor. A card reading EMILY was attached to it.

“Wait, are you also here to see Emily—?”

“What are you doing out there?” came a voice. Cecilia turned and saw Mordred poking his head out of a hospital room, which must have been his sister’s. When his gaze landed on the girl next to Cecilia, he broke into a smile. “I see you’re here, too, Grace. Thank you.”

“It’s no problem,” Grace responded, smiling softly in return.

Once they were all inside Emily’s room, the introductions began.

“This is Grace Martinez. She’s researching audiology at a lab here on campus.”

“Hello, I’m Grace. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh, nice to meet you!” said Cecilia, shaking Grace’s proffered hand.

Next, Mordred gestured toward Cecilia. “And this is a student at the academy, Cecil Admina. He’s a year older than you.”

“I see. My upperclassman, then. Once again, it’s very nice to meet you,” said Grace politely.

“I’m your upperclassman? But aren’t you a research student?” Cecilia asked with a frown, a bit confused.

“Grace isn’t a research student. She goes to the academy as well, but she’s very gifted, so they granted her special acceptance into the research program.”

“I’m mainly in the lab during the day,” Grace explained.

“Oh, wow,” Cecilia gasped. She must have been one of those prodigies. In addition to getting admitted to the labs, people like Grace were said to also be exempted from taking classes at the academy.

“Several years ago, phone calls in this country had poor sound quality. Grace here worked to improve that and is responsible for raising the caliber to our present standards. You’re currently researching the...phonograph, is that right?”

“Yes. We already have large ones, so now I’m creating versions that are as

compact as possible.”

“Ooh, Grace, you’re really amazing! But why does someone researching Obstructions know someone researching audiology?” Cecilia asked artlessly.

Mordred frowned. “Hmm? Did I tell you I’m researching Obstructions?”

“Oh! No, you didn’t! I heard it from Gil! Gil told me! He said you visited a cottage the Sylvies own! I wish I could’ve gone, too!” she cried. Half of that was a wooden performance, but the other half was to get her out of danger. It wasn’t Cecil who’d spoken to Mordred about his research into Obstructions—it was Cecilia.

“Ah, I see. The two of you are very close, then.”

“Ah-ha-ha, thank you...”

Cold sweat trickled down her cheek. That was a close call.

“Anyway, how do you two know each other?” she asked, brightening her voice to gloss over her slip of the tongue.

Mordred’s gaze dropped to his sister, asleep in the bed next to him. “Well, Grace actually saved Emily.”

“Saved her?”

“Yes. She was the first person to arrive at the scene after Emily was attacked.”

Emily had been attacked in the wee hours of the morning, while it was still dark outside. When she stepped from her house to grab the newspaper, a rock struck her, and she passed out. Just before the culprit could hurl another stone, Grace dashed over, and the perpetrator fled the scene. Emily escaped death thanks to how quickly she’d been able to receive treatment.

“My sister owes her life to her.”

“I see,” acknowledged Cecilia.

That’s why Dr. Mordred trusts her so much...

Nodding, Cecilia recalled Mordred’s smile upon seeing Grace. Then she realized something and whipped her head around to the girl.

So does that mean Grace saw the Killer?

She gasped a little as she realized she might get some information from an unexpected place. Choosing her words carefully, she asked, “But it’s so frightening how whoever did it is still at large, isn’t it? Did...you happen to see what they looked like?”

“Unfortunately...I didn’t,” admitted Grace with a shake of her head. Then she bit down lightly on her lower lip.

Mordred placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right. Even if we’d caught them, they wouldn’t remember anything anyway.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“Emily’s attacker was possessed by an Obstruction. There were, in fact, other witnesses who testified that a black mist was emanating from the person’s body.”

What?! So that means it wasn’t the Killer who did it?

There shouldn’t be anything about an Obstruction possessing them. At the very least, this was the first time Cecilia was hearing about it.

“So maybe that Obstruction is the reason Emily’s not waking up...,” postulated Mordred, gently stroking his sister’s forehead.

By the time Gilbert showed up, the visit was long over, and Mordred and Grace had left. Gilbert and Cecilia walked side by side from the hospital back to the dorms, discussing—obviously—Emily.

“So it’s possible that the Killer didn’t attack her?”

“Yeah, although we can’t be sure just yet. I didn’t play the game all the way to the end, so there’s a lot of stuff I just can’t verify...”

Gilbert stroked his chin. It looked like something had occurred to him.

After quite some hesitation, he spoke. “Hey, can I ask you something? How come Grace was able to save Emily?”

“Hmm?”

“Isn’t it weird? It happened so early in the morning that it was still dark outside. It doesn’t sound like they were neighbors, so why was she walking

around Dr. Mordred's house then?"

"True..."

He had a point. While it hadn't come up, Cecilia did get the feeling based on their exchange that the two researchers hadn't met prior to the assault. It was hard to believe that she would have just *happened* to need to drop by Mordred's house.

"That Grace might be hiding something," mused Gilbert. Cecilia's stomach lurched.



Cecilia was acting strange.

Oscar came to this conclusion about one week into the new school term.

It was already plenty weird that she dressed up in a boy's uniform, styled herself as a prince, and went around charming the girls of the academy. But even if he wrote all that off as her normal behavior, she was *still* acting oddly.

"Dr. Mordred!" she cried brightly, racing across the courtyard and up to the doctor.

Oscar observed her from a window on the second floor. "What's she up to?"

Her cheeks were flushed; she looked happy and excited. A vague sense of irritation welled up within him, seeing how close to Mordred she was standing.

Now he could wonder how in the world he'd *ever* thought she was a boy. No matter how you sliced it, her behavior was pretty girly. Realizing you'd been misled to believe something false was frightening indeed.

I can't ask her why she's cross-dressing, but...

"Can't I at least ask what she thinks she's doing?" he muttered.

Cecilia was dressing as a boy because she was convinced that she needed to. That much was clear based on what Gilbert had told him. Maybe that also tied in to why she'd suddenly started buddying up with Mordred.

Could it be that she's getting close to him because she needs his help?

In that light, her actions were understandable. Oscar watched them go, then turned away from the window. “If she needs help, I want to be the one to give it to her somehow...”

He felt that both as Cecil’s friend and as Cecilia’s fiancé. And also—just a teeny, tiny bit—as Gilbert’s rival. He just plain didn’t like how Cecilia relied on him for everything.

He would get his opportunity sooner than he thought.

“Oscar! Have you seen Dr. Mordred?” Cecilia asked, coming up behind him in the hall the next morning. He turned around, and she trotted up to him. Maybe she’d run part of the way to school; her cheeks were a little flushed. It was adorable.

She’s like a puppy.

Oscar cleared his throat and managed to school his features before he broke into a dopey grin. Though he didn’t agree with what she was doing, he’d decided to play along with her lie. If he didn’t keep himself firmly reined in, he’d start smiling at her affectionately. Plus, he wasn’t a very good liar to begin with.

“What do you need him for?” he asked in exactly the same tone as the one he’d used with Cecil before finding out the truth. Going off her expression, she didn’t suspect a thing.

“Nothing, really. I’m just trying to talk to him once a day, so I’m looking for him!”

“Once a day?”

“Mm-hmm, once a day.”

Why is it like she’s filling a daily quota?

Now he was even *more* perplexed by what she was doing.

Cecilia crossed her arms and frowned, apparently taking no notice of Oscar’s look of suspicion. “He doesn’t teach any classes, so it’s hard to find him if he’s not in the nurse’s office. And I’m not planning to go to the hospital for a visit today...”

“You’ve gotten pretty close to him lately... Any particular reason?”

“Huh?” Cecilia gasped, her large eyes growing even wider as she stared up at Oscar. When she cocked her head to the side, she looked just like a little woodland creature...adorable.

He coughed again and forced his lips back down into a normal expression. “If you need help with anything, I’d be happy to—”

“What? You’ll help me?”

“Uh, sure...”

“Yay!” she cried, so exuberant that it was a little bit off-putting. Then she grabbed hold of Oscar’s arm. “Come with me, then!”

She looped both her arms around his, which caused his elbow to bump into something soft.

“Ngh!”

Based on the location, there was no mistaking it, even though she’d bound herself to dress as a boy.

Realizing what he’d just touched, Oscar stiffened instinctively. He couldn’t prevent himself from heating up.

“Come *on!*” she urged, dragging him to the landing of a deserted floor of the school building. Just that was enough to bring on a headache.

Seriously, what does this loon think she’s doing?!

With tremendous effort, he restrained himself from shouting that out.

Cecilia let Oscar’s arm go and pressed her palms together hesitantly, a blush on her cheeks. “Ummm, so actually...”

The sensation of her soft curves against his elbow kept running through his mind, so he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to take in everything she was about to tell him. Nevertheless, he diligently kept his expression under control.

I’ve decided to go along with this ridiculous girl’s lie!

It was a vow that was already on the verge of collapse.

Cecilia looked up at him through her lashes. Though he desperately wanted to cover his face, he managed to restrain himself. A struggle was waging inside

him.

“Ummm, so actually, I’m trying to get closer to Dr. Mordred...”

“And why are you doing that, exactly? If it’s something I can do, why don’t you have me handle it instead?”

“Do what?”

“You know! Whatever it is you’re trying to ask him to do for you!”

“Ask him...?” she repeated, puzzled. She paused for a bit before shaking her head. “No, I just want to get close to him.”

“Get close to him?”

“Yup! Just that! I want to be as dear to him as someone he’s dating would be!”

A beat. “Excuse me?”

Oscar couldn’t comprehend what she was saying. It made no sense.

Did she just say “someone he’s dating”?

His headache reached a critical point and crossed over into dizziness.

His adorable fiancée, who was dressing as a boy for no explicable reason, was telling her future husband to his face that she wanted to be as close as lovers to some other man.

To say he was in hell would be putting it lightly.

“Yeah! I want to get so comfortable with him that he’ll talk to me about whatever’s on his mind!” she chirped.

This was a woman who could tear people’s hearts out without a single thought.

Oscar reached over to place a steadying hand on the wall. Failing that, he would fall over.

I-is Cecilia this unfaithful?!

Once, he had suspected her of being the type of person to date other people despite being engaged to someone, but now he knew very well that she wasn’t

that type of person.

But it's not like we're in love and dating or anything. Maybe she really does have feelings for—

But the instant that thought ran through his mind, he forcibly suppressed it. Right now, he didn't want to think about that possibility.

Looking pleased, Cecilia took Oscar's hand. "You'll help me, right?"

The girl he liked was beaming at him. He almost nodded out of sheer reflex.

But he managed to shake his head. He could be strong.

Why should he have to help the girl he liked get together with another guy? But he lacked the courage to say that to her when her eyes were so full of hope. Averting his gaze from her, he rubbed at his forehead.

"S-sorry, give me some time to think about it..."

"Whaaat?" She heaved in disappointment, pouting at him adorably.



Two weeks after Mordred introduced Grace to Cecilia in Emily's hospital room, Cecilia had established a daily routine.

"Oh! Dr. Mordred!" she cried, running over to him after school in whatever corner of the campus she found him in while beaming. "Hello!"

"Yes, hello," he replied with a confused wince. Everything on his face said, *Again?* He looked like he was at his limit.

And no wonder. Over the past two weeks, Cecilia had bothered him to death. Each time she caught sight of him, she'd bound over to him even if she had no reason to, nothing to say to him, and no time to be getting distracted. She would lay in wait for him around all his usual haunts, and she always made sure to drop by the nurse's office in the morning.

In her mind, this was all part of going after Mordred, but judging by his face, his affection points weren't going up in the slightest.

With a smile, Cecilia asked, "Would you like to chat if you're free?"

“This again?” He sighed, shaking his head. Even she could tell by his body language that he wasn’t interested. But since she didn’t know where the romantic part of his route branched off, all she could do was keep pestering him regularly.

I’m actually more interested in looking into Grace or the Killer, though...

Gilbert’s theory replayed in a corner of her mind. Still, she couldn’t help but focus all her attention on this. After all, she had no other leads to go on at the moment.

Reeling her thoughts back in, Cecilia plastered another grin on her face. Right now, she needed to focus on what was right in front of her. “Oh, don’t say that!”

“What’s going on with you lately? You’re being very clingy.”

“That’s just how much I want to talk with you!”

“I have nothing to say.”

“I do!”

“Are you dense or just hardheaded...?” he muttered, in spite of the fact that he was still stopping to speak with her. No matter what he said, he was a good person. Cecilia sat down on a bench.

Resigned, he plopped down next to her as well, but he still looked suspicious. “Why are you sticking to me so much?”

“Um, am I not allowed to?”

“It’s not about whether you’re allowed to. I just don’t think hanging around me will be all that interesting for you.”

“That’s not true!” she cried, shaking her head. She brought a resolutely clenched fist up over her heart. “Lately, I’ve really enjoyed the way you degrade me!”

A pause. “I’m not into that kind of thing at all.” He sighed, looking distinctly annoyed and put off.

While she might have failed in gaining affection points, she *was* succeeding in

getting him to show her more sides of himself, so that counted as progress.

“Oh yeah, I actually have something to ask of you today!” she cried, opening up her bag and pulling out two novels. “My parents sent me these. Which one of them do you think Emily would like?”

She handed him the books. One was a rags-to-riches fairy tale that any girl would love, while the other was a classic adventure story. Both were famous stories that everyone in the country was well acquainted with.

“These are for Emily?”

“Yeah! I’ve actually run out of things to say to her lately, so I thought I’d read her some stories! Oh, but maybe I should have gone with books that a girl her age would like? These might be a bit too childish...”

The kinds of stories Lean wrote might actually have been more to Emily’s tastes, but that was out of the question. There was *no* way Cecilia could read those out loud.

She went on, “Even though she’s asleep, there’s still a chance she could be listening. That’s why I was thinking about spinning her a really good yarn...”

“Have you been visiting her room even when I’m not there?”

“Um, yeah! Not every day, though!” she answered blithely.

Mordred’s eyes grew wide, and she backpedaled. “Oh, but I bring Lean with me most of the time! And when she doesn’t come, I make sure to leave the door open! It’s not like we’re all alone in there together!”

“I wasn’t worried about that. I trust you on that count at the very least.”

“Um, good,” she said, sighing in relief. Lean had told her that Mordred doted on his sister. If he ever suspected “Cecil” of doing untoward things with Emily, his affection would drop to unrecoverable levels.

“Ah, but that explains why the flowers get changed out regularly,” Mordred mused.

“Sometimes Grace shows up before me, so not all of the new ones are mine.”

“I see,” he acknowledged, an inscrutable look on his face. After a brief silence,

he asked, "But why are you coming to visit Emily? Is that how badly you want to get close to me?"

He scrutinized her doubtfully. Clearly, he hadn't the foggiest idea of what was motivating her behavior.

"Ummm, you're right in that was the way it started, but... But now I just hope she recovers quickly!"

"..."

"She's the same age as I am, but all she can do is sleep. It makes me want to do something for her!" Cecilia announced with a carefree grin, which seemed to surprise Mordred a little.

She was projecting the life of her past self onto Emily a little. Hiyono had been forced to leave the world at the most exciting part of her life, and Mordred's sister was in a coma. Hiyono could no longer go back, but Emily still had a chance. Cecilia wanted her to live out her days to the very fullest.

"Gil also told me that some people wake up from a coma after receiving extra stimulation from lots of people talking to them! So I was hoping it would help a little!"

"Hence, the books...?"

She laughed sheepishly. "Yeah, although I should have brought more of a variety." She scratched her head bashfully.

Mordred hung his head. Then he exhaled all the breath in his lungs in a single, lengthy sigh.

"Hmm? Did I say something offensive? I'm sorry!"

"No, you didn't. Now I understand how you butter people up."

"How I...what?"

"I think she'd like this one," Mordred suggested, pointing to the adventure story. Compared to earlier, his expression had become much gentler. "Emily preferred to read the books I liked when I was a child over the novels our family bought for her. She likes adventure stories and heroic epics."

“Got it! Thank you!” Cecilia said.

He gave her a smile and got to his feet. “All right, I’m off. Are you...coming to the hospital today?”

“I’m planning to!”

“I’ll see you there, then,” he said, walking off.

As Cecilia watched him go, she cocked her head in thought.

That actually went pretty well, didn’t it?

She didn’t know what had softened him up, but she felt as though she’d made some progress.

I guess I chose the right title. He likes adventure stories?

As she was musing on that, she sensed eyes on her from behind. She turned around and noticed that the low hedge behind her was rustling.

Lean?

Cecilia sighed. Maybe this time she wanted to pair off Cecil and Mordred. It was indeed amazing that she had expanded her hobby into a business, but Cecilia still didn’t like the idea of getting used as material for it.

“Lean,” she said, and the hedge shook. Cecilia narrowed her eyes. “I’m not mad, so will you just come out?”

“...”

But Lean showed no signs of emerging. Instead, she seemed to grow quieter and quieter. Was she going to try and escape?

“Come on! I said I’m not mad!” Cecilia cried, jumping up and peering into the hedge. Then she froze. “Huh? Grace?”

It wasn’t her friend in the hedge—it was Grace. Their eyes met, and the researcher leaped up like a startled cat. Then she turned tail and fled.

“Hey, stop—”

“Eeeek!”

But she tripped on something and went flying. So did the thing she was

carrying—a small wooden cube. A *click* came from the jewel embedded on the side of the box, as if a switch had gotten pressed.

What Mordred had just said to her floated through the air.

“No, you didn’t. Now I understand how you butter people up.”

“How I...what?”

“I think she’d like this one.”

It had just replayed their conversation. This box seemed to be the compact phonograph device Grace was researching.

But why did she record our conversation?

Grace dove for the device. “M-my Kakeru Sudou collection!”

The instant Cecilia heard that, she knew that the girl had also transmigrated into this world.

Kakeru Sudou was the name of the voice actor who had played Mordred in the dating sim.

CHAPTER 5 The Third Potential Holy Maiden

Kakeru Sudou was a very attractive voice actor who was capable of a range of voices, from fashionable and distinguished older men to cute mascot characters in a magical girl anime. In recent years, he'd been taking advantage of his good looks to do acting jobs as well. He had hordes of female fans; the size of his fan club was on par with a hit pop star's. Whenever he released a new song, it would invariably hit number one on the Oricon rankings that week.

Additionally, he had appeared in many *otome* games, including *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3*. Even someone like Hiyono, who hadn't been that knowledgeable about voice actors, was familiar with him.

"Everyone loves Kakeru's basic, clear, and high voice, but he's just as capable of speaking in deep, steady tones, too. He can truly do anything. If you looked up *mellifluous voice* in the dictionary, you would find a picture of him. And when he sings, his transition from chest to head voice is insanely smooth; it isn't the least bit jarring. Plus, when he layers in the character's personality on top of that, he can draw forth the most indescribable emotions to make your oxytocin and dopamine shoot up like crazy. To sum it all up, he's brought me so much happiness."

That night, Cecilia found herself in Grace's private research lab, where the girl had launched into a spiel about her love for Kakeru Sudou. Although she *looked* calm and composed, once she revved up into full fangirl mode, she talked a mile a minute. Her excitement was palpable.

Cecilia winced a little in the face of the full force of Grace's passion. "W-wow, okay."

"And that's not all. He's not only an amazing vocal talent; he's also great at stage and film acting. With a single 'I see,' he can convey not just love but sorrow, sentimentality, yearning—everything! And when he did the Japanese

dub in this one movie two years back—”

It didn’t look like she would run out of things to say anytime soon.

Grace Martinez had *definitely* transmigrated into this world.

In her past life, she went by Satsuki Yatani. She’d worked as a researcher for an audio equipment manufacturer and had been a self-professed audiophile and voice actor fan. In addition to Kakeru Sudou, she followed a ton of other VAs, which led her to play *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3*.

And so...now she’s using her knowledge from her past life to make a compact phonograph to record Kakeru Sudou’s voice...

What a waste of talent. She was like a different version of Lean—someone who used her powers for mischief.

Her final memory from her life as Satsuki was dying in the same burning movie theater as Cecilia. She was the woman who Ichika and Hiyono had tried to save. All three had perished together in the movie theater and had been transmigrated into the same world. The coincidence was almost unbelievable.

But while Cecilia fretted over that, Grace was still talking faster than a machine gun. Now she was going into her first encounter with Kakeru Sudou. Frankly, Cecilia couldn’t care less.

She glanced at the person behind her. His smile looked just as forced.

I don’t think Gil cares about this, either...

Gilbert had accompanied her. While he seemed to be listening, his expression said he was already sick of the topic. It was true that they’d make no progress if she simply kept nattering on.

In order to get information from Grace, Cecilia disclosed that she’d also transmigrated into this world and that Cecil was actually her alter ego. Letting Grace ramble on forever would mean that revealing her secret was all for naught.

I need to cut her off somewhere...

“Um...”

“Could I stop you there?”

She and Gilbert blurted out at the same time. Just before Cecilia had piped up, he cut in. Although she’d been interrupted, Grace didn’t look annoyed at all and only replied, “Yes, what is it?”

Perhaps this sort of thing was an everyday occurrence for her.

Gilbert pushed off from the wall he’d been leaning against. “I’d like to get to the point, if you don’t mind.”

“Mm, that’s right. We’re exchanging information, aren’t we?” Grace replied.

“Yes.”

“Then what would you like to know?” she asked, turning steady eyes on them. All her fangirlish joy had disappeared.

It was clear from Gilbert’s tone that he still didn’t fully trust her. “You’ll tell us anything we ask?”

“As long as it’s something I can answer, yeah.”

“What do you get out of it?”

“Nothing, really. None of this knowledge is of much use to me. I don’t mind telling you anything you’re curious about. We do come from the same place, after all,” she acknowledged, glancing at Cecilia with that last line.

“Thank you very much!” chirped Cecilia, bowing her head.

Grace beamed. “It’s no trouble. And stop speaking to me so formally anyway. You’re older than I am in this world, aren’t you?”

“Oh, right! And you can do the same with me!”

“It’s in my nature to speak this way to everyone. That doesn’t mean I’m keeping people at a distance, mind you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Also, while I did say that this information is of no use to me, that doesn’t mean I don’t have an ulterior motive for giving it to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying that our conversation might lead to a breakthrough in finding the Killer.”

The Killer?!

The name sent a chill up Cecilia’s spine. She’d already told Grace about the kidnapping incident with Lean at the Sylvie estate.

Cecilia leaned in toward her. “So the Killer is still targeting Emily?”

“Emily? Why do you think they’re after her?” asked Grace.

“Because she’s the third potential Holy Maiden...”

“Oh...is that it?” said Grace, sighing in exasperation. She shrugged off her lab coat.

“What do you mean?” Cecilia wondered.

“Please wait a moment,” she said, undoing the buttons on her shirt to reveal her crest.

Cecilia squeaked, “G-Grace?!”

“This should show you who the candidate is.”

“Hmm?”

She pulled her right arm out of its sleeve and bared her right shoulder to them. On her skin was a purple mark with a strong likeness to the one on Cecilia’s chest.

“The azalea...”

“Yes. The third potential Holy Maiden isn’t Emily. It’s me.”

“*Whaaaaatttt?!*” Cecilia shrieked, easily louder than her other yelps and cries up until that point. Fortunately, they were in a soundproofed room. If they weren’t, her bellow would have attracted attention for sure.

“S-so Emily is...”

“She’s Dr. Mordred’s little sister. Nothing more.”

Cecilia stood there slack-jawed, unable to move. Which was understandable, considering that everything she’d done up until this point had been based on

the belief that Emily was the third candidate.

Casting a sidelong glance at his frozen sister, Gilbert fired another question at Grace. “So does that mean the Killer failed in murdering the third potential Holy Maiden?”

“No, because I don’t believe they were targeting me to begin with. I didn’t allow all the right conditions to occur, so they didn’t appear on the scene.”

“Conditions?”

Grace nodded. “Before I get into that, I need to let you in on something.”

“What?”

“The Killer’s identity.”

Both Gilbert and Cecilia sucked in a breath. “You know who they are?!” demanded Gilbert.

“Obviously. I played that game through to the end.”

“So then—”

“Yes,” confirmed Grace, straightening up. Her calm eyes narrowed behind the rims of her thick glasses. After a short pause, she continued, “The Killer is...Dr. Mordred...or, I should say, it’s his other personality.”

Cecilia’s eyes practically bugged out of their sockets. This time, she couldn’t even make a sound.

Sweet, kind Dr. Mordred is the Killer?! But what’s this “other personality”...?

Ignoring Cecilia’s disbelief, Grace delivered her explanation matter-of-factly. “He has dissociative identity disorder, which used to be called multiple personality disorder. He has a mild-mannered mask he shows to all of us, but beneath that is one filled with loathing and hatred—the face of the Killer.”

“I can’t...”

“What’s more is that Dr. Mordred has no memories from his alter. Apparently, the Killer has his, though... Which is why on the surface, he isn’t aware of the second personality inside him or the damage he’s done to others.”

That made sense. After Lean was assaulted, Mordred had been more

distraught than anyone back at the cottage. He'd thrown everything into healing her and giving her medical treatment; it had really looked like he was doing his utmost to save her. There was no way he could have treated her with such composure if he'd known his other personality had injured her.

Grace continued, "I mentioned something about not letting the right conditions occur, yes?"

"Oh, right."

"Emily's death triggers the birth of the Killer. That's the impetus that leads him to develop inside Dr. Mordred."

Her statement made Cecilia forget to breathe for a moment. She was so stunned that her brain couldn't catch up with what she was hearing. If what Grace said was true, then she and Emily should have been dead already.

In sharp contrast to Cecilia, Gilbert remained calm. "Is that why you saved Emily? To avert your own death?"

"Yes. But to be perfectly honest, that's not quite the full story. In the game, the character of Grace gets seriously injured but doesn't die," Grace revealed, dropping yet another astonishing knowledge bomb. "Dr. Mordred's route is the final chapter. After erasing the Killer inside himself, the main character stays by his side as he processes his deep regret over killing Grace. That's when their friend Oscar shows up and says: *'My father is keeping her safe within the palace. We distributed false information to protect her after she escaped death.'*"

"What in the...?"

It was all too much information to sit with. Cecilia's head was about to burst from it all.

While Cecilia's brain spun in circles, Grace suddenly averted her gaze. "Incidentally, the bad ending is where the Killer overtakes Dr. Mordred's identity and murders Cecilia, who just so happens to be passing by. It stops right there."

"Aaah!"

Now it was all clear. Cecilia clutched herself tight.

“There’s no illustration for it, but the text says that he cuts off her arms and legs and digs out her guts while she’s still ali—”

“*Nooooo!* I don’t wanna hear this!” Cecilia cried, slamming her hands over her ears.

Death awaited her around every corner in this dating sim! Did the writers all have a vendetta against her or something?

Gilbert stroked his chin as he digested all these facts, then summarized them. “So what you’re saying is that Dr. Mordred’s hidden personality is the Killer, and Emily’s death triggers his development. You saved his sister not just to save yourself but also to avoid the Killer’s emergence.”

“Yes, that’s it... Although I can’t say I was successful.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“This is my first time getting transmigrated, so it took me a while to realize that this was the world of *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3*. Thanks to my slow start, I couldn’t save Emily completely,” she admitted, biting her lip remorsefully. She looked just as she had back in the hospital room.

Cecilia snapped her head up, having gleaned something from the girl’s words. “So that means the Killer is active now because...”



“Yes. Emily didn’t die, so the point at which Dr. Mordred’s personality branched into two was delayed. I thought I’d managed to prevent it, but from what you two have told me, the Killer has already emerged...”

Grace let out a grave sigh. Her gaze behind her glasses was laden with regret.

Frowning, Gilbert said, “Wait just a minute. In that case, why does the Killer attack a potential Holy Maiden in the game? I can understand his personality splitting as a consequence of him being unable to accept his sister’s death, but what would that have to do with targeting Holy Maidens?”

“That’s because of the Obstruction-possessed person who kills his sister,” Grace answered.

Cecilia thought back to when she’d visited Emily’s hospital room just recently. Mordred had indeed said that a person under the control of an Obstruction had attacked her.

“Since a possessed individual murders his sister, he grows to resent the Holy Maiden, who hadn’t protected her,” said Grace.

“But that’s...,” Gilbert murmured.

“Yes. It’s displaced aggression and a leap of logic, of course,” she replied. “If the Holy Maiden’s duty is to exorcise Obstructions, then failing to remove one is her fault. That being said, she can’t be held responsible for a possessed individual harming another person. But the Killer obviously couldn’t make that distinction. With his beloved sister dead, he was no longer able to process his grief. Thus, forming a grudge against someone was the only way he could hold on to himself. That was how his loathing of Holy Maidens developed... The real Holy Maiden, however, was out of his reach because she lives in her temple.”

Grace pressed a hand to her heart. “That’s why he turns to killing her potential successors. And he makes the character I am now, Grace Martinez, his first target.”

“But... It’s the Obstruction that was at fault...,” protested Cecilia.

“If he knew the identity of the possessed person, he would have gone after them. But...”

“They haven’t been found yet,” Cecilia finished.

Emily’s assailant was still at large. In light of that, it felt almost inevitable that Mordred would come to resent the Holy Maidens.

Grace looked down. For the first time that day, she frowned. “It’s not that they haven’t been found. They don’t actually exist.”

“What?!”

“The truth is—”

But just as she began to explain, the door to the research lab burst open. All three turned to the entrance to find an older man in a lab coat standing there.

“You’re still here, Grace?” he asked.

“Ah, yes. I still had a few things to get to in my research,” she replied.

“It’s good that you’re passionate, but you should head home already. You want to make sure you rest properly, don’t you?”

“Yes. Thank you for thinking of me. I’ll return there soon.”

“Good,” he said, leaving the room. He seemed to be making his rounds of the other labs, locking up and checking to see who was still there.

The clock indicated that it was indeed quite late at night. Grace got out of her chair. “I think that’s enough for today. We can keep talking about this another time.”

That brought the information exchange party to a close. Although the “exchange” part was in name only; Cecilia and Gilbert had gotten the information they needed, but they hadn’t given any to Grace.

Brother and sister walked home side by side. Since they’d just been discussing the Killer, the dark road back was a little scary. It still felt spooky even though they were on school grounds.

To distract herself from her fear, Cecilia remarked, “I never expected Dr. Mordred to be the Killer.”

“Yeah. But now that we know, it also explains why those wild dogs tried to attack Lean.”

“It does?” she asked, puzzled.

“He probably knew the whereabouts of the dogs’ territory, right? He’s the one who came to us asking permission to look into them in the first place. It wouldn’t be surprising for him to have realized that the dogs would pass by that cave.”

“You’re right...”

The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Dr. Mordred was outwardly mild-mannered and gentle, but lurking just underneath was a manifestation of his pent-up resentment, the Killer. In fact, maybe his alter was the only reason he could still smile on the surface even though his sister had almost been done in. He’d ended up creating another self who could feel that anger for him.

“That aside, I wonder what the last thing Grace said meant,” mused Gilbert.

“What thing?”

“That the person who attacked Emily doesn’t actually exist...”

Cecilia replayed in her mind what she’d said.

“If he knew the identity of the possessed person, he would have gone after them. But...”

“It’s not that they haven’t been found. They don’t actually exist.”

What did *that* imply? The more she dwelled on it, the less sense it made.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to ask her about it directly,” Gilbert reasoned.

“I guess we will.”

Still plagued by unease and uncertainty, they made their way back to the dorms.



Cecilia found herself outside the hospital after class the next day. Naturally, she was there to visit Emily. Lean had other things to do that day, so Cecilia had come alone.

I'm a little scared of Dr. Mordred now, but his sister didn't do anything wrong!

Flowers for the room in hand, she entered through the hospital doors. Although the facility was part of the academy campus, it was still a public institution. As such, it also had a back entrance for regular visitors, which was located outside the fence surrounding the school grounds. By the same token, a guard was stationed at the door leading to campus, so not just anyone could exit the building that way.

Let's see, Emily's room should be...

Despite how big the hospital was, Cecilia did know the way to Emily's room by now. She headed for the staircase leading to the upper floors.

Just then, a man wearing a brown hunting cap pulled low over his eyes crossed in front of her.

Wait, isn't that—?

It was Bernard. He wasn't wearing glasses, and his hairstyle and hair color were both different, but it was unmistakably him.

An ordinary person might not have noticed him at first glance. But Cecilia knew that he dons that disguise when he assaults women and children in the dating sim.

Why is he wearing it here...?

A sense of unease prickling at her, Cecilia followed Bernard. While he normally played the part of a meek young man, in truth, he was a serial criminal with a penchant for violence. And for whatever reason, he wore a disguise when committing his misdeeds. That would obviously put her on the defensive.

He's headed for...

Bernard climbed the stairs and made for the wing where Emily's room was. Then he actually went inside it.

But why?! Do they know each other?!

Cecilia crept up to the cracked door and observed him from there so he wouldn't notice her. Bernard stood over Emily's bed, fumbling in his jacket pocket for something, which he eventually produced.

It was a folding knife. He lifted it up high.

“Stop right there!” Cecilia shouted, bursting into the room and tackling him from behind.

It startled him. “What the—?”

Both parties crumpled to the floor. The knife slipped from Bernard’s hand and went sliding across the floor.

He reached toward the corner of the room where the knife had landed, but Cecilia grabbed on to his sleeve to stop him.

“Let me go!” he cried.

“Absolutely not!” she yelled back.

He kicked at her shoulder in an attempt to get her to release him, but she managed to hold on. Then she wrapped her hands around his waist to prevent him from escaping, which made him thrash even more.

“You little—”

Bernard reached for the bedside table, grabbed an object that was there, and brought it down over Cecilia.

“Oh no.”

A porcelain flower vase hurtled toward her face.



When she came to, she was in bed. The ceiling didn’t look like the one in her dorm room, and the window was open. It all seemed slightly familiar; suddenly, she realized that she was in a room in Emily’s hospital. Pain lanced through her head as she tried to sit up.

“Ngh!”

“Cecilia, are you okay?!” asked Gilbert, who was right by her side. He supported her back to help her into an upright position.

“Gil?”

“We found you unconscious in Emily’s room. Do you remember that?”

That jogged her memory. She snapped her head up. “How’s Emily?!”

“She’s fine,” confirmed someone else. It was Grace, shutting the door behind her. It appeared as though she’d just come back from checking in on her.

Cecilia breathed a sigh of relief.

“Honestly, I wasn’t expecting to find you passed out in Emily’s room when I went to go visit,” said Grace, who had apparently rescued Cecilia. The room they were in happened to be empty, so they’d asked the hospital for permission to borrow it.

“We’ve had a doctor examine you, and you have a mild concussion. The doctor told us that once you wake up, you’re free to go,” Grace explained.

Cecilia touched her head gingerly and found a slightly swollen bump there, but no broken skin. Maybe it was all thanks to her wig that she’d gotten off lightly.

“Do you remember how you ended up on the floor? Don’t tell me you smashed that vase onto your own head,” Gilbert said dryly.

“Oh, so actually—”

“Did Bernard assault you?” asked Grace, and Cecilia gave a start. Her insight was so keen, it was as if Grace had seen the event with her own eyes. Cecilia could only stare dumbstruck at Grace in response, who sighed. “I thought so.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gilbert sharply.

She brought a stool over to Cecilia’s bedside and sat down. “There’s something I didn’t mention yesterday.”

“Which is?” he inquired.

“Bernard is the one who attacked Emily.”

Both siblings inhaled sharply at the revelation.

“So an Obstruction is possessing him?” asked Gilbert.

“It didn’t look that way, though,” Cecilia mused, recalling the struggle from earlier. While he’d definitely had a dark aura about him, it hadn’t seemed like

he was possessed.

“Bernard actually spread the story of someone under the control of an Obstruction attacking Emily. He lied to deflect suspicion away from himself. Since rumors of the Holy Maiden growing weaker had started flying around that time, he decided to take advantage of them.”

So when Grace had told them the night before that the culprit didn’t exist, she’d meant that an *Obstruction-possessed* culprit didn’t exist—not that there wasn’t one at all.

As both Gilbert and Cecilia struggled to wrap their heads around everything, Grace turned to address them head-on. “Cecilia, did you play through Jade’s route?”

“Oh—yeah!”

“Bernard Broussais is the final boss of his route. Catching Bernard is a major part of it. But because that branch of the story only depicts him as a serial assaulter, it doesn’t show what happened with his very first victim.”

“Wait, then—”

“Yes. The first person he attacked was Emily.”

Jade’s route does a deep dive into the youngest Coulson brother. It reveals that Ticky twists Bernard’s already twisted personality even further through compounding his stress on a daily basis. Consequently, Bernard seeks out women and children to beat in order to vent his frustration.

Grace went on. “Originally, Emily dies, and Bernard’s violent streak only grows. But since she survived this time, his violent tendencies should be lying dormant; he shouldn’t go on the assault spree he does in the game... theoretically, anyway.”

That had held true until recently, when he’d attacked Emily. His savage nature was rearing its head again.

When Cecilia first met Bernard earlier, she’d blithely thought, *Has his personality changed?*

She could never have anticipated the truth that lay hidden in her observation.

“The way I see it, we have two avenues of eliminating the Killer inside Dr. Mordred,” Grace announced, holding up two fingers.

“What are they?”

“The first is to rouse Emily somehow, since she’s the reason why the Killer manifested,” she answered, folding down a finger. “The second is to catch Bernard, her assailant.”

Grace folded down her other finger. Cecilia leaned forward. “Then why don’t we just hand him over to the gendarmerie?”

“We can’t do that,” she replied, dropping her gaze. “He’s the son of a marquis. Unless we have ironclad proof, the gendarmerie won’t do a thing. I actually went to them once, but they shooed me away. In fact, they outright implied I was the one who did it...”

While this country did have a functioning judiciary, the catch was that it was clearly biased toward the nobility. This largely came down to the fact that most of the people who held positions in the justice system were aristocrats. Furthermore, no one carried as much influence over the judiciary as the highest-ranking nobles. The king’s word was absolute, which is why Oscar often executes Cecilia without a trial in the game.

“Even if you exposed your own social standing, Cecilia, there’s a high chance that Ticky would come barging in as a duke’s son himself. And if that happens, Bernard will get off with a slap on the wrist, even if we do manage to get him arrested.”

“And if that happens, we won’t completely eradicate the Killer?”

“No, we won’t. Instead, I think there’s a real possibility that once Bernard got out of jail, the Killer would assassinate him.”

That very well might happen. At the moment, the Killer was taking his rage out on the Holy Maiden candidates. But if the true target of his ire appeared, he was certain to train it on him.

“But we don’t know if we can wake Emily up. By contrast, we *do* know we can catch Bernard,” Gilbert pointed out.

“Even so, we don’t have any proof...”

Cecilia’s gaze dropped to the floor, just like Grace’s. Gilbert was right—since they knew his identity, it would be much easier to capture Bernard than to wake Emily from her coma. But that came with its own can of worms. Both options were equally difficult. Not to mention that Bernard had just failed to kill Emily. Though perhaps he would try again at another juncture, he would probably exercise more caution and lay low for a while before taking another crack at it.

In other words, capturing Bernard meant going back to square one with Emily and investigating everything all over again.

Can we really manage that?

In the end, the three of them left the hospital without coming up with a strategy.

CHAPTER 6 Crackdown

Bernard and Ticky's master-and-servant relationship was a microcosm of the connection between the families of Marquis Broussais and Duke Coulson.

While the status difference in their titles played into it, the main thing fueling that uneven relationship was the fact that all the rivers for agriculture and drinking water were located in Coulson territory. The two clans' lands were adjacent to each other. About fifty years ago, House Broussais was permitted to build a canal to draw water from one of those rivers, provided that it subordinated itself to House Coulson thereafter. From a young age, Bernard's parents had drilled into him that he must not defy any member of their clan.

Naturally, in emulation of House Coulson, he hadn't been allowed to attend the academy.

"It's all his fault. All of it! All of it!"

Bernard's day typically started with him spewing such malice. He'd writhe in bed, let all his curses out, then leave his room for breakfast. If he didn't do that, his life would be virtually unbearable.

Selfish and abusive to the extreme. Pushed Bernard around. Happily indulged in vices but would blame it all on Bernard if he got caught. He'd strike him if he was in a bad mood; entreating him to relent would result in a kicking.

And yet, it was his fate as a member of House Broussais to endure all that from Ticky.

Several months ago, however, his emotions had suddenly exploded.

At the time, Bernard was suffering from stress-induced insomnia. Since he couldn't fall asleep no matter what, it had become customary for him to take a very early-morning constitutional.

One day while he was on his walk, he made eye contact with a girl who'd

stepped out of her house to take in the newspaper. The instant he laid eyes on a creature so weak even he could overpower her, all his bottled-up feelings burst out.

Before he knew it, he was lying on top of her, bashing her head with a rock he'd grabbed from nearby.

"That was so exhilarating," he murmured, recalling the sense of pure exultation he'd felt then. One might even have called it a rush of pleasure. Ultimately, someone had intervened, so he hadn't killed her, but ever since then, he no longer found himself too anxious to sleep. Instead, when he thought of how alive he'd felt beating the girl, he would end up too *excited* to sleep.

"Once more, just one more time..."

His heart raced. Soon he would be unable to hold himself back.

Bernard was aware that the only person he truly wanted to beat to death was Ticky Coulson. But as of this moment, he had no means of doing so.

Just after he got out enough of his rage to leave his room, Bernard noticed a black envelope had been slid through the crack at the bottom of his door. The distinctive envelope was embossed with an owl design.

"Hmm..."

He picked it up. It bore the same design that the spies of House Broussais used.

To a member of the aristocracy, dirt on other noble houses was sometimes more valuable than gold. To that end, the highest of noble families employed specialized operatives to snoop on their peers.

He'd seen black envelopes like this one come to his parents on numerous occasions, but this was the first time he'd received one himself. Evidently, this was information he needed to know.

He scanned the contents—and his eyes grew wide.

"At last, I've got him!"

His lips curved upward in glee.



Three days after Bernard attacked Cecilia, a very familiar scene was playing out at the academy.

“Prince Cecil!” shrieked girls from the second-story classrooms as Cecilia passed by outside the building. She looked up to see several blushing female students staring down at her. When she graced them with a princely smile and waved, a few swooned and fainted, steam practically rising from their faces.

Gilbert regarded the spectacle apathetically before coming up next to Cecilia. “You really do that a lot.”

“Do what?”

“The whole prince shtick,” he said

She struck a triumphant pose. “Don’t worry! I’ve gotten pretty used to it!”

“I wasn’t worried.”

“Really?”

“But I know that’s just how you’ll interpret it,” he muttered. His sister was extremely good at interpreting things exactly the way she wanted to.

Suddenly, a teacher spied them from the school building and shouted at Gilbert, breaking up their pleasant moment. “There you are! Gilbert!”

Both of them turned around to find the faculty member running up to them.

“What’s the matter?” Gilbert asked.

“You have a visitor.”

“A visitor? Oh no,” he groaned, getting a very bad feeling about this. Ticky had probably marched his way onto campus.

Guessing the source of Gilbert’s frown, the teacher shook his head. “No, it’s not him this time. Today your visitor is the heir to House Broussais. He said his name is Bernard.”

Cecilia and Gilbert exchanged glances.

After class, Gilbert went behind the school building. It was a dark, north-

facing area where hardly anyone ever went, making it the perfect place for a secret conversation.

Facing him was Bernard, whose usual timid and cowering demeanor was nowhere to be found. As he regarded Gilbert silently, he didn't notice that there was a third party in the shadows.

"Why are you here?" the duke's son finally asked.

Bernard's gaze darted around before he replied in a thin, reedy voice, "I'm here because I want to help you."

"Excuse me? What are you talking about?"

"Today I received some intel," he noted, drawing a black envelope from his breast pocket.

"What is that?"

"Intelligence from a family spy," Bernard revealed, looking down at the letter he drew from the envelope. "This is a summary of what it says: 'Gilbert Sylvie is looking for help in getting revenge on House Coulson.'"

"....."

"Based on that, I guess they treated you pretty badly before you went to House Sylvie." Bernard smirked. His eyes were narrowed behind his glasses.

By contrast, Gilbert wasn't smiling at all.

"Ticky was right. You *have* been looking into House Coulson. But you've been collecting info to take down him, not Nichol. Am I wrong?"

"I don't know—who's to say?" Gilbert replied after a pause, refusing to confirm or deny.

Convinced of his victory, Bernard let his expression turn smug. He took a step closer to Gilbert. "I only wish I'd realized sooner! If the Sylvie heir takes revenge on the Coulson heir, that would cause great offense. But everything is different if it's Ticky who loses his noble status!"

Speaking with more fluency than he'd ever displayed before, Bernard moved in closer. "He's soon to be a commoner and has almost no one supporting him!

If you're going to take aim at anyone, it has to be him!"

"I suppose that's true."

"But you can't drive him into a corner on your own. He *will* be suspicious of any move you make. Which is why you're seeking coconspirators to help you get your revenge."

"Is that all written in the letter?"

"Yes. Aren't the Broussais spies amazing?"

"....."

Bernard placed a hand over his heart. His eyes had grown a little bloodshot in his excitement. "I can assist you. I'm sure you're aware of my current position. As a former Coulson, you must know that the Broussais family is condemned to servitude!"

His tone turned so rough, it was impossible to imagine it coming from his usual self. "I want revenge on Ticky, too! I want to send that rat straight to hell! But I can't do it alone! I need your help, too! So—"

He broke off, panting heavily. After leveling him with a chilly look, Gilbert finally let out a sigh of resignation. "I'll admit you've done relatively well bringing me this information."

"Does that mean—?"

"But I can't work with you," he finished coldly.

Bernard took a small step backward in disbelief. "Why not?"

"Yes, you resent Ticky, and you truly want to help me. But you don't have the guts to follow through."

"The guts?"

"Up until now, you've contented yourself with being his lackey. How could someone who's never so much as killed a fly possibly help me? What would you do if I roped you into some terribly cruel scheme?" Gilbert insisted disdainfully.

After a moment of silence, Bernard broke into an eerie grin. "Never killed a fly, huh? Far from it. I could do someone in."

“Anyone can *claim* they’ll do something.”

“In March...”

“Yes?”

“Have you heard about the thing that happened in March? You know, where a girl got her head bashed in with a rock?”

Gilbert narrowed his eyes. Then, after a slight pause, he nodded. “Yes.”

“That was me. I was the one who did it. Before I knew it, I had a rock in my hand, and I was striking her with it,” Bernard revealed, staring down at his own hands as if he was remembering how it had felt. “And three days ago, I couldn’t take it any longer, so I went to go finish the job. I didn’t manage to, but I was this close to killing her!”

“.....”

“If I get another chance, I’ll definitely send her to the grave. And if I’m going after Ticky, I’ll do whatever it takes!”

Bernard grabbed a fistful of Gilbert’s shirt, his eyes bulging. “Do you get it now? I have guts! Go on, pick me for your partner! I know you’re a sly one; Ticky says so all the time! You’ve got some pretty good intel, don’t you?”

“.....”

“Do you have proof of his crimes? Or maybe you’re planning to frame him for something he didn’t even do? Oh, or could it be you’ve figured out when he’s sure to be alone?”

Gilbert slapped Bernard’s hand away roughly. Then he smoothed out his slightly wrinkled shirt. “I really can’t pick you for my partner.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re arresting you here,” he said. That was when Cecilia suddenly emerged. Bernard must have remembered her from the hospital because his face froze.

“*Hiii-yah!*”

After tapping the Sacred Artifact on her wrist, Cecilia touched Bernard.

Something clear, round, and glass-like sprang up around him.

“What is this?!” he cried.

“I wouldn’t touch that if I were you! It’s got pretty bad recoil,” Cecilia told him, a hand on the surface of the glass. She had inverted her Artifact’s protective barrier to create a cage to contain Bernard.

The boy’s voice quivered with rage as he glared at her. “Where did you even get...?”

“It’s Gilbert’s,” revealed Jade, popping up all of a sudden behind Cecilia. He’d used his *own* Artifact to hide them both this whole time as they watched the exchange play out.

“Don’t forget about us,” called someone from behind Gilbert. The air warped, and Lean, Oscar, plus a very shell-shocked Mordred stepped out. Lean wore Jade’s bracelet, which she had once given back to him, on her wrist.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you read. What an idiot you are.”

“I could’ve forged something like that.”

Next it was Dante and Huey who jumped down from a tall tree nearby. Dante was holding a black envelope identical to the one Bernard had produced.

Gilbert drew out the hand he’d kept at his back this whole time. In it, he clutched an iron box about the size of his palm. Then he pressed a button on the contraption, and it began to play back his recent conversation with Bernard.

“Have you heard about the thing that happened in March? You know, where a girl got her head bashed in with a rock?”

“Yes.”

“That was me. I was the one who did it. Before I knew it, I had a rock in my hand, and I was striking her with it.

“And three days ago, I couldn’t take it any longer, so I went to go finish the job. I didn’t manage to, but I was this close to killing her!”

“Why, you little—”

“It’s a phonograph. I had Grace whip up a miniature just for today. Granted, it

isn't small enough to simply hide in my hand," Gilbert said, then switched off the device and turned back to face Bernard with a disdainful smirk on his lips. "Since we had no proof, we just had to get a confession out of you."

"Listen..."

"It's what you deserve for laying your hands on Cecil," he continued harshly, the look of a devil on his face.

They'd set the plan a day after Grace had explained the situation. Most of it was Gilbert's handiwork. It was Cecilia, however, who suggested they get everyone else in on it, too.

"We know who assaulted Emily, and we want to catch him. We need your help."

Everyone readily agreed once they heard that. Dante was the only one who'd never gone to visit Emily in the hospital, so they told him the whole story. His first response after taking it all in was, *"Oscar's going to help, too, right? I'm down."*

Then the mission began in earnest.

Huey was the first to act. Using his old assassin buddies and connections, he managed to uncover what was in the black envelopes. Next, Jade printed up the envelopes with his new printing press. Lean wrote the letter that went inside. Then Dante broke into the Broussais estate and slipped the note under Bernard's door. And after all of that, Oscar served as the official royal witness to Bernard's confession.

There would be no watering down of justice or pandering to the nobility in front of the crown prince.

Trapped inside the transparent glass, Bernard roared. He glowered at Gilbert. "So when you said you wanted to get revenge on House Coulson..."

"That was all a lie, of course. Lean here wrote everything in that letter, including the things about my past."

"Thank you very much for reading my work." She beamed, giving a gracious curtsy. Her powers of creativity had been surprisingly useful.

Bernard trembled inside the cage. His face was red with fury, and if it weren't for Cecilia's restraining dome, he would have already lunged at Lean.

I think we've managed to get a handle on the situation for now, Cecilia thought, breathing a little sigh of relief as she gazed at the captured boy.

In truth, she hadn't been wholly convinced they'd succeed. Their entire plan would have fallen apart if Bernard had just inspected the letter a little more carefully to verify it.

"So you're...the one who did that to Emily?" came a quavering voice from the back. Although the rest of the group had already relaxed, Mordred alone stepped forward. They'd had to drag him there half against his will in the first place, but now he drew right up to the glass and slammed his fist against it. They'd never seen him make such a frighteningly intense expression before.

"Cecil! Open this thing up!" demanded Mordred.

"What?! N-no! We've managed to catch him and everything—"

"I won't let him run away! I won't be satisfied until I've gotten to him with my own two fists—"

"Oh, hush." Huey sighed, punching Mordred in the solar plexus. He let out a low whine at the sudden blow before passing out.

"Hey!" protested Cecilia, at a complete loss.

"Well, I guess we didn't want him making a scene here anyway," drawled Dante with a grin.

True, it didn't matter if Mordred was there or not, now that they'd accomplished the bare minimum of showing him the culprit getting apprehended, but did those two have any scruples at all?

Huey hauled Mordred up over his shoulder. It was a little astounding that he could lift a full-grown man despite his short stature.

"I'll take him back to the nurse's office," he told them.

"Then I'm going with you!" trilled Lean.

"You don't need to."

“Awww, but I just wanted to accompany you,” she whined, swiftly handing Jade back his bracelet before bounding after Huey.

The couple always did exactly what they wanted and nothing else. It was soooo Lean to return the bracelet that promptly.

After watching them go, the rest of the group turned back to face Bernard. His head was hung low, and he hadn’t moved an inch.

“Now all we have to do is hand him off to the gendarmerie along with that, and it’s case closed,” noted Dante, pointing at the device Grace had made.

Sensing that everything was almost over, Cecilia felt relieved. But just then...

“...on me.”

“What?”

“You thought you could look down on me!” Bernard screamed, clawing at the cage.

“Hey!”

A loud crackle of static electricity propelled his hands away from the barrier. But he simply clawed at it again, undeterred.

“What are you doing?! You’re going to hurt yourself!” Cecilia cried.

“You thought you could look down on me! Treat me like crap! Bully me!”

“Calm down,” Gilbert ordered in an attempt to pacify him.

“Bernard?” Jade asked tremulously, backing away from him.

“Not just him but all of you! Everyone! Everything! I want it all gone from this world!”

“Ooh, you really sound like an evil villain there, buddy,” Dante jeered flippantly, which made Bernard roar in fury and lash out.

“Hey! You’re going to ruin your hands! Calm down!” Oscar shouted.

Though Oscar’s presence had seemed to cow Bernard up until now, that comment was the last straw. “Shut up! Shut up! *Shut up!*”

Then, with a feral growl, his eyes grew bloodshot, and he bared his teeth.

Smoke rose from his hands, and the stench of burning flesh filled the air. The ends of his hair lifted.

A black mist billowed up...

“What?! Wait a minute!” Cecilia cried in panic and disbelief.

“Rrroooooaaarrrrr!”

Bernard let out a beastly howl as the Obstruction took control of him.

“Cecil! It’s going to break!” shouted Oscar.



“What?” she yelled, turning to the glass to find that Bernard had dug his fingers into it. Little by little, cracks began to spread out across the cage.

“Y-you! Stop that!” she implored, pouring power into the Artifact to stop the glass from breaking.

He screamed as the barrier repelled his limbs. There came the sickening crunch of bones.

Oh no—

She rushed to let some of the force drain out. But this time, instead of resorting to his unusable hands, he head-butted the glass.

“Hey!”

Infused with the Obstruction’s might, his blows were enough to shatter the weakened glass into smithereens.

As he fell forward, he bared his teeth and attempted to spring at Cecilia first, the person closest to him. He was primed to tear her throat out. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, frozen stiff.

“Cecil!” Gilbert cried, shoving her away. After landing on her behind, she looked up to see Bernard sinking his teeth into Oscar’s arm.

“Oscar!”

“Oscar?!”

“Your Highness!”

Cecilia was the only one who couldn’t make a sound.

Face twisted in pain, Oscar stabbed his sacred sword into Bernard’s torso. Then the black mist swiftly dissipated from his body.

“Ah...”

Now that the Obstruction was gone, Bernard fell to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, then promptly passed out.

“That was one hell of a bite,” the crown prince muttered, falling to his knees.

“Oscar?!” Cecilia cried as she ran over to him.

Although Bernard had chomped over his shirt, blood still welled up from the spot.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. No broken bones or anything.”

“I’m really sorry.” Cecilia sighed as she cleaned Oscar’s wound. About half an hour had passed since he’d been injured protecting her.

Jade and Gilbert had already hauled Bernard off somewhere, leaving Cecilia and Dante to bring Oscar to the nurse’s office for treatment. But there wasn’t much they could do for a bleeding surface wound besides sterilizing it and wrapping it in gauze to keep germs from getting in. Besides, this was just a stopgap measure until Mordred came to. Once he did, he would heal a minor injury like this in a flash.

Dante disappeared a little later on. He gave an excuse about Emily’s situation reminding him of something before he left, but Cecilia thought he was just skiving off. He’d acted so worried when Oscar had gotten injured, but once he realized it was just a flesh wound, he wandered away.

Mordred, who Huey had knocked out cold, was snoozing on the bed behind them. But there was no sign of Lean and Huey, who’d brought him there.

Now it was just Cecilia, Oscar, and an unconscious Mordred in the nurse’s office.

“I’m really sorry. I’m never any good at dodging in time...”

“I told you, I’m fine. And don’t apologize over and over. As long as you’re not hurt, I’m good.”

“Okay. Thanks, Oscar,” she said, continuing to treat him despite her low spirits. It was Hans who’d drilled this first aid knowledge into her.

“Actually, I had something I wanted to ask you,” noted Oscar.

“What is it?” she replied, keeping her eyes on his arm as she wrapped bandages around it.

“Were you just following Mordred around so you could investigate this whole thing?”

“Huh?”

Caught off guard by the question, she gazed up at him. His cheeks were faintly red as he stared at her with a strange intensity.

“Yeah, I was actually,” she answered, a little puzzled.

Once she did, Oscar let out a long, relieved sigh, as though he were exhaling everything in his lungs. Then he let his head fall forward.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, I’m just glad,” he replied.

“About what?” she asked, scrutinizing him.

“Never mind,” he responded, jerking his face to the side. Had she given the wrong answer?

Well, he’s not mad, so it’s probably fine.

Choosing not to dwell too deeply on it, Cecilia went on dressing the wound. Then something occurred to her. “Hey, isn’t this kind of the opposite of how it was before?”

“Opposite of what?”

“You know, during the school trip! You helped treat that cut on my face, remember?” she recalled, pointing to her right cheek where a chip from the wooden cutting board had grazed her skin. At the time, they hadn’t been close enough to be chatting warmly like they were now, but that incident had truly brought them a little closer together.

He huffed out a chuckle. “That’s right. That did happen, huh?”

“You were so scary back then.”

“Was I?”

“Yeah, you were! Your eyes were so intense! And you wouldn’t stop demanding to see Cecilia and hounding me about whether I’d made plans for that yet. To be honest, it was a little annoying!”

“O-oh,” he responded. When she said *annoying*, his face fell like someone had punched him in the pit of his stomach.

“It’s a fun memory now, though! Come to think of it, you haven’t said anything like that lately.”

“Like what?”

“Asking to meet Cecilia and all that.”

Even though it wasn’t as bad as in the beginning, at least once a week, Oscar had still been asking Cecil about getting to see Cecilia. That had been before the cottage incident. But ever since then, he hadn’t said one word about her. While that made it a lot easier for her, she still felt a little anxious about his change in behavior.

“Oh, unless you’re good now that you got to reunite with her at the Sylvies’?”

“Not exactly...I just don’t need to go out of my way to see her anymore,” he replied, sounding as though he was having a hard time explaining it for some reason.

Her confusion only deepened. “You don’t need to go out of your way to see her? Does that mean you’re planning to dissolve the engagement without any hard feelings?”

“What? Dissolve the engagement?! Why would you say that?” he cried, his eyes growing as wide as saucers.

“I—I mean, didn’t you want to establish some sort of relationship with her so you could cancel the engagement on a good note?”

“*What?!*” he snapped.

Cecilia shrank in on herself. “Ummm, I mean, don’t you have a crush on Lean? And so that’s why...you know...you wanted to wrap everything up nicely before...”

“*Excuse me?*” Oscar asked. A muscle in his jaw twitched. He was gawking at her as though he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Why would you think this has anything to do with liking *her*?”

“Uhhh...intuition? I just kinda got that sense looking at you... You know?” she replied. She obviously couldn’t bring up her past life or the game.

His eyes widened even further, if that were possible, and he repeated,

“Intuition?” in a trembling voice.

Oscar’s reaction being not quite what she’d expected, Cecilia cocked her head in confusion. “So wait, have you given up on Lean?”

“Why are you talking like I used to like her at all?” he muttered, clutching at his head like he had a headache.

“Did you not?”

He didn’t respond; he merely massaged the furrow in his brow. Then, after a long silence, he looked up with a face haggard with exhaustion. “I do not like Lean...”

“What? Why not?”

“What do you mean, why not? Why is that your reaction?” he inquired in a low, resonant voice, his face darkening. His unhappy expression completely threw her.

Does that mean that in this world, the criteria for Oscar falling in love with Lean is different?!

That meant she was in trouble.

If he liked someone else who wasn’t Lean, and Cecilia unwittingly offended that girl somehow, it would lead straight to a bad ending for both Cecil *and* Cecilia.

Now Oscar himself was the biggest indicator that Cecilia was hurtling toward doom.

I have to get him to tell me who he likes no matter what it takes!

“So who *do* you like, then?”

In a situation like this, Cecilia wouldn’t beat around the bush but would instead come right out and ask directly. This quality was both a strength *and* a weakness.

“Who...?”

“I wanna be friends with her! I’ll support you two all the way! Who is it?”

“.....”

Oscar didn't look good. In fact, he even seemed a little pissed off.

"Oh, I know! You said you didn't have to go out of your way to see Cecilia anymore, right? So does that mean she's someone equal in status to a daughter of Duke Sylvie? That would definitely make it hard for House Sylvie to publicly object!"

"....."

"Is it Sonya Wills? I've heard she's really pretty—"

"No!" he shouted, getting to his feet like he couldn't take this any longer. His chair clattered to the floor behind him with the momentum. The gauze on his wound was about to come off.

"Oh no, your bandage!"

"I don't like her!"

"You don't? Then..."

"*You're* the one I like! Isn't it obvious?!"

A long pause. "Huh?"

Time stopped. Their conversation played on a loop inside her mind. After spending about three full minutes mulling over what it could mean, she finally reached a conclusion.

"Awww, c'mon, stop kidding aro—"

"It's not a joke!"

Three minutes of careful deliberation were squashed in a millisecond.

Flustered, Cecilia looked up at Oscar only to see that his face was redder than it had ever been. In that moment, she knew.

Oh. He's serious?

Finally, the meaning of his words sank in, and she blushed.

"Ummm, wait, so the one you like is...me?" she asked, wanting to confirm.

"Yes," was all he replied in a quiet voice.

Another silence fell.

What do I...even say...?

She had *not* anticipated this turn of events.

While Cecilia sat there frozen, Oscar suddenly ran his fingers through his hair.
“Augh! I’m leaving!”



“What? Hold on!”

“I can do the rest myself! I’ll get Dr. Mordred to heal me when he wakes up, so don’t worry!” he bit out before flying from the office.

As she watched him go, Cecilia felt utterly out of her depth. “What do I do now...?”

Oscar likes Cecil?

As everything that had just happened flashed back through her mind, her emotions morphed into embarrassment.

“He likes *boys*?”

No one was around to refute her.



Three days after Cecilia had developed *that* misunderstanding of epic proportions, she found herself in Emily’s hospital room with Dante. Mordred was there with them, fidgeting. He kept looking over at Dante with a worried furrow between his brows.

Casting a sidelong glance at Mordred, Dante held a hand over Emily’s eyes. A gust of wind strong enough to flutter the curtains burst up.

“Whoa!”

A faint light enveloped Emily and converged around her heart. The gale died down simultaneously.

“There. It’s done.”

“Will this really work?” Mordred asked, glancing from Emily to Dante and back.

Cool as always, Dante merely shrugged. “Maybe?”

“Maybe?”

“I’ve never used my powers this way before. Why don’t you just ask her whether it worked or not?” he suggested, looking back over at Emily. So did

Mordred and Cecilia. "Time for you to wake up, little sleeping beauty."

As soon as Dante said that, Emily's eyelids stirred. Slowly, they opened to reveal irises the same color as her brother's.

"Emily?"

"Mordred...?" she asked hoarsely. Mordred clapped a hand over his mouth and began to cry.

Dante and Cecilia walked back from the hospital together.

According to Emily's physician, she would need some physical therapy to regain the use of her atrophied muscles, but as long as she completed that without issue, she could be discharged at any time. They would examine her tomorrow to make sure nothing was wrong with her brain or body.

"I never thought that would be a way to wake her up," Cecilia murmured, recalling the miracle she'd just witnessed.

Flashing her the same carefree smile as ever, Dante flicked the bracelet around on his wrist. "My Artifact isn't just for putting creatures to sleep. It allows me to *control* sleep itself. I mean, I can only use it to wake people up in this specific situation, but when I heard what happened to her, I had a feeling it would work."

Apparently, this was what he'd been referring to three days ago when he'd said Emily's situation reminded him of something.

Come to think of it, Dante was the only one who wasn't there when we first visited her...

If he'd been there with them that day, they might have been able to rouse her sooner.

But I guess it turned out fine in the end, since it was better that we got Bernard behind bars anyway.

The gendarmerie had taken Bernard into custody and transferred him to a prison cell. No one could say what his sentence would be like, but it would be almost impossible for him to inherit his family title after this.

He wasn't an only child, so he could very well be kicked out of House

Broussais. If it did happen, however, he would at least be freed from the fetters locking him to House Coulson. That would probably be a good thing for him in the long run.

Of course, that was easy for Cecilia to say.

There we go—that's one case closed!

She felt truly happy for the first time in a while. She'd been working herself into knots worrying about everything lately, only for all of it to resolve just like that. That naturally did wonders for her mood.

Cecilia also hadn't told Mordred about the Killer.

Even though he'd hurt Lean the most, Lean had said, *"Why bother? I'm not going to end up in that situation again, so I don't care!"*

Ultimately, they decided that all those who knew the secret of the Killer's identity would keep it to themselves.

That aside, though, I feel like I'm forgetting something...

Cecilia gazed up at the sky as she walked alongside Dante.

The Killer stuff's pretty much settled, and we woke up Emily. Wait, why was I trying to get her out of that coma in the first place again?

"Oh!"

She stopped in her tracks, a look of realization on her face. Dante turned back and noticed. "Cecil?"

"Sorry, Dante! Go ahead without me!" she cried.

"Huh?"

She whirled back around and took off, leaving him in the dust as she made a beeline for Grace's research lab.

"So...that's why I need you to become the Holy Maiden! Please!" Cecilia begged, head bowed low.

"Absolutely not," Grace responded flatly. Her rejection came so fast that Cecilia stumbled forward.

“But why?”

“I’m busy recording Mordred’s voice. Plus, it sounds like House Sylvie is going to grant me some funding, so I need to work on enhancing the phonograph, too.”

“Awww, come on! Think about it! You’ll get to be with Dr. Mordred as much as you want if you’re Holy Maiden!”

Although you’d have to be in a relationship with him, was what she narrowly managed not to let slip. No benefit would come of bringing up that barrier now. And besides, she had a feeling that things were developing nicely between the two of them all on their own, unexpectedly enough. When Mordred looked at Grace, his eyes softened even more than they did when he looked at his sister. The same was true for her.

But she shook her head. “I’m only interested in who voices him. I have no interest in the man himself.”

“What?!”

“Well, I won’t lie and say I’m *not* attracted to him. But in the end, he’s only a vessel for his vocal cords.”

“That’s a terrible way of describing him!” Cecilia cried in disbelief. Grace and Mordred cared for each other so much, yet this was how she saw him?

Maybe she’s too dense to realize her own feelings?! Could that be it?

She shuddered, utterly blind to how this was the pot calling the kettle black.

“So anyway, you’ll have to abandon that idea, Cecilia,” piped up a familiar voice from the back of the room. Cecilia looked over Grace’s shoulder to find Lean waving at her. When she entered the lab, she’d immediately bowed low in front of Grace, so she hadn’t noticed Lean was there at all.

“What? Why are you here, Lean?”

“Oh, I just had something to discuss with Grace,” she replied.

Cecilia had told Lean that Grace had also transmigrated into the world. She’d planned to get the three of them together at some point, but evidently there had been no need to insert herself into things after all.

A smile on her lips, Lean pointed at Cecilia. "You should just be the Holy Maiden already!"

"Exactly. That's the simplest way," Grace agreed.

"Please don't be ridiculous! If I do, I'll die! You know that, don't you?" Cecilia wailed.

Both women exchanged glances. Lean said, "Well, yeah, we do. Right?"

"But you'll probably manage to work something out, won't you? I don't know what, though," added Grace.

Though they seemed like total opposites on the outside, they were quite similar at their cores. Cecilia was at her wit's end. "Both of you are acting like it has nothing to do with you!"

"Well, that's because it doesn't," Grace responded reasonably.

"So true."

"You're both very, very involved in this, though!" Cecilia cried. Her lamentation rang out loudly enough to be audible even outside the research laboratory.

Epilogue

Before Cecilia knew it, almost five months had passed since the start of the Selection Ceremony. August was nearly over, and the sun's rays were gradually shifting into something milder and gentler.

It's certainly felt like it's gone by in a flash, though...

First there was her screwup at the Selection Ceremony because she forgot how to play the tutorial, then the school trip, her big fight with Gilbert, getting abducted, and coming home in one piece only to go through a chaotic summer vacation. Then the Killer appeared, another person who transmigrated popped up, they rounded up Bernard, and here she was at present.

As she thought back over all those past events, Cecilia sighed. While five months was a considerable amount of time, it was still the most action-packed five months of her life to date. In retrospect, so much had happened that it was all a blur.

She'd met so many new people and experienced so many things...

"So what are you going to end up doing? You wanted to make someone else be Holy Maiden, but haven't they all said no?" Gilbert asked as they walked along together.

"Stop! I'm trying to indulge in escapism right now!" she protested, almost on the verge of tears.

It was the morning after Grace had refused the position of Holy Maiden. Still unable to accept reality, Cecilia was attempting to take her mind off things by reviewing past events.

There was no one else around, since it was still too early for most students to be heading to class.

Gilbert heartlessly cut down his sister from doing her best to pretend the

truth didn't exist. "That's not going to change the facts. You should adjust your way of thinking already."

"You make it sound so easy! If I could do that, I wouldn't be struggling so much!" she cried, burying her face in her hands.

She wished he'd put himself in her shoes. Her last-ditch plan to foist everything off onto the third potential Holy Maiden had evaporated into nothing, so she was out of options.

Since she counted as a prince now, she couldn't very well return Gilbert's Sacred Artifact. Lean had zero motivation to do anything, so if nothing changed, Cecilia would end up being named Holy Maiden for real. And if that happened, a bad ending awaited her—a literal dead end.

"But I don't care about the position! I just wanna live a normal, carefree life!" she wailed. She wanted to live the life Hiyono had wanted for herself, as Cecilia. That was her only wish.

But reality just had to keep getting in the way.

After a tactful pause, Gilbert looked over at her, watching her expression carefully. "You won't consider becoming Holy Maiden and picking me as your knight?"

"No way. I couldn't also ruin *your* life by dragging you into this mess."

"You could, though."

"W-well, let's save that as a last resort. Like, if I *really* can't figure anything out and end up getting selected..."

Even as a last resort, Cecilia wasn't too keen on taking that route. She couldn't destroy her adorable little brother's life just because he'd wound up with a failure of a big sister.

"But you'll do it if we exhaust all our other options?" he pressed.

"It almost sounds like you *want* me to pick you to be my knight."

"And what if I do?"

"Awww, come on! This is why Oscar is always saying you're obsessed with

your sister.” She grinned at him, sure he was just joking.

“Sister? I think the lines are blurred there.”

“What does that mean?”

“In terms of how I see you.”

Cecilia frowned. Sometimes Gilbert used these odd turns of phrase that she really couldn’t wrap her head around. The workings of smart peoples’ minds were an enigma.

In a voice too low for her to hear, he murmured, “Interesting. It sounds like she might pick me if she does become Holy Maiden.”

He pasted a faint smile on his lips. Up until now, he’d played along with whatever she said, but now he was ready to revolt for the first time.

Entirely unaware of this Trojan horse, Cecilia pursed her lips. “Hey! Have you forgotten that the moment I become Holy Maiden, I might as well just go tomb shopping? It’s way too dangerous a path for me to go down.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“I mean, all I can really do in a situation like this is cut the evil off at the source.”

“What evil?”

“The Obstructions.”

Gilbert frowned. “You could do that?”

“I don’t think it’s a matter of whether I could or couldn’t! It’s about whether I *will*—”

“*Cecil!*” shouted someone as they crashed into her from behind. Cecilia almost pitched forward and fell, but Gilbert steadied her.

“Look! Look!” cried Jade, shoving something at her. While Cecilia and Gilbert had been deep in conversation, the morning had worn on, and students on their way to school had started to pop up behind them.

Jade was more excited than she’d ever seen him as he thrust some sort of book in her face. “We did it! It’s ready! Lean’s debut novel!”

Evidently, her BL novel publishing enterprise had successfully gotten off the ground.

While Cecilia honestly didn't care too much about it, she had to admit to being a *little* curious as to what was inside, since she'd modeled for the illustrations.

"Thank you for always helping out with material, seriously! Here's your free copy," he announced.

"I never intended to assist you with that, though...but thanks," she replied, accepting the book gratefully. Discounting for the part where she'd forced Cecilia to model for the art, Lean's stories were really interesting. Yeah, except for that part where she'd *forced* Cecilia to model...

"You helped out with that foreign dress picture, too, right?" asked Jade.

"What? She used that?"

"Lean said that even though she only saw it for a moment, the sight was burned into her eyes."

"....."

Cecilia felt a headache coming on. The whole country was going to see her wearing a *qipao*. It hurt just to consider.

And besides, didn't she say she planned on using it in her second or third book anyway?

Was this also part of Lean's revenge plan?

When she rubbed at her eyes, her fingers came away wet. This was too painful for words.

"Morning, Cecil and Gil. Oh, and Jade, too," drawled Dante.

"All three of you are here early," Oscar chimed in next.

Gilbert frowned at Dante's casual, friendly attitude with him. But he didn't seem to mind as much as his expression would indicate, because when Dante slung an arm around his shoulders, he merely huffed before allowing it.

Oscar caught Cecilia's eyes, blushed faintly, and coughed.

And what am I gonna do about this situation? I need to get things sorted out...

But while she was aware of that, she really did feel comfortable in Cecil's friendship with Oscar, so she couldn't bring herself to say anything that might ruin it. And he hadn't asked her for an answer or anything, so she had no excuse to drag the topic back up again.

"Hey! I told you to stop doing that when we're in public!"

"Awww, my little Huey is so shy!"

"That's not the issue here!"

"Okay, then why don't we just continue once we're alone?"

"You're not listening to me!"

Turning to look back at the sound of two familiar voices, Cecilia saw Lean cuddled up close to Huey. They were holding hands, though Huey shooed his girlfriend's hand away roughly. Even then, she looked extremely pleased.

She really does put on one hell of a persona.

The Lean who interacted with the rest of them and the Lean who interacted with Huey were like two completely different people. Although really it was just her manner of speaking that changed; her freewheeling personality remained basically intact.

Lean caught Cecilia's eye and gave her a little wave. When Cecilia waved back, Huey glared at her. Though he didn't like showing things publicly, he still got jealous over Lean.

"The world is at peace," Cecilia murmured as she gazed up at the blue sky.

What trials and tribulations awaited her next?

Only the gods knew.

EXTRA The Ghost in the Old Building

“A ghost in the old school building?”

“Yeah. There’ve been tons of rumors about people seeing it lately...”

Cecilia and her friends were at a table in the library after class when Jade brought them news of a scary story. Imitating the ghost, he held his arms out in front of him with a menacing glower on his face.

In addition to Jade and Cecilia, the table also included Gilbert, Oscar, and Dante. They all had homework spread out in front of them.

Cecilia, seated across from Jade, turned green and hugged herself. “N-no way...”

“But there are people who swear they saw it,” he went on, his voice an octave lower than usual. “They say they heard a woman laughing night after night in a storeroom in the old school building. Word on the street is that it’s the spirit of a girl who committed suicide twenty years ago out of heartbreak.”

Tears welling in her eyes, Cecilia pressed her hands over her ears.

After casting her a sidelong glance, Oscar chimed in brightly, “Who would believe that? It’s probably just someone who broke in.”

“It’s not! Oh, Oscar, you have no sense of pathos, do you?”

“Specters have nothing to do with pathos,” he replied.

Neither Dante nor Gilbert looked particularly agitated by the ghost story, either. They likely didn’t believe in them in the first place.

Jade probably felt a little let down that his tale hadn’t spooked anyone, but he gave his usual smile as he pulled out his chair and sat down. “Well, whether it’s real or not, the rumor has the teachers all worked up anyway. Some students are so frightened that they won’t come out of their dorm rooms.”

“I feel like we should do something about this,” Oscar mused.

“But won’t this sort of thing just clear up on its own?” Jade wondered.

“Well, maybe—”

“Oh. I have a good idea!” interjected Dante with a clap of his hands. He looked all around the table, an expression of pure joy on his face. “Let’s play a game, and the loser has to go investigate the spirit. And then tomorrow, you have to report back to u—”

“No, no, no, no, no!” Cecilia immediately protested. “I—I don’t care what you guys do, but leave me out of this! No way! I don’t wanna see a ghost!”

“Aw, what? Cecil, you won’t play?” chimed in Jade, who seemed unexpectedly into the idea.

Cecilia shook her head again emphatically. “I—I refuse! There’s no way I’d play!”

“Aw. Cecil, that’s not very manly of you,” insisted Dante, a challenging glint in his eyes as he grinned at her.

“Not manly?” she repeated uncertainly, taken aback despite her fear.

“Mm-hmm. A real dude steps up at times like this, you know? Refusing like that comes off kinda unmasculine.”

“It does?”

“Although I think that makes you pretty girly and cute myself—”

“I’ll play!” Cecilia declared, shooting a hand up in the air. She couldn’t take all of this talk of “*not manly*,” “*unmasculine*,” and “*girly*” lying down.

“I’m going to play after all! I just need to win the game so I won’t have to go!”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit!” Dante cried, snapping his fingers happily.

Gilbert sighed, deeply unimpressed.



“I—I can’t believe I lost,” cried Cecilia mournfully, staring up at the old school

building that night.

“I’m not. I knew this would happen,” said Gilbert, standing next to her with that same unimpressed look on his face.

When he sighed, she bobbed her head at him apologetically. “I’m really sorry, Gil. You ended up coming along, too...”

“I don’t mind. I know you don’t like this sort of thing... But anyway, are you going to stay like this the whole time?” he asked, pointing to his arm. Cecilia had wrapped both her arms around it, like she was cuddling right into his side.

Gilbert coughed, his face tinted pink. “I think anyone who sees you like this would say it’s unmasculine.”

“B-but we’re all alone now! And I’m really scared! Do...do I really have to let go?” she pleaded, gazing up at him.

Rubbing at his eyes, he averted his gaze. “I didn’t say you *had* to... Just...it makes it hard to walk...”

“I-I’ll try to match your pace!”

“Uh...”

“I want to stay like this! Please!” she entreated with tears in her eyes, and Gilbert stumbled a little for some reason.

Then, pinching the bridge of his nose, he heaved a deep sigh and acquiesced. “Well, I guess if you’re going to be like that, then—”

“Hey,” a voice suddenly called from behind them. Cecilia gave a start and shrieked at the top of her lungs. Then she plastered herself to Gilbert’s back. He stiffened up all over, for a very different reason than his sister.

“Why are you screaming? It’s just me, Cecil.”

“Who? Oh, Oscar?!” she yelped.

Oscar had come up on the other side of them. He narrowed his eyes at Cecilia as she cowered behind Gilbert. “Unbelievable. What do you think you’re doing?”

“Why are you here, Your Highness?” her brother asked in a crisp voice that

made it perfectly clear the prince wasn't welcome.

The inquiry made Oscar scratch the tip of his nose bashfully. "I just thought Cecil might be scared exploring the old school building alone at night, so I came to check on him."

"Oscar! Thank you so much!" Cecilia cried, popping up from behind Gilbert with lingering tears of fright in her eyes. "I'm so glad you're here! Gil just told me he doesn't want me clinging on to him, so I was really—"

"I'm fine with it," interrupted Gilbert.

"Huh?"

"If you're going to grab on to him, you can grab on to me instead."

"But..."

"I said it's fine!"

"Okay...", she muttered, not really getting it but looping her arms back around his arm anyway. For some reason, Oscar looked a little miffed by the sight.

Just then, a voice as clear as a bell rang out in the building. "Oh my. Why are all of you together?"

"What? Lean?"

Her friend emerged from the shadows of the building with a sewing bag hanging from her arm, blinking at everyone in astonishment. Oscar and Gilbert seemed just as surprised to see her.

"Don't tell me the ghost in this building is actually..."

"Ghost?"

When Cecilia relayed what Jade had told them, Lean laughed and admitted she was the source of the rumors. Apparently, she'd been sewing in here night after night.

And obviously she was crafting clothes for Cecil to wear.

"I just happened to find a foot-operated sewing machine in the storeroom here," she explained.

“I can’t believe it. Don’t scare me like that anymore, seriously...,” murmured Cecilia in relief as they walked back to the dorms. She was intentionally *not* asking about what type of clothes Lean had been making.

“Oh, but you know, it’s so strange,” Lean said, stopping in place as if something had just occurred to her.

“What is?”

“This was only my second night coming here. Would that be enough for rumors to start?”

A chill ran down Cecilia’s spine. Then she thought she heard someone laughing from the old school building behind them.

Afterword

Hello to new readers and welcome back to old ones. I'm Hiroro Akizakura.

I've returned a year after the first volume. We're now at Volume 2 of *Cross-Dressing Villainess Cecilia Sylvie*. You can tell by Dangmill's gorgeous, beautiful illustrations! They took my breath away!

Once again, we follow Cecilia—who is perfectly intelligent but tends to jump to conclusions and get a bit carried away—as she ropes our two heroes and their other friends into her mess, dragging them to and fro into disarray.

Volume 1 of the manga version also went on sale around the same time as Volume 2 of the light novel. Shino Akiyama drew the art for it! In a strange and wonderful coincidence, we're an Aki-Aki duo (I know that was corny—please have mercy). It turned out wonderfully, so please go check out the manga as well.

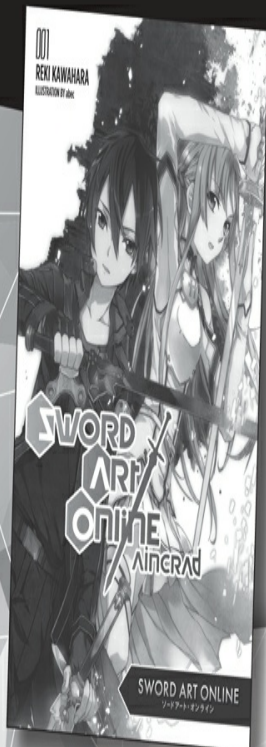
Finally, I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in the production of this book.

Thank you so very much, and I hope you'll stick with me going forward.

Hiroro Akizakura

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