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Hiroro Akizakura

Cross-Dressing Villainess Cecilia Sylvoie

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Cecilia Sylvie**

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Illustration by **Dangmill**

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ON**
NEW YORK

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Hiroro Akizakura

TRANSLATION BY KIKI PIATKOWSKA ✿ COVER ART BY DANGMILL

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AKUYAKU REIJO, CECILIA SYLVIE WA SHINITAKUNAI NODE DANSO SURUKOTO NI SHITA. Vol.5

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CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1: Taste of Tranquility

Chapter 2: Journey Companion

Chapter 3: Roland Salinger

Chapter 4: Valentine's Day Event

Chapter 5: Final Showdown

Epilogue

Extra: Only You and Me Tonight

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Name: Cecilia Sylvie



CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1: Taste of Tranquility

Chapter 2: Journey Companion

Chapter 3: Roland Salinger

Chapter 4: Valentine's Day Event

Chapter 5: Final Showdown

Epilogue

Extra: Only You and Me Tonight

Afterword

Name: Cecilia Sylvie



Characters

Lean Rhazalao



A daughter to a baron. The protagonist of *Holy Maiden of Vieugel Academy 3*.

Jade Benjamin



A young merchant. Cecilia's classmate and a love interest in the game.

Dante Hampton



An ex-assassin and a good friend of Oscar. Also a love interest in the game.

Huey Cranebel



Lean's boyfriend. An ex-assassin.

Gilbert Sylvie

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

Oscar Abel Prosper

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

Cecilia Sylvie

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

Cecil Admina

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

Grace Martinez



An academy student. Preoccupied with acoustic research at the campus lab.

Mordred



The school doctor and a love interest in the game.

Janis Salinger



The third-born prince of Nortracha. Encountered as the final boss on many of the story branches.

Roland Salinger



The fourth-born prince of Nortracha.

Eins Machias



A love interest in the game. Strong-minded but very caring toward his twin brother.

Zwei Machias

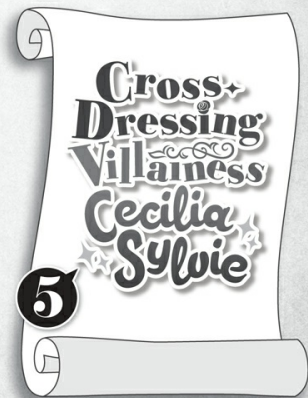


A love interest in the game. Somewhat timid.

Margrit Aubry



The incumbent Holy Maiden who eloped with Prince Janis.



Prologue

I hate anything dirty. I hate ugliness. I hate flimsiness. I hate fakes.

I hate forced laughter. I hate people who are hard to read. I hate calculating people.

I hate words of pity. I hate people who offer words of sympathy, but no real help.

I hate people who project onto me. I hate people who think they've got me all figured out.

I hate contempt. I hate derision. I hate ridicule. I hate scornful sneers. I hate mockery.

I hate empty praise. I hate favors given only to be returned with interest later.

I hate herd mentality. I hate boastfulness. I hate fishing for pity. I hate flattery. I hate wheedling.

I hate the mornings on the days where I have something difficult in store, and the evenings on the days I have enjoyed.

I hate my country. I hate its people.

I hate my father. I hate my older brothers who resent me.

I hate the neighboring nations. I hate their people, too.

I hate the Holy Maidens and everything related to their cult.

But don't get me wrong. That's not why I kill. That's not why I destroy. Those are only small contributing factors, not the underlying reason I behave this way.

What I hate the most of all is myself. This is what drives my desire to annihilate everything.

Anything I touch, I harm, whether I want to or not. Thus, I have to keep anything I care about at a distance, choosing all those things I hate for my

companions.

The tattered curtains of the dilapidated church swayed as the breeze found its way inside through a crack. I idly noted their movement, thinking about the promise I had made to the only person I considered my family among the toxic relatives living at the royal palace. It was a very important to me, but impossible to fulfill at this point. I was unlikely to meet the person who I'd made that promise to ever again. Besides, he might have already forgotten about it.

"Janis, everything's ready," Margrit called.

"Okay. I'm coming," I replied, standing up from the pew I'd been sitting in.

I turned to look at the curtains one more time. They were still gently moving. An image of the boy I'd been thinking of, smiling, flashed through my mind.

I hope my actions won't wipe that smile off his face for good... The desire to protect still dwelled somewhere in the recesses of my mind. But I didn't stop walking. That's why I hated myself. How abhorrent I was!

CHAPTER 1 Taste of Tranquility

Vleugel Academy had its very own prince. He had glossy hair the color of butterscotch and eyes blue like a calm sea sparkling in sunshine. His androgynous beauty made students of all genders turn heads when he passed. Recently, he'd even been compared to a mythological hero.

His posture was elegant, and his back as straight as an ironing board. Some likened his gracefulness to a lily, or a white rose.

An amorous whisper from this enchanting prince was enough to make anyone, young or old, girl or boy, faint on the spot, lovestruck forever after.

In front of the school prince stood two princesses. Or should we say, "princesses."

The first one had intensely crimson hair and a piercing, knife-sharp gaze. She was of high stature, with shoulders broader than you'd expect for a girl. Her facial features were beautifully regular, but the shape of her jaw was unmistakably masculine. Even from a distance, no matter how much you squinted, she did not look like a girl at all.

The one next to her was also tall, and although her shoulders weren't as broad, she had a masculine build. The face framed by her glossy black hair could plausibly belong to a girl, but her obsidian eyes cast a deadly glare.

They looked rather out of place in the unused classroom, and their presence imbued the air with a strange tension.

These "princesses" were none other than Oscar Abel Prosper and Gilbert Sylvie. There was one more person in the room with them and the prince...

"A-amazing! I thought dresses might not quite suit you, but this is beyond bad. You look hilarious!" Lean Rhazaloea was laughing so hard, she had tears in her eyes.

It was thanks to her that they were wearing girls' clothes in the first place.

Next to her, the school prince spoke up nervously.

“D-don’t laugh at them, Lean! They’re angry enough as is!”

“It’s not anger that I’m feeling right now...”

“Same... It’s despair.”

The prince looked at the pair helplessly as they said that, but then he placed a hand firmly on each of their shoulders. Suddenly serious, he said encouragingly: “Don’t worry, you look just fine. You’re adorable *and* beautiful!”

“I have to disagree...”

“It’s not about that...”

“Have confidence! It actually makes you look attractive!”

The prince was just trying to make them feel better about their outfits, but they didn’t take it that way.

“Way to shatter my confidence!”

“You really didn’t have to put it like that!”

“What?”

“Even I think that was a mean thing to say.”

“B-but why?!” he asked with a pout, feeling betrayed by Lean not backing him up.

The prince was, of course, Cecil Admina, the alter ego of a duke’s daughter pretending to be a boy. Her crazy antics were keeping her busy as usual.



“That was hilarious, they had me in stitches!”

“Come on, Lean, you shouldn’t make fun of them. It’s mean,” Cecilia rebuked her friend, who was chuckling at the memory of Oscar and Gilbert in the dresses.

The two girls were at the old schoolhouse. Classes had ended for the day, and they were only people in the hallway, which was bathed in the orange glow of

the setting sun. Lean didn't seem the least bit remorseful as she strolled by the windows. She spun around to face Cecilia.

"They willingly cooperated this time. Isn't that nice?"

"Willingly? They only did it because you threatened them."

"What, why would you say that! Me, threaten them? I only told them the facts!"

"Maybe, but those facts were—"

"Shouldn't you blame the people who caused this situation, rather than me for relating it to our dear friends?" Lean easily deflected the blame.

Cecilia, who was at the root of this problem, fell silent.

Shortly after their last class of the day, Lean had approached Oscar, Gilbert, and Cecilia with a request.

"I need your help with something. Come meet me in one of the unused classrooms in the old schoolhouse."

She left without explaining the details, which made the trio suspicious, but they didn't have anything else to do, so they did as she asked. Upon opening the door to the classroom where she was waiting, the first things they saw were two dresses displayed on tall mannequins.

One was very tight-fitting, in a rich emerald color. Based on how it dazzlingly reflected light, it was probably made of satin. It looked strikingly elegant.

The other one, in muted red, was a glamorously styled princess-like dress with large floral decorations at the waist.

Lean stood proudly in front of these two dresses, which even experienced tailors would agree were outstanding. When Cecilia and the boys shut the door behind them, she immediately got down to business.

"So this is what I need you two for. Change into these for me, please."

"Wait, who are those dresses for again?"

"Oscar and Gilbert! Isn't it obvious?" she replied in a warbling voice.

The two boys were stuck for words. Neither made a move toward the outfits,

and it was clear as day that they hated the idea of wearing them. Lean realized she'd have to explain herself.

“You see, for the next installment of my novel series, I’m thinking of having Oran and Crow go undercover...disguised as girls! And it would be fantastic to have you pose for an illustration to go with that chapter...”

It was as simple as that. They really should’ve seen it coming.

Next to the dresses were two wigs. Lean had probably pulled another all-nighter making these costumes. Oran and Crow were characters from her stories, based on Oscar and Gilbert, respectively.

Getting the two boys to put on dresses wasn’t going to be easy, though.

“I’m not doing this,” Gilbert said definitively, balking at her request.

“Not to discourage you from pursuing your hobby, but I’d rather be left out of it...” Perplexed, Oscar chose his words carefully.

“Well, this is a problem,” Lean said with an exaggerated sigh, touching her cheek in a theatrical gesture of being at a loss. “I’ll have to go with a different idea, then... I’ve been thinking of introducing a new character soon. Maybe it’s time.”

“A new character?” Oscar asked.

“Yes. Based on Dante,” Lean replied cheerfully. “When you think about it, Dante is like a super top. He fits the trickster stereotype, but with his personality, he could be a lead, too. I noticed his potential a while ago, so I’ve been planning to do a character based on him eventually!”

Lean was normally chatty, but when you got her going about her stories, a nigh-unstoppable stream of words would spill from her mouth. She got closer to Oscar and Gilbert and continued speaking excitedly.

“This time around, I could have the Dante character flirt with the protagonist based on Cecil! I’m sure Dante would happily agree to model for an illustration of him making out with Cecil! Aw, just think about this pairing! Ciel switching from top to bottom! Wouldn’t that be delightful?! We’ll need more than just one illustration for this exciting development!”

Oscar and Gilbert immediately agreed to pose for her in the dresses.

When Lean was still spinning her yarn about her new concept, Cecilia butted in, alarmed.

“You didn’t tell me anything about this! I won’t pose for any risqué illustrations!”

“I’m afraid you don’t have a say in this, since you owe me so many favors. Did you forget about the shrine, for example?”

Cecilia couldn’t argue with her. She was indeed indebted to Lean.

“I wouldn’t have made you pose for anything sketchy like that even if those two didn’t agree. You know that, right?”

Lean turned to Cecilia, who was walking behind her.

“You mean...that was just a bluff?!”

“Obviously!” Lean replied, pointing upward with her index finger. “In my heart, Ciel can only ever be a top. That’s what I have in mind for him as the author, and I won’t stand for any role-reversal fantasies! I don’t care if that’s kind of fanatical of me. Besides, I’d never change the main pairing this deep into the story! Unless the other guy dies, I’m not replacing him with a new love interest!”

“Uh, okay,” Cecilia said, deflating as though she were disappointed. But maybe that was just relief on her part. She flashed a tired smile at her friend.

“Honestly, though, who’d have guessed they’d look so awful cross-dressing? They’re both handsome, and you’ve been pulling off your stunt successfully, so I was sure it’d work out.”

“I guess it’s because they’re so tall?” Cecilia mused.

“Oscar is one thing, but Gilbert has such a pretty face. The makeup actually suited him. Those silhouettes, though, ruined everything. I designed the dresses to disguise their body shapes somewhat, but it just wasn’t enough, was it?” Lean pouted. “I poured so much effort into those outfits!”

“I can tell you worked really hard on them.” Cecilia tried to cheer up her sulking friend.

They both fell silent for a while, the setting sun tingeing their faces red.

“Come to think of it, things have been really uneventful lately.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Cecilia nodded, looking out the window with Lean.

Winter break was over, and it was almost the middle of January. According to Grace, they had passed the end of the game’s main scenario. There were still some seasonal events left, but the central narrative didn’t go that far, since by that point the next Holy Maiden would have already been selected, along with most of her knights, so everything was pretty much settled. Grace told Cecilia that her next goal would simply be making it to the end of March without any incidents.

Can I make it that long not getting wrapped up in anything, though? Cecilia sighed. She still had more than two months left until then, and looking back at the events of the past year, she didn’t have a good track record when it came to staying out of trouble. But she needed to try her best.

Grace interrupted Cecilia’s despondent mental digression.

“You should hurry up and pick one already.”

“Sorry? Pick what?”

“Hello? Which of the two do you like best? What else?”

“Uh...”

As Cecilia caught Lean’s drift, a blush began to form on her cheeks. Lean frowned.

“But... Why bring it up now?”

“Because there’s nothing else going on, that’s why! You’re incapable of thinking about more than one thing at a time, so this is the perfect opportunity for you to finally sort out your love life!”

“Ngh...”

Lean knew Cecilia all too well—not that she should have been surprised, considering they’d also been close friends in their past lives. She could tell that Cecilia was avoiding that subject.

“You haven’t changed a bit. In your previous life, you also didn’t want to talk about which guys you liked. Despite being into dating sims.”

“Dating sims are like romance manga! It’s not about who I like, it’s about observing the heroine and cheering her on. I never put myself in any of the protagonist’s shoes...”

“So you don’t think of either of them as a potential love interest?”

“That’s not what I’m saying...”

Cecilia clasped her head with her hands, staring down at the ground.

Just being around those two was thrilling, and she felt like her body was on fire whenever one of them got close to her, which suggested they were both viable options... But she couldn’t imagine either of them suddenly becoming her boyfriend or lover. Plus, she didn’t really know which way her heart was leaning. That was a big problem.

“I’d like to have some more time to think it over...”

“You’ll just use that as an opportunity to put off your decision forever. Am I wrong?”

“All right, you got me...”

Figuring out her own love life was a nightmare.

Lean glanced at Cecilia out of the corner of her eye and laughed, not without sympathy.

“As long as you’re happy, I don’t mind which you snatch up. Do you not have warmer feelings toward one over the other yet?”

“I...don’t want to have to pick. I wish I didn’t have to make a choice between Oscar and Gilbert...”

“Wait, do you mean you might end up rejecting both? Wow. Didn’t take you for a femme fatale!”

Lean slapped her on the back.

“Don’t make fun of me...,” Cecilia replied listlessly.

“I’m not. All I’m trying to say is, you should make up your mind because even

I'm starting to feel sorry for the guys."

"I know, but I've never really thought about romantic stuff before, so it's kind of difficult for me to deal with it now."

"That's the thing with you, huh..." Lean crossed her arms and thought for a moment, humming to herself. Suddenly, she looked up as an idea popped up in her head. "You know that fortune teller? They've been the talk of the town lately. Why don't we see them for advice?"

"How's a fortune teller going to help me?"

"You could them ask which of the two guys you're most compatible with!"

"That...doesn't sound like a fair way of choosing your boyfriend..."

She pictured telling Oscar or Gilbert that she was going to date them because a fortune teller told her they would be compatible... It made her cringe. That was no better than flipping a coin.

"Well, then you've got to choose one or the other! No more running away from making decisions!"

"Right..."

"So! We're going to talk about love now!"

"Uh... Love?"

"I'm going to have you tell me EVERYTHING about your preferences!"

Lean approached Cecilia, making groping movements with her hands for some reason. Cecilia squeaked and took a few steps back.

"Come on! You can be absolutely honest with me! Aren't we best friends?"

"Y-yes, but..."

Cecilia hit something with the back of her heel as she retreated. She turned to find that her friend had driven her against a wall, quite literally.

"Nowhere to run! Tell me what sends your heart racing!"

"Um... I... I left my bag in the classroom! I'd better get it!"

Unable to stand the pressure, Cecilia ran back down the hallway.



Meanwhile, Oscar and Gilbert were still in the same classroom where they'd been cross-dressing. They both sighed, removing the wigs Lean had forced them to wear.

"She made us put these things on, but she couldn't be bothered to stay and help us get changed back."

"Not very considerate, that..."

Grumbling, they began taking off their outfits. They weren't evening dresses with deep décolletages, but demi-toilet dresses with three-quarter sleeves for formal occasions. Lean had cut corners making the costumes because they were meant only to provide her a reference for her drawing, so they were impossible to get into or out of without help. Not being accustomed to wearing ladies' fashion, Oscar and Gilbert had to help one another even with basic tasks such as doing the buttons up or adjusting the bottom layers of the skirts.

"Turn around, I'll unlace you."

"Ah, okay."

Oscar stood with his back to Gilbert, who placed his hands on the fastening on Oscar's dress. He found the buttons concealed among the lace and undid them. The prince could finally breathe deeply again.

"Removing this sort of clothing seems to come easy to you."

"It's because I'm so good with my hands."

"Such humbleness."

"It's a fact. Why be shy about it?" Gilbert replied flatly as he undid the last button.

Oscar lifted the dress over his head to get out of it, then turned to help Gilbert with his outfit in turn.

"Besides, I've helped Cecilia with her dress before."

"What...?"

Oscar froze in shock, opening his eyes wide. Gilbert faced him and raised an eyebrow, a bored look on his face.

“No need to be so rattled. It was way back when we were kids.”

“That doesn’t make much of a difference!”

“There was nothing inappropriate in that, I assure you,” Gilbert replied with a sigh, proceeding to undo the buttons at the front of his dress by himself. “Cecilia asked me to loosen the corset of her dress when she felt sick from overeating. Even though she often avoided socializing, she used to practice wearing formal dresses for dinnertime at home.”

“Ah, I see... You’re so lucky, Gilbert.”

“...Do you wish you had the chance to help Cecilia slip out of a dress?”

Gilbert turned toward Oscar again, a murderous look in his eyes. Oscar blushed a bright red.

“N-no! What I’m envious of is...that you have those sorts of memories together.”

“Why?”

“You know sides of Cecilia I never got to see. Isn’t it normal to be jealous of that?”

Gilbert had grown up with her. Though Oscar had met her for the first time when they were kids, they went twelve years without seeing each other again after that encounter. He now understood why Cecilia had been avoiding him, but he was envious of Gilbert, nevertheless.

“Always honest about your feelings, aren’t you?”

“I suppose so?”

“Well, you won’t earn any pity with me.”

The last of his buttons unfastened, Gilbert doffed his dress. He and Oscar folded the outfits as far as they could manage, then put them on a table where Lean had asked they be left. The boys had only needed to strip down to their pants for their modeling session, so they were fully dressed after they put their

shirts back on.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about something, Gilbert. Thought this might be a good time.”

“What is it?”

“All of those letters I’ve been sending to Cecilia... I presume you destroyed them?”

Gilbert stopped buttoning his shirt and stood motionless for a second before he resumed what he’d been doing.

“So you realized that.”

“I did. Don’t you think that was out of line—?”

“I had to inspect every correspondence addressed to Cecilia. I couldn’t let any pests trouble her.”

“Pests...?”

Here was a prince getting called a pest. The corners of Oscar’s lips dropped. He lowered his voice slightly.

“Say... Do you resent me?”

“You’re just figuring that out now? Don’t tell me you thought I liked you.”

“What...?” Oscar’s voice faltered from shock.

Gilbert looked away from him, as though avoiding his gaze.

“Though my distaste for you has lessened recently.”

“Really?”

“What do you sound so happy for? You know what you are? You’re emotionally manipulative.”

“Am I? I don’t really see how... I’m simply relieved that your low opinion of me seems to have somewhat improved lately.”

Faced with such a sincere response, Gilbert found it impossible to keep up his belligerent attitude. He turned his attention back to doing up his shirt.

“Still, I’m angry with you for destroying my letters to Cecilia,” Oscar said, a

note of complaint in his voice.

“If you want to be upset about it, that’s your business. I reported the contents to our parents, with the exception of anything too personal of course, before destroying the letters. What you wrote was communicated to them, so there’s no problem, is there?”

It was the opposite, in fact. Since the Sylvie family knew of some of the things he wrote about, Oscar hadn’t caught on to the fact that his letters weren’t being delivered to Cecilia until years later.

“Did it not occur to you that I wouldn’t like that?”

“Why should I care if you did or not? You wouldn’t punish me for it. I only censored your personal messages to Cecilia from the letters.”

“But that’s exactly what I—”

“I’ve always placed a great deal of trust in you, Oscar. I knew the kind and virtuous prince wouldn’t use his position to get back at me.”

Oscar frowned.

“It’s people like you they call black-hearted...”

“Black-hearted? I’m just good at judging people. Besides, Oscar, you might want to be a bit less virtuous going forward. I wouldn’t much enjoy being ruled by a goody-two-shoes king without a single fault of character.”

“You have no shame...”

Oscar was going to accuse Gilbert of being the reason why he missed out on contact with Cecilia over so many years, but he reconsidered. Even if her brother had delivered his letters to her, she would have likely refused to meet him anyway, fearing that he would act like some character from a game...

Ah, this makes sense...

Oscar turned toward Gilbert, who was standing with his back to him.

“You saved her from having to write me rejection letters.”

“What are you talking about?”

Had the letters been delivered to her, Cecilia’s natural compassion would

have led her to feel obliged to respond. Unlike Gilbert, she wouldn't be able to ignore Oscar's letters just because she wasn't required to write back. But penning rejection letters to him would have undoubtedly caused her much mental anguish.

"I wouldn't have been upset with her for declining my pleas to meet with her again. It's not in my character. But even if it was, there would have been no repercussions. You needn't have worried so much, Gilbert."

"I hate the way you interpret things."

His reply was neither affirmative nor negative. Oscar snorted in laughter.

"Well, we're good to go now, but I suppose we shouldn't just leave this here?"

Gilbert glanced at the two dresses which made for a rather bulky bundle, plus the box Lean had brought with her, presumably full of props for modeling.

"It is quite a lot for one girl to carry."

"Not that it would be too much for her."

Lean had brought the costumes and props in by herself, so she would certainly be up for the task of carrying them back by herself...but they would both feel guilty about not lending a hand.

"When is she coming back for her things, I wonder?"

"Lean left before us, so I'm assuming not today. She'll probably come collect them at some point tomorrow."

"We can help her tomorrow, then. But let's put the box and dresses over in that corner, so they'll be out of the way."

Oscar picked up the garments from the table. But little did Gilbert realize that he'd been standing on the hems of one of the dresses, so he tripped when they were pulled out from under his feet.

"Whuh!"

"Gilbert!"

Oscar dropped the bundle of clothing in surprise, but when he reached out

reflexively to catch it, he also lost his balance and crashed into Gilbert. He steadied himself against the wall, inadvertently trapping the other boy in front of him.

Suddenly...

“Hey, it’s just me! I forgot something!”

The door to the classroom opened.

“Uh...”

“Oh...”

“...”

Gilbert was still caught between Oscar and the wall. He cringed out of awkwardness. Cecilia was standing in the doorway, unsure of what to make of the scene in front of her. It took her a couple seconds to process what she was seeing, after which her cheeks flushed.



“Oh, uh... S-sorry for interrupting!”

“N-no, wait! It’s not what it looks like! I’ll explain!” Oscar shouted like a boyfriend caught cheating, but Cecilia was already running away without so much as glancing back.

They were alone again.

“Why...?” The crown prince groaned.

“...Oscar.”

“Hmm?”

He looked away from the door, and his eyes met Gilbert’s, flaming with fiendish fury.

“Move.”

For a moment, his throat constricted as he suppressed a yelp.



“That was kind of unexpected...”

Cecilia was clutching her bag as she put more distance between herself and the old schoolhouse. She suspected the situation she’d witnessed wasn’t of the romantic sort, since she’d never gotten the sense that there was anything going on between Gilbert and Oscar. Yet she still couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d seen something not for her eyes.

They’d be in trouble if it was Lean who’d walked in on them!

Even if her friend wouldn’t have gone wild on the spot, she wouldn’t have pretended she hadn’t seen anything, either. And it would have resulted in much more than just a little zine... In fact, it could very well spawn a full-length novel she’d put in mass production.

Cecilia smirked.

“That would make for a neat illustration,” she thought aloud, turning to look back at the schoolhouse.

“Cecil! There you are!”

She turned again to find Jade running toward her from the opposite direction. He stopped in front of her, bracing his hands against his knees and panting heavily.

“Is something the matter?”

She wondered if there was an emergency.

“Cecil... The teachers are looking for you...”

“Huh? What did I do...?”

She wasn't a perfect student, but she definitely hadn't done anything bad enough to warrant Jade to come running for her in a panic. She blinked a few times, confused. Nothing could have prepared her for what he said next.

“The king is here... And he wants to see you!”

“Whaaat?!”

She was instantly terrified. Her peaceful days had come to an end sooner than she'd expected.



“So you've really been attending the academy pretending to be a boy, Cecilia?”

“I am so very sorry, Your Majesty...”

They were in the campus lounge, the same one where Oscar had summoned her once before. Cecilia hung her head, pale as death. Guards had been posted outside the entrance, but she and the king were the only two people inside. They were sitting directly across from one another, he on a sofa, and she on a chair. Needless to say, she was still in her Cecil disguise.

“Raise your head. I approved your admittance, after all. I will not bring this matter up again if you can promise me to keep your true identity under wraps as long as you're a student here. Lucinda has been bending my ear about this, and I could really do without any more headaches.”

“I am terribly sorry for causing your trouble, Your Majesty...”

Cecilia bowed in apology again.

Lucinda was the name of her mother. She was fiercely protective of both her daughter and adoptive son, and she didn't hesitate to intimidate even the king for the sake of her children. While Lucinda had only the best intentions, her tendency to spoil Cecilia beyond belief is what causes her daughter to become a villainess in the game.

The king, as subtle as his son, rubbed the creases on his forehead.

“Well, let's not dwell on it. The main reason I came to see you today is this letter I received from Nortracha yesterday.”

The king put an envelope on the table between them and pushed it toward Cecilia.

“Is it for me?”

“It's an invitation, addressed to Cecil Admina.”

“Huh?”

That didn't make sense to her. She promptly picked up the envelope. It was from someone named Roland Salinger. She knew that the Salingers were the royal family of Nortracha.

The king pointed at the sender's name.

“He's the fourth prince of Nortracha, Janis' younger brother. But I cannot fathom why he would send an official invitation to Nortracha to Cecil.”

“He's inviting Cecil specifically...?”

It wouldn't be so strange if the invitation was for Cecilia Sylvie, given that she was not only a high-ranking noble but also Oscar's fiancée. She could be a useful connection to have, and the Nortranchan prince might be hoping to get a feel for her country's political climate through her. But he wouldn't have anything like that to gain from becoming acquaintances with “Cecil Admina.”

“Is Roland in on what Janis has been plotting here? Is that why he addressed the letter to Cecil?”

That was the only explanation she could think of, but the king shook his head.

“No. The investigation is still ongoing on both our side and theirs, but it seems Janis kept his plans largely to himself. Apparently, he hasn’t contacted his brother since going missing.”

The king stroked his chin. It sounded like he’d talked about this with the king of Nortracha.

The letter was a complete mystery. How had Roland even heard of Cecil Admina? And even if he had picked up the name from somewhere, why would he want to invite Cecil to his country? The missive was only a very terse invitation, with nothing to indicate the reason it had been penned. Cecilia could only guess his motives for reaching out, but she was drawing a blank.

She fell silent, puzzling over this conundrum. Then the king spoke to her again in a quieter, confidential tone.

“Nortracha has officially extended an offer to cooperate with tracking Janis down, but we must not assume that they are our allies. We cannot dismiss the possibility that their assistance is only a ruse, and that they are, in fact, colluding with Janis.”

“Ah... You think it may be a trap?”

“It’s only one possibility. Another is that Janis himself sent the letter and forged Roland’s seal to lure you into his clutches.”

Having said his piece, the king leaned back, sinking into the backrest of the sofa.

Cecilia thought for a while, sitting straight as a rail in her chair.

“Your Majesty, may I ask your personal opinion on this?”

“To be honest with you, I think this is a tremendous opportunity. I’ve mobilized a lot of people to hunt for Janis, but they’ve come away empty-handed, which leads me to suspect his family are helping to hide him in Nortracha.”

“Would you like me to go there and find him for you?”

“That would be ideal, but I won’t insist that you go against your will, of

course,” the king replied apologetically.

Cecilia smiled at him. Until the completion of the Selection Ceremony at the end of March, Prince Janis, with his ability to manipulate Obstructions, would pose an incredible danger to the kingdom. He had the power to destroy it single-handedly. As such, the king’s top priority was locating the fugitive prince, and he had every right to order Cecilia to accept Roland’s invitation. He should have commanded her to travel to Nortracha and find any information she could about Janis, especially since he suspected its royal family of secretly sheltering him.

But the king refused to treat her like a pawn. He was transparent about the risk this task would pose to Cecilia, and he’d presented it as an offer she was free to turn down. It made her like him.

I see who Oscar took after.

It dawned on Cecilia that she couldn’t turn down the invitation without souring Prosper’s relationship with Nortracha. Had it been addressed to her, the daughter of Duke Sylvie, she could have politely declined. But her alter ego was only the son of a baron, and he’d need a very serious excuse to turn down an invitation from a prince. An excuse she couldn’t easily make up.

“What do you want to do, Cecilia? Should you decide to go, I will provide you with a suitable escort. Including female servants, if you find that reassuring?”

“That would be very considerate...”

At this point, she felt saying no would be too selfish. One more reason to go occurred to her—there was someone she wanted to see again.

Maybe I’ll find Elza there? No, not Elza. Her real name is Margrit.

Margrit, the incumbent Holy Maiden, had abandoned her duties to elope with Janis.

I hope she’s okay...

Ever since the Maiden’s escape, Cecilia had been thinking about how much she wanted to see her at least one more time. If they’d met under different circumstances, they might have become good friends. She deeply regretted that

things hadn't turned out that way.

Cecilia bowed low.

"I will accept the invitation and travel to Nortracha."

"You have my gratitude," the king replied gravely, as though the risk he was putting her in weighed on his conscience.

CHAPTER 2 Journey Companion

Cecilia's life was always full of surprises. First the king had come to visit her on campus, and then he'd told her about an invitation from a prince of Nortracha, which could be a trap. She awaited the day of her departure with anxiety, worried about the entire undertaking and having to do it all alone, not counting the escort the king had promised her. And then, it was time to leave...

"Oscar! I had no idea you were coming, too!"

"I'm as shocked as you are. No one told me I'd be traveling in your company."

Cecilia beamed with relief at the confused prince. They were sitting in a horse-drawn carriage together. Since they were being picked up on campus, she was dressed as Cecil.

As it turned out, Prince Roland had sent out more than just one invitation, but they each only learned of this fact after boarding the same coach.

"Why didn't the king tell me you also got an invite? I was stressing out, thinking it'd be just me!"

"Father sometimes forgets to mention what's most important..."

While that did seem frustrating, Cecilia couldn't be happier now that her worries had been put at ease. Oscar, though, was the opposite—a look of concern clouded his face.

The two leaned back in their comfy seats and continued their conversation.

"I can't tell you just how glad I am not to be alone on this trip! I won't lie, I was pretty scared!"

"That's understandable. We might be heading into hostile territory. Didn't Gilbert object to you going?"

"Ah, about that. I didn't tell him about me leaving since he'd never agree to it!"

Her overprotective younger brother would never have wanted her to act alone, nor would he have approved of anything that put her at risk. If she'd revealed to him she was going to Nortracha all by herself to attempt a risky mission, he would have flat-out told her to give up. And in the event that she didn't listen, he would have gone straight to the king to keep her from going.

"It was my decision to make, and I didn't want to stress him out over it or put him in an awkward position."

Though Cecilia hadn't been ordered to go, she wasn't exactly in a position to refuse, either. The king had personally asked her to undertake this mission. When your head of state bowed to you and politely issued a request, you accepted it. Going so far as to refuse would be a recipe for getting ostracized by high society.

If Gilbert had objected to the king's call for Cecilia to go to Nortracha, his social standing would have suffered, and he would have lost any favor he might have had with the king.

"I'd have told him if I knew I'd be traveling there with you! Gil would be okay with it if he knew I wasn't alone."

"I think he'd be just as keen to stop you from going, although for a different reason."

"A different reason?"

"I leave it to your imagination."

Try as she might, Cecilia couldn't think of what that other reason might be. She cocked her head at Oscar.

"Never mind."

He turned away and looked out the window, his ears reddening. Cecilia found this even more puzzling.

"So that makes you just as overprotective of Gilbert as he is of you."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because preserving his social standing is more important to you than your own safety."

“Oh, hmm... That’s one way of looking at it, I guess?” Cecilia laughed bashfully. “I do want to keep Gil safe, that’s true! But it always works out the other way around, with him protecting me...”

“Hmm. You have a good relationship.”

Oscar’s tone changed to something between awkwardness and longing. Picking up on this, Cecilia scooted closer, smiling at him brightly.

“Hey, let me tell you something nice! You have this ‘let’s fight together!’ vibe!”

“Is that good?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Well... I’ll think positive and take it as a compliment, then.” Oscar chuckled softly.

Cecilia smiled.

“We’ll be on this trip together for two whole weeks. Let’s keep each other safe, okay?”

“Sure.”

Cecilia extended her hand toward him. Oscar wavered for a moment, surprised, but then he clasped her hand and shook it firmly.



It wasn't supposed to be like this...

That was Oscar’s first thought when he discovered he was traveling to Nortracha with Cecilia.

Oscar had received an invitation from Roland a few days earlier. When his father, the king, asked him if he would accept, he’d said yes at once. He knew that the search for Janis was going nowhere, and that his father and other well-informed people were skeptical as to whether Nortracha’s government was acting in good faith. Consequently, he was willing to travel to the neighboring country to see what he could find out, even if it involved considerable danger.

Even if Nortracha had hostile intentions.

Having made up his mind to go, Oscar had steeled himself for the possibility that he might not return from this trip. But then Cecilia got on the same coach...

I was so tensed up for this, but then my anxiety dropped in an instant...?

He looked at Cecilia, smiling happily back at him. She'd said she was afraid to go alone, so she must have understood the dangers inherent to this trip. But why, then, was she acting like they were going on a relaxing vacation?

He was determined to protect her at all costs and put her safety above his own, which only amplified the difficulty of this mission...

"Oscar, Oscar! Look! That lake is gorgeous! I've never seen anything like it!"

"It's very picturesque, yes..."

Oscar had been coiled like a spring before getting on the coach, but he couldn't maintain that focused tension in the presence of Cecilia's carefree attitude. Or rather, the nature of his tension changed.

What are we going to do, me and her, for two weeks together?

He felt a hot blush spread over his face, so he turned to the window and pretended to take in the sights, covering his profile with his hand.

The prospect of spending so many days in her company made him happy, but given the circumstances, he couldn't simply sit back and enjoy it. Yet he couldn't deny that she was having an effect on him...

We'll only be this close to each other while we're on the coach. I should just act how I always do. There's no way we'll have to share a room...

Cue a flashback to the school field trip, when the two of them had bunked together. Cecilia had been too scared to sleep after noticing a suspicious individual outside their window, so Oscar took pity on her and invited her into his bed...

SLAP!

He smacked his right cheek. He'd needed to stop himself from remembering how it felt to be right next to her back then... At the time, he didn't make much

of it because he was still under the impression she was a boy. Thinking back, though, it had been an inappropriate thing to do, and it went without saying that he wouldn't have dreamed of casually inviting Cecilia into bed with him if he'd known it was her.

"O-Oscar? Are you okay? Why did you do that?"

Cecilia was staring at him wide-eyed, startled that he'd struck himself out of the blue.

"It's nothing. A mosquito landed on my face."

"A mosquito?"

"Yes."

"Damn, so now they even attack in winter!"

She delivered her comment without a hint of sarcasm. She was always so trusting and easygoing.

Suddenly, he felt silly for agonizing over the prospect of being on a trip alone with her.

I should be grateful for the opportunity...

He had been wanting to spend more time alone with her for a while now. In fact, he'd even admitted to Gilbert that he envied how close he was with Cecilia.

This was the first time Oscar would be alone with her for an extended period of time. It was a rare chance.

Besides, I'd be making a fool of myself, being so unsettled by her presence while she's not fazed in the slightest.

She didn't seem at all nervous at the prospect of traveling alone with him. Did she not think of him as a man? As a romantic interest? She couldn't have forgotten that they were engaged, could she?

At least he wouldn't need to tread on eggshells around her since she was so at ease with him. Yes, the plus side was that he could get close to Cecilia without her finding anything untoward in it.

But...what should I do to make this a memorable trip?

He supposed chatting with her some more would be a good first step. She was sitting quietly, looking out the window.

“Cecilia.”

“H-huh?! Uh... Y-yes?”

“Why are you so jumpy?”

He blinked a few times, not understanding why she’d overreacted. She scratched her cheek and laughed awkwardly.

“Sorry, I’m just not used to you calling me by my real name.”

“Do you not like me using it?”

“No! I mean—that’s not it—I don’t mind! I just keep forgetting that you know who I really am now, so it still throws me off when you call me Cecilia.”

Come to think of it, aside from when they had been waiting to be rescued in that cave together, he’d stuck to referring to her as “Cecil” in case someone on campus overheard them. That explained why she wasn’t used to hearing him use her real name.

Cecilia smiled at him bashfully.

“You know, it feels great not to have to hide my identity from you anymore. I actually love it when you call me by my real name!”

“Really...?”

Hearing her say that made him emotional. After he’d deduced Cecil’s true identity, it hurt him that she wouldn’t trust him with it, especially when he realized that others were in on her secret. Now it finally felt like she wasn’t keeping him at arm’s length anymore.

As he basked in that joyous feeling, the coach suddenly rocked violently, as if it had gone over a large rock.

“Whoa!”

The jostle nearly threw Cecilia out of her seat. Oscar put his hands on her shoulders to steady her. The next moment, their faces were practically on top

of one another, so close together that their foreheads touched almost imperceptibly.

“Ngh!”

For a split second, the only thing Oscar could see was the blue of Cecilia’s eyes. He jerked away from her, clearing his throat as he collected himself.

“A-are you all right?”

“Yeah!”

I’ve got to calm down... She didn’t think anything of it. And didn’t I also decide to act casual around her just a few minutes ago?

His lips had been just a few inches from hers. Oscar turned away from Cecilia so that she wouldn’t notice how flustered he was and took some deep breaths until his face returned to its usual color. Then he finally dared look at her, only to again be on the verge of losing his cool a few seconds later.

“Thanks for the save, Oscar!”

“...Why are you blushing?”

“Ha-ha. Dunno!”

Oscar felt his cheeks reddening, as if her blush were infectious.



Two days later, they ran into trouble.

“I beg your pardon?”

Oscar was confused. Behind him stood Cecilia, making big eyes. In front of him was the fortysomething captain of the guardsmen.

They were in a room of an inn frequented by the nobility and royalty, in a town on the border between the kingdoms of Prosper and Nortracha.

Oscar rubbed his forehead, asking the knight to explain himself. The man wearily began his explanation one more time, while the prince eyed him suspiciously.

“As you are no doubt aware, Your Highness, this is a border town.”

“Yes, I do know this.”

“And border towns attract criminals. Which is why we’ve implemented special security measures.

“Makes sense.”

“So in the interest of your safety, you and Lady Cecilia will be sharing this room.”

“Why would that be necessary? I don’t follow!”

Atypically, Oscar raised his voice in irritation. The captain of the guard scratched his head, not intimidated in the least.

“That’s the protocol. As far as I remember, you agreed to abide by it when you were staying here last year.”

“I was traveling with my brother back then! You cannot apply the same rules when my companion is a lady!”

“The suite is large enough to fit two people comfortably.”

“This isn’t about the size of the room! A setup like this could...could lead to an incident!”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness, but what sort of incident are we talking about?”

The captain’s brazen attitude was increasingly getting on Oscar’s nerves, and a vein popped out on his temple.

“You’re mocking me, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t dare. I’ve concluded that there should be no issue with your sharing the room with Lady Cecilia when you’re so commendably principled.”

“I hear the mockery in your voice loud and clear!”

Cecilia smiled awkwardly, guessing that this sort of banter was normal between them. She wasn’t disguised as Cecil anymore. The guards and servants accompanying them all knew who she was, so she’d stopped cross-dressing on the second day of their journey. She would have to don her wig and boys’ clothes again when they reached the royal palace in Nortracha, though.

Oscar was now bellowing in front of her.

“Why am I always the last person to be told what’s going on?! Especially on matters related to Cecilia. Why wasn’t I notified of the arrangements in advance when all the guards knew about this?!”

“We thought you were already aware. You’ve been very tense, which we chalked up to you being nervous about sharing a room with her...”

“You gossip about me among yourselves...?”

Oscar was in shock.

“Of course we do.” The captain nodded. “Besides, you and Lady Cecilia are engaged. If something happened in the heat of the moment, well, it wouldn’t be a problem, would it?”

“That’s not for you to decide—”

“Oscar.”

Cecilia was fed up with this never-ending argument. Oscar had been leaning forward aggressively, but her voice quelled his anger immediately.

“Uh...” He straightened his posture and rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”

“It’s okay. Let’s just share a room this time,” she insisted.

“What?”

“It’s already been decided, no? And it’ll make it easier for the guards to keep us safe.”

Cecilia didn’t want to make the job any harder for her entourage, grateful as she was to have them. But Oscar still didn’t want to let it go.

“It’s going to make other things more difficult, though...”

He rubbed his forehead again.

“Anyway, it wouldn’t be our first time!”

“C-Cecilia!”

“Huh?”

Oscar turned red as a beet while the captain of the guard looked at them, wide-eyed. Cecilia was referring to them having bunked together on the school trip, but the knight took it to mean something else entirely. He scratched his chin, surprised by that morsel of information.

“Well, well, Your Highness. Who’d have guessed.”

“It’s... It’s not that! She didn’t mean we...”

“Don’t worry, I won’t rat you out to the king.”

“I’m telling you, you’ve got it wrong!” Oscar yelled, but the captain was already on his way out of the room. Evidently, he’d taken Cecilia’s consent to mean that everything was now sorted, so he didn’t have to stick around anymore.

“Wait, we were still talking!”

Oscar tried to stop him, but the captain ignored him.

“Enjoy your stay,” he said, closing the door behind him.

The prince put his hands on his head in a gesture of despair.

“Why is this happening to me...?”

“...Is the idea of sharing a room with me really so bad, Oscar?”

“No, it isn’t! But I...”

He opened and closed his lips a few times, but no words came out. In the end, he couldn’t bring himself to share the real reason for his objections with Cecilia, so he just sighed. He’d been doing a lot of that on this trip.

“I tried my best. Don’t blame me if something happens...,” he muttered in a voice too quiet for her to hear.

The fact they were sharing a room didn’t make a difference at first. Like the day before, it was already evening when they arrived at the inn, so they came downstairs for dinner. But when night fell, they needed to go back to their room to sleep.

“So, um...there’s only one bed,” Cecilia remarked in her pajamas after taking a bath.

It was a king-size bed—of course there wouldn't be two of them. This came as no surprise to Oscar. Unlike her, he'd taken a mental note of there being only one bed as soon as he set foot in the room. Nevertheless, he was now wearing a very strained look on his face.

“Should we request different rooms after all?”

“Um, no, it's fine! There's plenty of space on the mattress. I can sleep on one edge, and you can sleep on the other!”

“Are you being serious?”

“Yeah!”

“Uh...”

Oscar let out what was perhaps his deepest sigh yet as Cecilia balled her fists, as though psyching herself up.

In truth, Cecilia wasn't completely okay with the prospect of sharing the bed with him. There was no way she could avoid being hyperconscious about their closeness when she knew he had feelings for her. It was embarrassing. At the same time, she'd already agreed to share the suite with him, so she didn't want to go back on her decision now. Besides, she'd shared a bed with Oscar once before, so she assumed this wouldn't be much different.

“Let's hit the hay, Oscar! We're getting up early tomorrow!”

“You're bold as brass...”

Oscar felt dizzy. He was visibly struggling to remain calm, but when Cecilia got into bed, he resigned himself to going over to the other side and slipping under the covers along with her. He blew out the flame of the lamp on the bedside table. The room became perfectly dark and quiet.

The mattress was large enough that they could both sleep on it without touching each other, provided they stayed near the edges. But the fact that there was only a single quilt meant they couldn't ignore each other's presences entirely.

Okay, maybe this wasn't the best idea after all...

Cecilia was lying with her back to Oscar, breathing very quietly, a tense

expression on her face. Sleep wasn't coming. If anything, she was feeling more awake with each passing minute.

This isn't working. Oscar was right, we should've gotten separate rooms...

She was really regretting her stubbornness.

"Are you okay?"

She rolled onto her other side. Oscar was watching her, wearing his typically exasperated expression.

"Can't sleep?"

"Um... I guess I'm stressing out about entering Nortracha tomorrow."

She made up a plausible excuse, too embarrassed to admit to that their proximity was actually stopping her from sleeping.

"Ah."

Cecilia couldn't tell whether he believed her or not.

"Well, we should stay alert once we cross the border, but there's no need to be afraid. Despite their appearances, our guards are excellent, and I'll also be there to protect you. You will be safe."

"Despite their appearances?"

Cecilia giggled at Oscar's snarky comment. He pouted.

"They've always loved to tease me. I'm sure they specifically arranged for there to be only one bed in our room instead of two. Of course, I wouldn't think of behaving inappropriately around you, even though the circumstances might be very testing for me."

"You're well-liked by your people."

"I don't think it's that. I just lack sufficient dignity to be respected," he said sourly.

"You're kind, and it takes a lot to make you angry," she added. But he didn't seem to take that for a compliment, frowning instead. She changed the topic and lowered her voice. "It's funny how we're in this situation again!"

“Are you referring to that time during the field trip?”

“Yeah!” she replied cheerfully. She continued, closing her eyes, “Your voice is so calming, Oscar. I was too anxious to drift off earlier, but now I’m getting sleepy.”

Cecilia rubbed her eyes. Oscar sighed quietly, as if he were irked by something.

“Would you like to come closer?”

“Huh?”

“It’ll be just like on the field trip. We slept next to each other then, remember?”

“Y-yeah, but... Um...”

She had indeed fallen asleep next to Oscar on the school trip...But this was different. Their relationship was different now. She wasn’t Cecil, but Cecilia. And he was Oscar, her fiancé.

“I don’t know if...”

She tensed up again.

“But if you do come over here to me, you’ll have to accept that I might...do something,” Oscar added, his voice low and deep.

“Do something...?”

“You know what I mean.”

Cecilia blushed at the implication. She wasn’t so naive as not to guess what sort of thing he had in mind.

She glanced over at him and saw that he had locked his eyes on her. He wasn’t smiling.

“Um... Are you mad at me?”

“How could you *not* think I’d be mad at you? The guards teasing me is one thing, but why did you have to chime in about wanting to share a room and sleeping in the same bed? I’m trying to act respectfully toward you, but you seem bent on making it as difficult as it can be.”

“Sorry about that...”

Cecilia spoke slowly, daunted by Oscar’s rare show of anger. He stretched out his arm and tapped the mattress between them.

“Listen, don’t get any closer than this. If you do, I can’t guarantee that I’ll behave like a gentleman.”

“You mean...”

“Is that clear?”

“Yes,” she replied meekly.



Cecilia, Oscar, and their guards arrived at the royal palace of Nortracha three days later. Winters in this country, which lay in the northern part of the continent, were much colder than they were in Prosper Kingdom. Cecilia and Oscar had needed to don coats thicker than any garments they wore at home when they got off the coach.

Even though the royal capital was in the southernmost part of the country, where the climate was still relatively mild, strong gusts of icy wind were lashing painfully at their face. Their breath turned into white puffs in the frigid air.

The local architecture was well-adapted to the climate, with houses designed to keep the cold out. As soon as they stepped inside the palace, they were as warm as they were back home.

“It is a great pleasure to meet you, Prince Oscar and Lord Cecil. I am Roland Salinger. Thank you for accepting my invitation to visit our nation!”

Roland welcomed them with an amiable smile, flanked by a resplendent military entourage.

He was the fourth-born prince and Janis’ younger half-brother, born to a different mother. Like Janis, he had amethyst eyes, but his hair was reddish-brown. Cecilia recalled that he was a year younger than her and Oscar, which made him the same age as Gilbert, Eins, and Zwei. He wasn’t very tall, and his build was slender. Roland’s smile was similar to his brother’s, but it seemed

sincere, bereft of anything nasty hiding underneath. All in all, he came across as a nice young man.



His manner of speech was gentle rather than confident, and Cecilia took an immediate liking to him.

I wasn't expecting him to be like this...

Cecilia released her breath as she watched Roland and Oscar engage in conversation. Roland seemed happy, while Oscar was mostly just politely responding. Roland offered to show them around the palace.

"First, I would like to introduce you to the culture of my country!" he'd said, before they had the chance to inquire about why they had been invited, leading them through the hallways of the palace to show them the sights.

His innocent happiness reminded Cecilia, who was following behind him and Oscar, of a puppy walking beside his master. It was rather heartwarming. But his interest in his guests was oddly lopsided...

"Prince Oscar, we're coming up to the courtyard! You will notice that the ceiling is made of glass, so it's more of a conservatory, really. I managed to persuade our court gardener to allow me to help care for the plants there. As a matter of fact, it's one of my favorite places in the palace!"

"I see. It is a beautiful garden, a balm for the eyes. Wouldn't you agree, Cecil?" Oscar turned to her.

"Um, yes! It's lovely!"

Roland also turned to glance at her. He froze for a moment, before quickly averting his gaze from her again. It was like he didn't want to acknowledge her presence.

Why is he being like this...? She puzzled over his attitude toward her. Meanwhile, Roland resumed his conversation with Oscar, who also seemed a bit thrown by being made the sole focus of the prince's attention.

This state of affairs continued for a few hours. Cecilia wasn't completely ignored, but whenever she said anything, Roland would fall silent and look away from her.

Did I offend him somehow? As far as she could tell, she hadn't done anything. She'd never met him before, yet he'd acted strangely toward her from the start.

It perplexed her to be left out of conversation while the two men seemed to be enjoying a pleasant chat.

“And over there are the training grounds for our soldiers. Would you be interested in seeing them?”

“Of course. Would you mind taking us?”

“Heh, I knew you’d want to go there! I’ve actually already told the commander you’d be coming over to observe things.”

“That’s very farsighted of you, Prince Roland. I will be much obliged.”

Oscar bowed slightly.

“Ahem!” Roland piped up anxiously, “Could you drop that, if you don’t mind?”

“Excuse me? I’m not sure I understand what you’re referring to?”

Oscar cocked his head at him.

Roland looked to his feet, as though embarrassed.

“The formal manner and language? You address me with unnecessary humbleness despite being older than me, and your country is far larger than mine. Besides, I would like us to get along...”

Roland blushed as though he were confessing his feelings to a crush. Cecilia thought it was terribly cute.

“I also would like to make friends with you...,” she whispered quietly, so that he wouldn’t hear.

Oscar smiled disarmingly at this boy, the same age as one of his brothers.

“Well, in that case, you don’t need to speak formally to me, either. Please call me Oscar.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly...!”

“You said it yourself that you’d like us to get along. Besides, if I talked to you informally while you continued to title me, it might come across to people that I was simply being arrogant toward you.”

“Ah, I suppose so...”

Roland considered things for a moment before his face brightened into a smile. He pressed his fist against his chest, all eagerness.

“I will call you Oscar from now on! And while I’ll try not to be formal with you either, I don’t think I could bring myself to use only common, informal language. I hope you understand?”

“Sure, whatever you’re comfortable with,” Oscar replied casually, to which Roland’s eyes lit up.

“Thank you so much for this!” he said with a deep blush.

They were getting on so swimmingly that Cecilia was growing jealous. The only time Roland had, in fact, said anything to her was when she’d asked if she could use the restroom.

“Please come along with me, Oscar and Lord Cecil”

“Sure.”

“Um...”

Oscar and Lord Cecil? Cecilia made a long face. Why would Roland address the crown prince of Prosper informally, yet keep using titles for the mere son of a baron? That would make people scratch their heads. Oscar had made a good point earlier in justifying why didn’t want to be titled. Now she was at risk of looking like a pompous noble demanding to be addressed with all ceremony.

“You don’t have to title me, either! I also want to be friends with you!” she said to Roland in a panic.

She smiled at him with as much friendliness as she could muster, but when he turned to her, he spoke in a harsh tone.

“That’s out of the question.”

“Huh?”

“Lord Cecil, I will continue to use your proper title.”

“But why...?”

“Now let me show you the training grounds.”

Roland ignored her, an amiable smile returning to his face.



“Roland hates me!”

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be that,” Oscar replied.

They had withdrawn to the guest room for the evening. Cecilia’s feet were throbbing after a whole day of being shown around the castle. She slumped onto the sofa in the middle of the room. Behind her, Oscar took off his waistcoat and hung it on a hanger, smoothing it of creases.

The guest room they’d been shown to at the palace wasn’t just a small chamber with beds in it. It consisted of a large central lounge with several doors leading to separate bedrooms to accommodate a whole group of guests staying together. They were alone at the moment, as their escort was waiting outside their accommodations.

Oscar was sympathetic toward Cecilia, who had found their first day at the palace depressing. He tried to cheer her up.

“Surely he wouldn’t have hosted you here if he actually hated you.”

“Maybe he felt he didn’t have a choice, since I was with you? Or he didn’t want to make things even weirder by putting up one of his guests in an inferior guest room.”

“Perhaps. But you haven’t done anything to him, so I don’t think you need to worry so much. He might have just been tense around you.”

“Why would he be tense around me but perfectly at ease with you?” Cecilia asked, sprawling on the sofa with a defeated sigh. “I’ve never had anyone shun me like that before in my life. It’s shocking.”

“You’ve never thought about it, despite shunning others in much the same way?” Oscar teased.

She turned to him and pouted.

“You promised not to bring that up again!”

“I don’t remember promising you that, specifically.”

He chuckled. Cecilia made an angry puffer fish face back at him. He had her

dead to rights; she didn't have a comeback. Not one to sulk for long, she changed the topic.

“So you'll be meeting Roland for a private chat tomorrow?”

“Yes. He has some business to talk with me about, apparently.”

After the tour of the palace, Roland had asked if he could speak with Oscar in private the next day. Oscar wanted to know what it was about, but Roland had declined to answer, insisting that he would explain everything to him when they met up for the chat.

“Maybe it has something to do with why he asked us here?”

“But then why would he want to talk about it only with me?”

“Do you think he could have invited you and me here for different reasons?”

“You could be right. My original guess was that he wanted to get some information about the Selection Ceremony from us.”

To the uninitiated, the only things Oscar and Cecil had in common was that they both attended Vleugel Academy and were both knights of the Holy Maiden candidate. Roland was apparently in the dark about Janis' schemes in the Kingdom of Prosper, but maybe he'd heard a thing or two and had gotten wind of Oscar and Cecil in the process. That was a fair assumption to make in the absence of any certain information.

“I'll try to find out his motives when I see him tomorrow. Maybe I won't even have to ask about it.”

“I'm sorry. I'm no help at all.”

“It's not your fault. Besides, Roland's complete lack of interest in you honestly came as a relief to me.”

“Huh?”

Cecilia stared at him blankly, not understanding how that could be a good thing. Surely it would have been easier to get intel out of Roland if he was friendly with both of them?

Oscar tousled her hair.

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

“You don’t even realize what a dangerous charmer you are.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“That’s fine,” he replied, taking his hand off her head. “Anyway, why don’t you take it easy tomorrow? You must be worn out after the long journey here. It’d be a shame if you were to fall ill while we’re here, so do take your time to recover.”

“Okay! I’ll take that as permission to do nothing all day!”

She giggled cheerfully. Oscar blinked, unsure what she was finding so funny.

“Why are you in such a good mood?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking that sometimes you sound exactly like Gil, heh-heh!”

Oscar narrowed his eyes and sighed, not liking the sound of that at all.



The next day...

“Oscar wants me to laze around all day, but that’s too boring!” Cecilia said resolutely, her hands on her hips.

She was in her private guest bedroom. Before her sat an open duffel bag, packed with clothes she’d never worn before. She removed them from the bag and held them out in front of her, checking how they would look on her in a mirror.

“Lean’s amazing. She got the size just right!”

It was a maid outfit. Not the cosplay type with lots of frills and a miniskirt, but a classic-style servant uniform, with a long skirt that reached past the ankles.

Lean was the only person Cecilia had told about her trip to Nortracha. On the odd chance she wouldn’t return, at least somebody would be able to inform the rest of her friends what had happened.

At first, Lean tried to dissuade her from going, asking whether it really was

necessary to undertake such a dangerous journey. In the end, though, she capitulated, knowing that there was no changing Cecilia's mind one she decided to do something. "Take this with you just in case," she said, handing her the maid outfit.

"It's meant to be a getaway disguise, but whatever..."

Lean had told Cecilia to use it if things went awry, and she needed to slip away unnoticed. It was very much Lean's style to give her a maid outfit instead of a lucky charm or the like for heading into enemy territory. It was also very much Cecilia's style to ignore instructions and use the getaway disguise for something else.

"I might be able to get some info out of the servants if I dress up as a maid!"

Cecilia's objective in Nortracha was to either capture Janis or obtain information that would help track him down. Personally, she was also hoping to find something out about Margrit. The maid costume would serve her well for both purposes.

The locals were unlikely to share rumors about their country's royal family with outsiders, but if she posed as a maid who'd been hired to work at the palace, the other servants ought to be happy to gossip with her. She could probably get them to disclose what passed for common knowledge here if she made it clear that she was an ignorant rookie.

"Janis is said to indulge his wanderlust at every opportunity, but he's lived here for a good chunk of time. The servants must know something about him."

Cecilia changed out of her clothes into the maid outfit. Since it had been designed to aid her escape, it was very quick to put on. She also donned the wig that came with it and a pair of fake glasses that Lean had also included for some reason. She was ready.

"All right!"

She spun around in front of the mirror. The outfit consisted of a white apron over a long black dress that sported a collar, a wig of long, dark brown hair that was tied beneath a small mobcap, and oversize, tin-rimmed glasses that did a good job of concealing Cecilia's striking blue eyes.

The woman staring back at her in the mirror didn't resemble Cecilia at all. She didn't look like Cecil either, of course. Oscar might recognize her, but she was pretty sure nobody at the palace would. Maybe she could even fool the guards who had been assigned to protect her. All in all, it was a very clever costume.

"Lean's a genius!"

She clenched her hands into fists, bringing them up high to her chest.

"Okay, let's go!"

Cecilia decided to leave her room by climbing down a rope, since she didn't want the guards and servants from Prosper Kingdom to catch her leaving her accommodations dressed as a maid.

She looped the rope around one of the legs of her bed, tied a knot, and threw the rest of it out the window. After making sure nobody was around, she slid down the rope in a practiced motion, just like Hans, one of the knights who served the Sylvie family, had taught her. Incidentally, she'd received a letter from him just a few days ago reading, *Who would have thought you were attending the academy pretending to be a boy! I wouldn't have trained you had I known you were going to put those skills to use for mischief!* She could tell he was incensed.

I'll have to apologize to Hans next time I see him, she thought with a rueful smile as she finished her descent.

Cecilia smoothed out her dress and headed to the servants' quarters at the edge of the palace. That was where she was likeliest to come across the most workers, giving her better chances of finding someone with useful information. But when she got there, she realized she had a problem.

I have no clue how to strike up a conversation!

The linen room and the servants' kitchen were predictably crowded. Though the staff didn't seem the least bit suspicious of her, perhaps because of this, neither was anyone coming over to talk to her. Her plan had been to simply hang out where the servants were and wait for people to tell her things, but that wasn't happening. She'd really jumped the gun.

I guess I should just go up to someone, but what if I say something unnatural

and make them suspicious?

Not knowing what to do, she came to a halt in the middle of the room.

“You there!” came a sharp voice from behind her.

“Yes?”

Cecilia straightened her back and turned around. A tall older woman had quickly walked over to where Cecilia was standing and looking lost.

“Are you free?” the woman asked with some impatience.

“Um, well, it’s correct to say I’m not busy with anything right now...”

“Then you’ll come and help me.”

She grabbed Cecilia by her wrist.

“Huh?”

Cecilia widened her eyes and stared, but the woman didn’t care. She pulled Cecilia by the hand, forcing her to walk alongside her.

“Weren’t you listening at the morning briefing? The guest dining room will be in use later, so anyone who’s free is supposed to go and help clean it.”

“R-really?” she asked.

“Really,” the woman snarked back, glaring at her with reproach, as if Cecilia were a naughty child.

The woman sighed with exasperation. Despite her crankiness, Cecilia didn’t get the sense that she was mean.

And so the woman led her to the aforementioned guest dining room, where a huge chandelier hung over a long dining table lined with chairs. The walls were coated with damask wallpaper, and the curtains were made of thick velvet. It was as lush and plush a dining room as you’d expect in any royal palace.

“Wow...”

Cecilia gasped in admiration. There was a dining room for hosting guests at her family residence, too, and it was gorgeously decorated, but it wasn’t as majestic or large as this one.

“This is no time for *oohs* and *aaahs*, girl. Get to work!”

“Yes, of course! So um...”

What exactly does she want me to do? Cecilia wondered, glancing around sheepishly. She knew the basics of cleaning work, but she had no idea where the supplies were or what her specific role as a servant entailed. Did every staff member have regular tasks they would perform daily?

The woman who had brought her to the dining room noticed Cecilia’s cluelessness. She raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

“Don’t tell me you’re new?”

“I am, in fact! Today’s my first day...”

“Ah, I knew I didn’t recognize your face.”

The woman sighed and threw a dustcloth over to Cecilia. Then she gestured with her chin at the dining table.

“Wipe the chairs clean to get started. Don’t leave a single speck of dust!”

“Right! I’ll do my best!”

Cecilia’s obedient reply was met with a sharp look.

“I should certainly hope so.”

An hour later...

“Lia! Can you put that parcel over there?”

“Sure!”

“Lia, I’d like you to check if we have enough tableware for the guests.”

“On it!”

Cecilia was successfully blending in. The woman who’d brought her to the dining room—Isabelle—and another maid who’d started only a month ago—Anne—had taken her under their wings. Lia was the alias she was using for this undercover operation.

“Hey Lia, do you know who’s going to be dining here tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure. Some nobles staying at the palace?”

“So you haven’t heard? It’s a prince and an aristocrat from abroad!”

“Oh!”

Cecilia realized she was cleaning the guest dining room for none other than herself and Oscar. Come to think of it, Roland had told them the day before, that despite his busy schedule, he would make time for them to have dinner together two days from then. Frankly, it had sounded like he was only inviting Oscar to dine with him at the time, but based on what the servants were saying, it appeared that she was expected to turn up as well. Maybe Roland had really included her in the investigation even though his gaze had been fixed firmly upon Oscar?

“I’ve seen the guests earlier, and you know what? That aristocrat is the more dazzling of the two!”

“That blond boy? I’ve seen him as well! He’s a looker!”

“He spoke to me—would you believe it?! His name is Cecil.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ve seen him.”

Cecilia forced a smile, surprised at how her Cecil persona had won over the maids. She should have been reborn as a boy—her life would have been so much easier. Although on second thought, it might just have introduced her to a whole new host of problems.

“Prince Janis is dashing, too, but Cecil has a charm all his own.”

Another servant joined the conversation excitedly as soon as she heard the name “Cecil.” Then another came over, and another, until a small group of maids had formed around Cecilia.

“I know what you mean! They’re like the moon and the sun!”

“I like Cecil best!”

“Nah, even he pales in comparison to Prince Janis!”

“Aah, speaking of Prince Janis!”

Cecilia remembered her objective. She hadn’t dressed up as a maid to clean the palace—she was supposed to be getting information about Janis from the

servants, whose attention she now had.

“What about him?”

“Um... Well...”

“Let me guess, you heard the stories about Prince Janis and that’s why you applied to work here, right?”

“Wait, what stories?”

“Of his handsomeness! He’s famous for it in the capital. Every so often, we get a new maid who’s come here because she’s developed a crush on him.”

“Happens all the time!”

The other maids nodded in agreement, engrossed in the topic.

“Would you like us to tell you about Prince Janis?”

“If you don’t mind!”

“You’re a nice girl, Lia, so we’ll give you all the details!”

Cecilia’s diligent attitude seemed to have earned her points with the other maids. They glanced conspiratorially at one another.

“Save the gossip for after work.” Isabelle reprimanded them before they could tell Cecilia anything about Janis.

The group dispersed, each of the maids returning to her tasks.

That evening, Cecilia and Oscar had dinner in their shared lounge. Afterward, rather than retreat to her private bedroom, Cecilia slumped onto the sofa, exhausted from a whole day of cleaning work. Oscar sat down beside her.

“What did you do today, Cecilia?”

“Huh? Oh, um, nothing much! I was just relaxing!” she lied, determined to hide the fact that she’d spent the day disguised as a maid, cleaning the dining room they would be using the next day. She didn’t want to worry him, and she was also a little afraid he would get mad at her if he found out.

“And what about you, Oscar? Did you learn anything from Roland?” she said, changing the topic.

He looked down at his feet.

“No. He kept dodging my questions,” he admitted wearily. “It seems like he wants to tell me something about Janis but can’t bring himself to say it. Whenever I tried to turn the conversation in that direction, he became hesitant and evasive. I also agreed to talk to him in private tomorrow, so maybe he’ll tell me something then.”

“Hopefully.”

“Well, we’re not in a hurry to go back, so if he needs more time before he’s ready to open up, I can wait.”

“Yeah... Sorry it’s all on you.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Roland was avoiding her, so it fell to Oscar to find out what the prince knew. It was really bugging her that she was being ignored by the very person who’d invited her, but it wasn’t as if she could just ask Roland what was going on. In that regard, she also had to count on Oscar for answers.

Anyway... I’m dog-tired after today!

Cecilia hadn’t even taken a bath yet, but she was already feeling drowsiness creeping in, thanks to all the physical labor she’d done that day. Maybe she could have a nap in her bedroom before the bath? She got up from the sofa and started walking to her room.

“I’m going to lie down for a bit. Later, Oscar.”

“Cecilia...”

“Yes?”

“Are you sure you didn’t get up to anything unusual today?”

She stopped in her tracks, seized by panic. After a brief pause, she managed to conjure a smile on her face, hoping it looked natural.

“N-no, nothing strange. Just the, um, usual stuff today.”



It was the morning of the third day since they'd arrived in Nortracha. Like the day before, Cecilia donned her maid disguise and threw the rope down from her window. Before descending, she put the fake glasses in her pocket to make sure she wouldn't drop them and wrapped pieces of fabric around her hands to prevent friction burns.

Then she slid down the rope like an experienced escape artist. When she reached the ground, she did a little fist pump before setting off to her destination.

I know exactly where to go today! I even have a map! she thought, taking out a folded piece of notepaper from her pocket. On it was a rough map of the palace that Cecilia had copied from Anne—a maid she'd befriended the day before.

"Even I still can't remember the layout of the palace. Would you like me to show you a map?"

Anne, who was also relatively new herself, had produced a hand-drawn map from her apron pocket, and Cecilia had hurriedly made a copy for herself.

There was a star symbol on Cecilia's map that wasn't present on Anne's. It marked a place she'd established as her destination for that day based on information from the other maids. She started walking with sure steps, remembering what the servants had told her during their break after work while she'd scarfed down some cookies.

"Prince Janis is very charming. And kind—he talks to servants with real friendliness."

"He left the palace on a diplomatic mission some time ago. I hope he returns soon."

"I've known him since I was a little girl. He's the most sensitive man I've ever met!"

Charming, kind, friendly, sensitive. Those weren't adjectives Cecilia would use to describe the Janis she knew. Okay, he could pass himself off as charming and friendly, but he definitely wasn't kind or sensitive. At least, it didn't seem to her that he was. The maids didn't have a bad thing to say about him, though. She'd

tentatively brought up the rumor about him cutting off the arm of the princess who was sent to marry him...

“Yes, there’s a story like that going around, but none of us knows which princess it’s supposed to be about.”

“I know of a princess who he sent back home the moment she arrived—but cutting off her arm? Prince Janis wouldn’t do anything so horrible.”

“Of course not!” the other maids exclaimed in unison.

The servants had a good opinion of Janis, apparently. Cecilia changed tack and asked about the other members of the royal family of Nortracha. This strategy turned up better results. Isabelle’s tale stuck in her mind the most.

“Prince Janis had two older brothers, exceptional in so many ways, but unfortunately, they passed away...”

Isabelle told her that Janis’ mother had died around the same time. The prince suffered such severe shock that he shut himself up in his room for days.

“After the death of his older brothers, Prince Janis became the next in line to inherit the throne. That got unkind people talking... The sudden loss of two princes in close succession was unprecedented. Even the king harbors suspicions about Prince Janis, which is why he hasn’t officially designated him as the crown prince yet...”

“There’s no way that Prince Janis would have killed his brothers!”

“Of course he didn’t do it!”

“Hmm, I think that’s when he started leaving the palace to travel around on his own.”

“He probably wanted to get away from it all, be alone with his thoughts.”

Cecilia sighed, thinking back to everything the maids had told her about Janis. She didn’t know them well enough to be able to gauge how much of what they said was based in fact. Even so, they’d presented Janis to her in a new light, and she couldn’t help feeling pity for him. Still, that didn’t excuse what he’d done to her friends, and she had no intention of going easy on him just because of some tragic events in his past.

Right now, my job is to collect as much info as I can about Janis. Fact-checking can wait!

Cecilia followed the map to the place she'd marked with the star. She stopped in front of a door...the portal to Janis' study. She'd "borrowed" the servants' copy of the key to get inside.

I just have to make sure nobody sees me going in and out!

That sounded simple on paper, but gaining entry to royal chambers by illegal means was undeniably a serious crime, and in her case, she could be accused of spying for another country. Beads of sweat formed on her face.

Since Janis' study didn't require cleaning during his absence, the servants didn't frequent this part of the palace. All Cecilia had to do was sneak inside quietly and slip out unnoticed...

Ugh... This is kind of stressful...

She reached for the doorknob and tried to turn it first, without putting in the key...

"Huh?"

It was open. She didn't have to unlock it. Strange as it was, she quickly stepped inside and shut the door behind her. Then she looked around.

Janis had been gone from the palace for a long time, and his study looked quite empty. There weren't any important documents lying around or valuables that could be easily snatched and sold. Perhaps he'd assumed less trustworthy servants might venture inside during his absence. The only furnishings were a desk and chair, plus a sofa and coffee table.

Cecilia checked the desk drawer first. There was nothing besides a fountain pen inside. Then she opened the closet. It contained only a single coat on a hanger.

"There's just not anything here..."

Nothing in the room qualified as Janis' personal belongings. Had he emptied it himself, or did someone else clear it out after he left? In any case, there was nothing in the way of useful clues here.

“Well, it was worth a shot. It’s a shame I didn’t find anything, though.”

Cecilia’s high hopes had resulted in disappointment, but she didn’t want to dwell on it. Now she just needed to vacate the room before anybody noticed...

“What are you doing, Cecilia?”

She spun around in surprise to find a familiar face in the doorway.

“Huh? Oscar? What are YOU doing here?!”

“You were acting strangely last night, so I followed you today. And here you are, rummaging through other people’s rooms wearing a disguise... Honestly, I don’t know what to say.”

Oscar sighed, clutching his head as if he had a headache.

As it turned out, he’d had nothing to do that morning before his lunch with Roland. He’d been planning on spending that time with Cecilia, but she was acting weirdly secretive, so he kept quiet and tailed her.

He walked up to Cecilia with a very tired look on his face.

“How do you think it felt when I saw the rope dangling from your window? *There she goes again*, I thought. *Why can’t she stay put? Would it kill her to not get involved in anything for a while?*”

“I used to think that way, actually.”

Until a few months ago, she’d been certain that she would meet her doom if she just sat around and waited. Things had changed since then—now she reckoned that not doing anything *might* give death the chance to get her.

“By the way, I can’t believe you saw through my disguise!”

She gestured at herself with her open hand. She might have been a bit biased, but the disguise seemed perfect to her. It wasn’t just a maid outfit, but came with a wig and pair of glasses, too. It had crossed her mind earlier that if anyone could recognize her dressed like this, it would be Oscar, but it was quite a shock to learn that he really had.

He crossed his arms and huffed.

“How many times do you think you can fool me? Besides, the only reason I

didn't immediately recognize you when you showed up as Cecil was that I didn't know what you looked like all grown up."

"Oh really?"

"Awfully confident, aren't you?"

Her tease met a stony stare.

Cecilia laughed heartily. A few months earlier, she wouldn't have imagined that she'd be so at ease talking to Oscar. She kind of wished she hadn't needed keep her identity secret from him for so long, but on the other hand, maybe they wouldn't have ended up so close if it weren't for that. *Everything worked out for the best*, she rationalized.

"Anyway, are you finished here? I don't want to linger a moment longer. There's no way I could come up with an excuse for us sneaking into rooms we have no business being in."

Cecilia's first thought was they could just claim they took a wrong turn and ended up there by accident, since the room was unlocked, but Janis' study was pretty far from the guest apartments. No one would buy them getting so lost they'd ended up in a completely different wing of the palace, and the fact that she was dressed as a maid would only make things more complicated. They wouldn't be able to talk their way out of this one if they got caught.

"Yeah, let's go!"

Cecilia headed for the door...just as they heard footsteps right outside.

"Shoot, shoot, shoot! What do we do now, Oscar?!"

"Why are you asking me?"

Cecilia saw that he was just as tense as she was. She looked around the study, and her gaze fell on the closet she'd left open. She pushed Oscar toward it.

"Get in there!"

"What?"

"Hurry up!"

She pushed him into the closet, stepped inside after him, and shut the doors.

They pressed into each other amid the darkness, trying to breathe without making a sound.

“You and your ideas—”

“Shh! Be quiet, Oscar!”

He fell silent, but as time passed without whoever had been inside the room trying to come in, he spoke up once more, albeit in a hushed tone.

“Something very similar to this happened before.”

“Huh?”

“You were dressed in a foreign outfit, running away from Lean.”

Cecilia opened her eyes wide.

“Ha-ha, yeah, I remember that.”

She scratched her cheek.

That had happened before Oscar had guessed who she was. Lean had pretty much coerced Cecilia into putting on a *qipao* and was chasing after her, sketchbook in hand, eager to draw her for her national debut story. Oscar happened to notice Cecilia on the run and spoke to her, but she just pushed him unceremoniously into an empty classroom to hide until Lean lost her.

“You never change your ways.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge! What has it been, a few months? Have you had any personal growth since then?”

“It may not count for much, but I’ve learned not to lose my calm when you do things like this.”

“Wait, are you saying that I made you uncomfortable the other time?”

She blinked. Oscar used to be unreadable to her, so she had had no idea. For his part, Oscar, who’d remained expressionless until then, began to blush.

“Well. Kind of. Yes.”

“Oh. I guess anyone would feel confused, not knowing what was happening. Sorry, I’ve been so thoughtless.”

“It wasn’t that...”

He couldn’t admit to her that he’d lost his composure not from the suddenness of it, but the fact she’d pushed him over and sat on top of him... When that scene played back in his mind, he averted his eyes from Cecilia, who was staring at him. Then she craned her neck trying to meet his gaze, not understanding why he turned his face away from her, which only caused him to turn even farther. The more she tried to meet his eyes, the more painful an angle he tilted his face away from her.

“Give me some space, Cecilia.”

“Sorry, what?”



“Don’t stand so close to me!” he yelled thoughtlessly.

Just then, the door to the study opened, and someone entered the room.

Oscar and Cecilia held their breath, peering through the thin gap between the closet doors. It was Roland. He walked over to the desk and heaved himself on the chair behind it, slumping over the desk. Then he pulled out the drawer, which Cecilia had checked earlier, took out the fountain pen, and held it before his eyes. He seemed distressed. Cecilia pressed her face against the closet door to get a better view.

“Is this Roland’s study?”

“No, it’s not...”

“Janis...,” Roland abruptly called out in a sorrowful voice. Oscar and Cecilia pressed their ears to the gap between the closet doors.

“Janis, why did you leave without telling me anything at all...?”

Roland sounded as if he were about to burst into tears. He buried his face in his crossed arms, bending over the desk. Then he let out a long sigh. Cecilia furrowed her brows.

Poor Roland...

From her and Oscar’s point of view, Janis was their enemy, so they would both be happy if he never showed up again. It wasn’t that Cecilia wanted to get revenge on him—she simply never wanted to have anything to do with him again.

On the other hand, Roland’s perspective couldn’t have been more different. He was longing for his missing brother, bawling over his disappearance. It seemed that Roland truly loved him.

Distracted by her thoughts, Cecilia lost her balance slightly and accidentally bumped the closet door with the tip of her shoe. Roland immediately sat up straight in his chair.

“Who’s there?”

“Oh crap...”

“I swear, you’re a magnet for trouble...”

They were sweating beads as Roland stood up and paced around the room, glancing left and right nervously, until he stopped before the closet. Yet his eyes never fell on it, as though he’d dismissed the possibility that someone might be hiding inside.

Just as their racing hearts began to calm, however, Roland reached for the knob of the closet doors after all, pulling them open in one swift motion.

“Eek!”

“Oh!”

Cecilia, who’d been leaning right up against the door, tumbled out, followed by Oscar in short order. Somehow, he managed to get himself under her, bracing her fall with his body to save her from slamming against the hard floor.

“Yiiikes...! Oh, Oscar? Are you okay?!”

“Ngh... Don’t worry about me...”

He got up off the ground. Cecilia followed his gaze. Roland was staring at them, stupefied.

“Excuse me, but may I ask what you were doing in the closet?”

“Ha-ha, it’s a long story...”

Cecilia laughed awkwardly.

“So what you’re saying is, you trespassed into my brother’s study because you’re looking for clues to find him?”

“Y-yeah, that’s right,” Cecilia replied hesitantly.

Oscar explained to Roland that they had met Janis before and were trying to figure out where he’d gone. They happened to walk by Janis’ study, then went inside when they found that the door was unlocked. Cecil was wearing a disguise because they’d been worried that Roland would refuse to help Oscar if he saw Cecil was with him.

“You should’ve told me that you were looking for my brother! I’ll help you in any way I can!”

Roland bought their story. He must have been exceptionally trusting of people in general, or just of Oscar at the very least. Either way, they were safe.

Interestingly, Roland didn't recognize Cecilia as Cecil at first. "*What have you been doing with that maid in the closet, Oscar? I didn't take you for that kind of person!*" had been his initial reaction. Cecilia put her hands up. "*It's just me, Cecil!*" Roland relaxed for a moment, as if reassured that he hadn't walked in on something untoward, before another thought came to him, and he stared at them in even more shock than before. Oscar had needed to do a lot of explaining, after which Roland wanted to continue the conversation, so they wound up sitting on the sofa.

"The door was unlocked because I come here very often. It's embarrassing, but I can't stop thinking about my brother." Roland scratched his cheek, gazing around the room. "Janis took all of his things from the study before he disappeared. I haven't been locking it up since there's nothing left here."

"So you two are close?" Cecilia asked.

Roland thought about it for a moment, knitting his brows.

"I don't know if I'd say that. I look up to him and trust him completely. Out of all my brothers, he's always been the most gifted," he replied with honesty, no longer ignoring Cecilia. He hesitated for a moment before he stared at Oscar with resolve. "The reason I invited you two... Or rather, the reason I invited you, Oscar, actually has to do with my brother."

"You mean Janis?"

"Yes. I was hoping you might be able to stop him."

Oscar and Cecilia exchanged glances. They were expecting him to say something along the lines of helping him find Janis, but stop him? Supposedly, Roland was unaware of Janis' activities in Prosper Kingdom because he hadn't been in touch with his elder brother since his disappearance. But did Roland, in fact, have some inkling of what Janis had been up to?

He wavered for a few moments before he continued.

"I'm worried Janis might kill himself."

Oscar and Cecilia widened their eyes.

“I would like us to keep what I’m about to tell you between ourselves,” he said, preempting his explanation. “Did you know that Janis and I had two older brothers?”

“I do. I’ve heard they were very promising but passed away...”

Cecilia thought back to what Isabelle had told her earlier.

“After the death of his older brothers, Prince Janis became the next in line to inherit the throne. That got unkind people talking... The sudden loss of two princes in close succession was unprecedented. Even the king harbors suspicions about Prince Janis, which is why he hasn’t officially designated him as the crown prince yet...”

“Yes, they are dead.” Roland nodded. “And it was Janis’ mother, Chloe, who killed them.”

Now this was a bombshell.

“Is that...an established fact?”

“I wouldn’t have brought it up if it was just a rumor. I saw her do it,” Roland replied, dropping his gaze to the floor and bringing a hand to his chest. “Chloe was kindhearted and gentle, like Janis. She always treated me well, and she started acting like a mother to me after my own passed away. But for reasons I don’t understand, something in her changed the day Janis turned seventeen. From then on, she grew violent.”

He went on to explain that the family had initially thought she might have succumbed to mental illness. Doctors were called, but no treatment worked. They even had to keep Chloe locked up temporarily to keep everyone safe.

“Eventually, she became unrecognizable. She attacked Janis’ bride when she arrived from her home country, cutting her arm off. When one of the ministers was found guilty of embezzlement, she ordered him beheaded. And yet, my father—the king—kept protecting her, concealing what she’d done. Until she murdered my brothers, that is...”

The first-born prince Pascal succumbed after she poisoned him. His younger

brother Michael survived the poisoning, but when Chloe got wind of this, she forced her way into the room where he was recuperating and stabbed him in the heart.

“I was visiting Michael when she came in. She strode purposefully to his bedside without even acknowledging that I was there and immediately buried a knife in his chest. Only then did she speak to me, saying that it was just me and Janis now, and that my brother was the only one who deserved to succeed the throne.”

Chloe was captured on the spot. There were other witnesses to her crimes besides Roland, and the king imposed a gag order on them, but he could no longer prevent her from going to trial at that point.

“She died in the dungeon beneath the palace before the day of her trial. Only then was it found that she had hidden a vial of poison on her body—the same she had used on my brothers.”

“That’s horrific...”

“For some reason, Janis blames himself for what happened. He’s so strong and resilient, but one time he broke down in front of me and insisted that everything was his fault. Shortly after his mother committed suicide, he started sneaking out of the palace and disappearing for days.”

With a murderess for a mother and vagabond tendencies, Janis could hardly be made the next crown prince, despite all of his other redeeming qualities. Yet because the king had kept those facts from the public, it would come across as unseemly were he to designate the younger Roland as the successor to the throne.

“I think Janis is searching for a place to end his life. He used to send me letters whenever he left the palace, but I haven’t gotten any since he last departed. This was the first time he emptied his study of his belongings, too.” Visibly distressed, Roland clenched his hands into fists in his lap. “I intended to speak with you about this on the day you arrived, but I found it very difficult to bring up...”

“Have you spoken to your father about this?”

“Yes, I’ve shared my concerns with him. But as far as he’s concerned, Janis is a *persona non grata*. He told me to forget about him and take consolation in the fact that I’ll be the next king if he vanishes for good. But I don’t care about the crown at all...”

Cecilia wondered if the king’s indifference was motivated by his knowledge of the misdeeds Janis had committed in Prosper Kingdom. From his point of view, it would be better if his third son never came back. If he returned, then Prosper could prove that he’d committed crimes within its jurisdiction, and it would require serious reparations to mend the relationship between the two countries.

“Please, help me stop Janis if you can!”

Roland bowed low. Cecilia and Oscar exchanged glances, not giving an immediate reply. They didn’t mind helping Roland find his brother since that had been their objective to begin with. In fact, teaming up with the young prince might make their task easier.

The problem was that their motives clashed with Roland’s. He wanted to bring Janis safely back home, while they were tracking him down because he was too dangerous to be allowed to roam free. His aim was to find Janis, while theirs was to capture him.

Roland seemed to misread their lack of an answer. He dropped his gaze sadly.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have troubled you with this...”

He was on the verge of tears. Oscar rubbed his brow, finally speaking in a strained voice:

“Give us some time to think about it. We also want to find Janis, but the circumstances on our side are quite complicated, as it happens.”

“I understand... I just ask that you please give me an answer before you leave my country, if possible.”

With the decision put on hold, Roland smiled, signaling an end to their conversation. After such a heavy discussion, it was difficult for them to switch gears, and a heavy silence fell upon the room for a few minutes. Ultimately, Cecilia broke the quiet, raising her hand and glancing earnestly at Roland.

“Sorry, can I ask you something?”

Both he and Oscar turned their attention toward her.

“Does it not bother you that I heard all of that, too?”

“What do you mean?”

“You were just talking to Oscar, not me, right?”

Roland had only been asking the prince to meet up with him for private chats. But what he’d just told them was a national secret. If he’d known Cecil was Cecilia, it wouldn’t be that big of a deal, but he was under the impression that Cecil was just the son of a baron.

Roland shook his head.

“You deserved to hear it, too. You’ve proven how much you care about my brother by taking a great risk, sneaking into his study to look for clues as to his whereabouts and going so far as to put on a maid disguise. Lord Cecil, you’ve earned my trust.”

“Ah... Th-thank you...”

Cecilia’s inner turmoil was giving her a tight feeling in her chest. She didn’t care about Janis, she would be happy if he were gone for good. Yet she couldn’t bring herself to clarify her position to Roland, who was so attached to his brother.

“That aside, could you tell us now why you invited Cecil? I’ve been suspecting that you invited him for quite different reasons than me.”

Roland seemed to grow anxious for a moment at Oscar’s question.

“Well...”

He pressed his fingertips together.

“You’ve been talking to both of us today, but you were excluding Cecil from our conversations before then. It really did appear to us that you were shunning him. We’ve been talking since yesterday about how odd it was you invited him to lunch, despite how you don’t seem to want anything to do with him.”

Oscar turned to Cecilia as if for confirmation, and she nodded gingerly.

Roland glanced over at her, and a crimson blush spread over his cheeks.

“That’s because...”

“Yes?”

“That’s because...I wanted to meet the Advent Day Prince!”

Cecilia froze, totally thrown by this revelation. Now that Roland had finally confessed why he’d invited her, he continued with intense enthusiasm.

“You see, I’ve been studying folklore, and I have a special interest in the mythology of Prosper Kingdom! Your founding myth is relevant to my country as well, and the religious celebrations connected to it are fascinating from a folklorist’s perspective! I’ve been sending people to your festivals for a few years now to bring back more information for my research, but when I heard that a boy who might be a reincarnation of Ian appeared on Advent Day this year, I couldn’t content myself with just a secondhand account!”

Cecilia was a bit taken aback by the sudden change in Roland’s demeanor as he became more and more excited.

“On top of that, the incredible feats you performed on Advent Day show that you’re on par with Ian himself! I thought it would be a dream come true to meet you in person, so when I was sending an invitation to Oscar, I wrote one to you as well. But I didn’t really think you would accept. That’s why I got so terribly nervous when you showed up with him!”

“You do know I’m not in a position to turn down an invitation from a prince, right?”

“You can’t be serious! As a reincarnation of Ian, you’re a living god! Don’t tell me you don’t get special treatment back home?!”

Roland shot a look at Oscar, who blinked, not knowing what to say.

“Um... There are people who think I’m the reincarnation of Ian, but it’s just what they choose to believe. It’s not a proven fact.”

“Even my friend who’s a member of your church confirmed that you were presumed to be Ian. If the Church agrees, doesn’t that make it fact? You may not be aware of who you are, but it’s already been proven beyond doubt.”

Based on what he was saying, Roland had sent Cecilia the invitation with the same degree of hope fans of celebrities do when writing to their idols.

So that's why he insisted on calling me "Lord Cecil..."

It still weirded her out that he was titling her and not Oscar, but it no longer stressed her out now that she knew why. She was relieved that it wasn't because Roland hated her.

He kept stealing glances at Cecilia.

"I have to say, it wouldn't have occurred to me you might be into...this sort of thing."

Cecilia was still in her maid outfit. She stared down at her clothes and blushed, only now remembering how she was dressed.

"I-I'm not wearing it because—"

She didn't get to finish. Roland, still red in the face, cleared his throat loudly and turned away.

"The possibility of boys cross-dressing as girls never occurred to me before..."

"Uhm..."

"You've opened my mind to a whole new world of possibility."

Cecilia could almost hear that cursed door opening with an ominous creak.

Afterward, they had a meal in the guest dining room Cecilia had helped to clean. The atmosphere between them was the most convivial it had ever been, and they laughed together a few times. Cecilia even managed to persuade Roland to stop titling her. Overall, it was an enjoyable luncheon. After they'd eaten, Cecilia and Oscar went back to their rooms.

When she and Oscar were alone in the guest lounge, Cecilia brought up the earlier conversation.

"What did you make of Roland's story?"

"What he said about Janis? I'd take it with a pinch of salt. As far as I can tell, Janis isn't the type to get depressed over the death of his family members, and he definitely wouldn't take his own life. The stories about what Chloe did, and

the thing about Janis periodically disappearing from the palace are probably true, but I think Roland was projecting emotions on his brother that simply aren't there."

"Hmm, I guess you're right," Cecilia replied, taking off her outer layers.

That was her impression, too. She didn't think Janis was capable of committing suicide, and the image Roland had of his brother was heavily colored by his feelings toward him.

I know that, and yet...

She still couldn't help feeling pity for Janis. If, and this was a big "if," Roland was right about Janis, that meant the vagabond prince had endured some serious trauma.

"Although..." Oscar began, seeing Cecilia grow dispirited out of the corner of his eye. "It would explain why Janis has been acting so bold."

"What do you mean?"

Cecilia cocked her head. Oscar raised his index finger.

"Well, what would you do if you'd done something bad?"

"Apologize?"

"You'd do that, wouldn't you...?" Oscar grinned. "Most people aren't like you, though. They would want to make sure nobody finds out they're guilty. It doesn't even matter whether they erred on purpose or not—their instinct would be to pretend it wasn't them. The more they stand to lose, the more important it would be to them to feign innocence. But Janis doesn't seem to care."

He made a good point. Janis wasn't trying to hide his crimes. Even if he was rotten to the core, he was still a prince, and there was no shortage of people he could command to do his foul deeds for him. He could've safely pulled the strings from the shadows instead of getting personally involved. Despite that, he'd gone out of his way to draw attention to himself and his wrongdoings, both at the Advent Day celebrations and at the shrine.

"He's certainly aware that by acting so openly, he's making himself a wanted

criminal wherever he goes. While I wouldn't describe that as suicidal, it's undoubtedly self-destructive behavior."

"He's got all sorts of people trying to track him down."

"Yes. So if he's drawing attention to himself, making enemies all around intentionally, then maybe Roland was right about him having a death wish," Oscar said, summing up his theory.



"Thank you kindly for taking up my offer!"

The next day, Roland greeted Cecilia outside the guest lounge, his eyes sparkling. She was dressed as Cecil and ready to go on a tour of Moulay, the capital of Nortracha, with Roland serving as her guide. He had suggested the activity at dinner last night. She really wanted to see the sights, so she agreed at once. Oscar wouldn't be going with them because the king of Nortracha had requested an audience with him that day.

"I'm sure you'll have a great time, but please be cautious. Nortracha isn't enemies with Prosper, but it's unfamiliar territory. Better safe than sorry," Oscar had warned her.

Roland was friendly with her, and they would have an escort, so it wasn't as if she were taking a big risk going into the city. Still, Oscar had a point. She couldn't afford to let her guard down in this country.

She dressed in an outfit that prioritized comfort for the occasion, in pants, a jacket over a shirt, and a coat. Though it was simple, it was classy enough for a young man from a noble family. No one would mistake her for a commoner. As it happened, Roland turned up dressed in a similar fashion.

"I can't wait to see the city!"

"I'll show you all the best sights!"

Roland blushed slightly. The cold and distant attitude with which he'd treated her just two days earlier was completely gone.

A coach was waiting for them. It took them downtown, stopping a little way

away from the central streets. They got off together. Roland insisted on the escort remaining hidden, so it would look as if it were just him and Cecil out on a stroll together. Apparently, it was safer that way, as without an entourage of knights, people were less likely to notice Prince Roland mingling with the public.

“Where would you like go first, Lord Cecil? I did plan out a route, but if there’s anything in you’d like to see in particular, I’ll gladly take you there instead.”

“You promised you wouldn’t title me anymore!”

“Oh, sorry! It was a slip of the tongue!”

Roland chuckled shyly and blushed. Like Janis, he was very androgynous, and he seemed almost as if he were a young girl in love when he got bashful like this. Or an otaku meeting their favorite dating sim character in the flesh...

The urban aesthetic of Nortracha was a far cry from the Kingdom of Prosper. The houses were more colorful, sporting red, yellow, or white facades, and they had steep gabled roofs, which were probably a necessity in a country with heavy snowfall. The buildings were concentrated along the bay and its many harbors.

Cecilia thought it looked like a cute toy city, as the buildings all shared the same design, distinguished only by color.

“You know, the first thing I thought when we came to Nortracha was how pretty the cities are! I love how neat they look!”

“Thank you, I’m so happy you think so!”

Roland smiled with pure joy beside her.

They went to the market first. You could learn a lot about a country by checking out what kinds of products and produce they sold.

Since Moulay was a port city, many of the stalls were selling a variety of fish. Cecilia was astonished at the enormous size of some of the catches, which were cleaned and displayed whole. The speed at which the fishmongers portioned and packed the fish to meet their customers’ demands was also quite exceptional.

The next most common product on sale was alcohol. Dante would surely be

pleased if she brought him some as a souvenir, but there was no way she was going to do that.

Next, there were a bevy of root vegetables, which grew well even in cold climes, and dried meat suspended on hooks.

“Our cuisine lacks variety, but we have the freshest, tastiest fish around thanks to our proximity to the sea! They’re great sautéed but are also delicious in stews. Some intrepid seafood lovers even eat them raw! I personally wouldn’t recommend that, though.”

Roland smirked as he said that.

They left the market and exited onto the main street. It wasn’t snowing, but there weren’t many people around; at the very least, it was nowhere as busy as the market. Cecilia noticed that everyone they passed seemed to be in a good mood, wearing placid smiles on their faces.

“That pen... Is it from Oscar?” Roland remarked, looking at her breast pocket.

“Yeah, I got it from him. How did you guess?”

“The encrusted gemstone matches his eye color, and it’s very fancy.”

Cecilia kept the pen wrapped in thin parchment, but it was still very clearly a luxury item, the likes of which you wouldn’t expect a mere baron’s son to own. She brushed it gently with her fingertips.

“He gave it to me this morning.”

Oscar had given it to her shortly before Roland came to take her on the city tour. He was due to see the king, but just as Cecilia said good-bye and wished him a good day, Oscar suddenly turned and stuck the pen in her breast pocket. “Just in case,” he said enigmatically. Cecilia stared at him in confusion, so he added, “Roland’s a guy, so, you know.” That hadn’t cleared anything up.

“So you two are...close that way?” Roland ventured timidly.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Cecilia cocked her head and gave him a blank stare.

“Ah, my mistake. I suppose you’re just really good friends...” Roland scratched

his chin. “Seeing the pen just reminded me of this custom where a man gives his lady something of his own to wear to keep pests away.”

“Pests?”

“Other suitors.”

“...Oh.”

Blood rushed to her face. Now that she finally understood why Oscar had given her this pen, she felt as if it were burning a hole in her pocket.

That’s what he meant by giving it to me “just in case”—it’s because Roland’s a guy!

Roland widened his eyes as Cecilia blushed.

“So you two really are...”

“N-no! I mean, in a way... But no!”

She *was* engaged to Oscar, so they kind of were a couple, but that didn’t apply to her Cecil persona. Besides, engaged or not, she didn’t *feel* like Oscar’s girlfriend.

“Ah. I suppose the correct thing to say is that you’re important to him.”

Roland had interpreted Cecilia’s panicked reaction in the most wholesome manner possible. Unlike Lean, his mind wasn’t permanently in the gutter.

Cecilia decided to leave it at that, and they resumed their tour without bringing the pen up again.

“I wish we had more time so I could show you the cliffs, too. They’re a bit farther that way.”

“Why cliffs?”

“Well, our cities can be quite pretty, but the natural scenery in Nortracha is also breathtaking! We consider the views on fjords, carved into the land by glacial rivers, to be our national treasure! You really should see for yourself!”

“That does sound amazing.”

“Oh, and farther north you can see the aurora!”

“The aurora...?”

That word did ring a bell. She remembered watching a TV program about the aurora borealis, the northern lights. It was a natural phenomenon that occurred in high-latitude regions, where streaks of light appeared in the sky. Most people who'd heard of it would want to witness it at least once in their lifetime.

Cecilia fell silent, lost in thought. Roland hurried with an explanation.

“Sorry, I shouldn't have assumed that you would know about it. Believe it or not, the aurora is like a curtain of light appearing in the night sky. It's a natural phenomenon, but people thought it was the gods trying to communicate something to them in the past.”

“I can totally see why. It's very mystical, isn't it?”

“Ah, so you did know about it?”

“Um, I've only seen a picture of it in a book...”

She quickly made up a lie, since she couldn't tell him she knew of it from her past life. Roland scratched his cheek.

“So that's how you heard of it!”

He smiled at her pleasantly.

“How about you, Roland? Have you seen an aurora?”

“I wouldn't say I've seen a great variety, but yes, I've seen them quite a few times. I have less responsibilities than my brothers, so I've traveled to the north quite frequently.” Roland half-closed his eyes, remembering the sights he'd seen there. “The northern lights really are spectacular. I've only seen green ones, but sometimes you can see blue, purple, or even red aurorae.”

“Wow, that sounds fantastic!”

“It is!”

Roland spoke about his country with love and passion, which made Cecilia wish she had the time to see the fjords with him and go looking for aurorae. His eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm.

“That reminds me,” he said, his face lighting up even more. “I once went to

see the aurora together with Janis!”

“Oh, really?”

“He said he wanted to see it, so I took him north. It was back when his mother was still well. He was a gentle, happy person then,” Roland said wistfully. He stared up at the sky. “We weren’t lucky that time, so we didn’t get to catch one, but as we were watching the starry sky, we made a promise to each other. That we’d see an aurora together one day. It’s a memory I treasure, you know? Though in the end, we never got to go there again, so the promise remains unfulfilled.”

His smile took on a twinge of sadness. He had told Cecilia and Oscar that he wanted to find his brother, but something in his tone made her think that he’d half-given up hope.

She decided to ask him outright about something that had been on her mind.

“Roland, why is Janis so special to you? What about your other brothers, the ones who died? Did you not like them very much?”

“Well... Only Janis treated me like family.”

“Wait, why didn’t the others?”

“I mentioned this before, but I’m a half-orphan. My father hasn’t really been a parent to me, since he’s the king. And it would be an understatement to say I wasn’t close with my two oldest half-brothers. They were like strangers to me. But Janis was different. He was the one who encouraged me not to stay shut in my room all day and enjoy life, since we didn’t have to worry about succession.” Roland dropped his gaze. “I understand a little how Chloe must have felt back then. Janis used to speak of himself so self-deprecatingly. ‘The failed third prince,’ ‘the third-born disappointment,’ he used to call himself.”

“Why would he do that...?”

“I think it was because he’s so smart. He didn’t want to be involved in the rivalry for the crown. Maybe he wanted to keep his mother safe from becoming a target for Pascal and Michael’s mother. But it was hard hearing him debase himself like that.”

Cecilia noticed that Roland had clenched his hands into fists. They were shaking a little.

“Whenever he played the fool, I wanted to shout that it was only an act. I didn’t want anyone saying a bad thing about Janis, including himself. I think it was really getting to his mother, much more than to me. Not to say I condone what she did.”

Roland laughed dryly. A moment later, he was smiling serenely again, but Cecilia could tell he was just putting on a brave face. His eyes still expressed deep sorrow. She instinctively clutched his hand and smiled at him.

“We’ll find Janis. I’ll do what I can to help!”

She’d said that without thinking, driven by pity for Roland. If she and Oscar really did manage to track down Janis, there was little chance he’d be allowed to return to his country. They couldn’t just let him go free after all he’d done, but Roland trusted his brother so completely that she couldn’t tell him what their true mission was, or about the crimes Janis was guilty of. But she couldn’t have just said nothing when Roland looked so sad. Technically, she wasn’t lying, and her earnest reassurance comforted him. He genuinely beamed at her.

“Thank you, that means so much to me!” He blushed adorably and smiled with his teeth. “Sorry for getting so sappy. I’d better get back to being your city guide for today!”

“Thanks!”

They exchanged smiles and started walking again, with more spring in their step.



It was the last day of Cecilia’s and Oscar’s stay in Nortracha. The coach which would take them back to Prosper Kingdom picked them up in the morning, so they didn’t really have time for much else besides packing up and making sure they didn’t leave anything behind.

Cecilia was gazing out the window, which swayed gently as the coach took them out of the city. The scenery changed from town houses to pasture, and

her mood turned slightly melancholic.

“And just like that, our trip is over.”

“The days went by quickly.”

“So quickly!”

“I was anxious about coming here, but I had a good time in the end.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll treasure these memories of ours forever!”

It felt bizarre to Cecilia. She was talking to Oscar alone, but was getting double the replies. The superfluous answers came in an almost childlike voice that she’d heard a lot in the past few days.

“Is something wrong, Cecil?”

She knew the owner of that voice, of course. He was sitting right next to her, smiling from ear to ear, swinging his legs happily. Cecilia had been doing her best to ignore him, unwilling to accept the reality, but she could no longer pretend he wasn’t there. She finally turned her head to face him.

“Why are you here with us?”

“Huh?”

The undeniably real owner of the third voice titled his head in confusion. It was none other than Roland Salinger. He and Cecilia stared at one another, both completely baffled.

“What do you mean, why am I here?”

“You do know this coach is headed to Prosper Kingdom, right?”

“Yes, of course I know that!” he replied without missing a beat. He clasped his hands in front of his chest. “When you said that you’d help me find my brother yesterday, didn’t you mean to invite me to come with you?”

“I um... How to put it...?”

Oscar was giving her the stink eye. She knew what he was thinking—that she’d brought this upon herself by acting recklessly as usual.

Roland didn't notice the looks his companions exchanged. He raised his fist, all enthusiasm.

"My brother was last spotted in Prosper Kingdom, so it makes sense to start our search there!"

"Is the king okay with you leaving the country, Roland?"

"Don't worry, I'm acting with his permission! 'Family sins ought to be redeemed by family,' he said to me."

So the king had sent his younger son to track down the troublemaker prince without informing Roland what his brother was guilty of... It could be a gesture of goodwill on the ruler of Nortracha's part, but he was throwing his poor son into a mess he wasn't prepared for.

"Besides, I've always wanted to visit the Kingdom of Prosper to expand my horizons!" Roland added cheerfully.

Neither Oscar nor Cecilia could bring themselves to object to Roland coming with them. They couldn't ask him to get off the coach at that point anyway, since they were quite far from the city, with nothing but fields as far as the eye could see.

"Thank you for having me, Oscar and Cecil!"

They had never seen him happier.

CHAPTER 3 Roland Salinger

“Take him back to where you got him from.”

Gilbert spoke quietly, although he was seething with anger.

“He’s not a stray cat or puppy...”

Cecilia couldn’t bear to meet his eyes.

Oscar was standing by the door, crossing his arms and wearing a sour look on his face. They could hear Jade’s animated voice outside.

They were in the unused classroom in the old schoolhouse on the Vleugel Academy campus, where Lean often hung out.

Cecilia and Oscar had only returned from Nortracha the night before. Despite the late hour of their arrival, Lean and Gilbert went to greet them as soon as they found out the coach had returned. But when they saw three people exit the coach instead of the two they were expecting, Gilbert had immediately asked for an explanation.

“Um... *This here is Roland Salinger, the fourth-born prince of Nortracha,*” Cecilia had replied candidly. Her shocked friends called an emergency meeting to talk about this new situation.

“I wish you’d brought back a cat or puppy. Why did you have to drag a *prince* back with you?”

“I didn’t! He came of his own volition, without my asking.”

“Whether he came of his own accord or not is beside the point. And are you sure he didn’t join in on your return trip because you were careless and said something that made him think he could tag along?”

Gilbert’s guess was so uncannily accurate that Cecilia stared at him wide-eyed in surprise.

“Clairvoyance is real...,” she muttered to herself.

“What was that?”

“N-nothing!”

She shrunk back, intimidated by her brother’s piercing glare.

“Why do you always come back with some guy in tow...?”

Gilbert sighed.

While they were having their emergency meeting, Jade was showing Roland around the campus. Apart from Gilbert and Lean, nobody else had been told that he was a prince. His father had instructed them to introduce him as an exchange student from Nortracha and avoid any other details.

“You didn’t even tell me you were going to Nortracha in the first place. Can you imagine how anxious I was when Lean told me where you’d gone?”

“I’m sorry I made you worry.”

“You’re always doing this to me...”

“Don’t be so harsh on her. She didn’t tell you out of consideration for you.” Oscar, who’d been just listening quietly until then, spoke up in her defense.

Gilbert darted his eyes from Cecilia to Oscar.

“I guessed as much. She probably assumed I’d go straight to the king to voice my objection to this escapade if she told me, which would negatively affect my social standing.”

“Wow, Gil! You’re incredible!”

Cecilia was amazed—it seemed like he really could read her mind.

“Anyway, I understand why you kept the trip secret from me, but that doesn’t change the fact it’s caused me great distress! I’m also mad at you specifically, Oscar, for going on the trip without anyone else to chaperone you!”

“But... You can’t blame me for that. I didn’t know that Cecil would be coming along until the moment I got on the coach.”

“Tell me nothing happened between the two of you?”

“O-of course nothing happened...”

Oscar blushed faintly. He was probably remembering that little incident on the coach.

Gilbert frowned so deeply at Oscar's reaction that no less than three creases appeared on his forehead. That was only for a moment, though. After a sigh, the number of lines on his forehead reduced to one.

"Well, I'll forgive you this time around on account of the king having expressly asked you to do this. If you were being spontaneous as usual, I'd have at least an hour-long lecture in store for you."

"Thanks, Gil!"

Cecilia raised her head, relieved that "briefing about the new situation"—which was, in fact, just her brother venting at her—was over.

"Still, it was a blunder on your part to bring back the Nortrachan prince. What if he suffers an injury, or worse, loses his life while in our kingdom? It would be a serious international incident."

"You're right, of course. Sorry."

Roland had come along with them because Cecilia said something careless, so she knew it was her fault.

"It's easy to say sorry."

Though Gilbert was still miffed, he simply sighed and let it go.

His attitude dampened Cecilia's mood a bit. He crouched down beside her chair and looked up at her.

"Regardless, I'm relieved you returned safe and sound. You're not hurt, are you?"

"No, I'm perfectly fine!"

"I'm glad to hear it."

Cecilia could see genuine relief on his face, and she felt a twinge of regret for going off to another country and making him anxious.

He stroked her cheek, looking into her eyes as if seeking reassurance that she really was fine. Then he stood up and turned to Oscar.

“Rest assured, I’ll voice my various objections to you later on. Now back to Roland. I’ve heard from Cecilia that he’s shared some information about Janis with you. Can you tell me the details?”

That took priority. Roland’s unexpected arrival had rocked the boat, but the information about Janis he had provided was more important than that. Oscar briefed Gilbert about everything—why they had been invited to Nortracha, Roland’s relationship with his older brother, the incidents caused by Janis’ mother Chloe, and Roland’s fears that Janis might kill himself.

“Him, take his own life? I can see how a normal person might be driven to that if they were in his shoes, but this is Janis we’re talking about.”

“Yes, I’m also skeptical of that.”

“But improbable as it is, we can’t dismiss the possibility. I couldn’t care less about stopping Janis from committing suicide, but the how and where could make his death a thorn in our side.”

As he explained to Cecilia when talking about Roland, few things would harm foreign relations as much as a visiting foreign prince suffering injury or death. It could conceivably lead to war.

“We have to find him by any means necessary.”

“A great many people have been scouring the country looking for him to no avail. I doubt we can do any better...” Gilbert paused. “Hmm. Chloe, Janis’ mother... Wasn’t she from Prosper?”

“Was she?”

Oscar widened his eyes in surprise.

“If I’m not mistaken, she’s a distant relative of my biological family, the Coulsons. I remember Mrs. Coulson bragging a few times about having a relative who stole the heart of a foreign king and went to live with him.”

“Ah, I should’ve studied the genealogy of Nortracha royals more closely.”

“Well, Chloe didn’t go on to become the king’s wife, only a concubine. Still, Mrs. Coulson insisted it was as much an honor.”

You could tell by the way Gilbert was referring to his biological mother that

his relationship with her was rather frigid, and his tone was outright hostile.

“Taking Chloe’s origin into consideration, I daresay that Janis wasn’t the source of her madness.”

“Sorry, I’m not following. Based on what Roland told us, it was the perceived injustices against her son which motivated her crimes.”

“I should’ve been clearer. I meant that she might’ve been possessed by an Obstruction.”

Cecilia gasped, wide-eyed.

“You said her shift in personality was sudden and coincided with Janis’ seventeenth birthday. Perhaps that was when his power first manifested.” Gilbert laid out his theory. “Well, I won’t go as far as to say he intentionally caused his mother’s possession. It could’ve been an accident. We can only guess.”



The following day...

“My name is Roland, and I’m an exchange student from Nortracha! My major is folklore, and this kingdom’s mythology is of particular interest to me! I’m so happy to have this opportunity to meet you all and study at Vleugel Academy!”

Roland, dressed in the very same uniform as Cecilia, enthusiastically introduced himself to other students.

He was in the canteen, together with her and her usual group of friends—Lean, Huey, and Lean’s knights sans Mordred.

Roland had already met Jade earlier, when he was being shown around campus. It was Gilbert’s idea to introduce him to the rest of the group, so that if something happened, he’d have people to lend him a hand. The fact that he was a prince was kept secret from them, though.

Cecilia’s friends were surprised at the unexpected arrival of an exchange student from another country, but they were a friendly bunch and readily accepted him. They animatedly offered to introduce him to the local sights and

help him get his bearings.

“I already showed him all there is to see at the campus!”

Jade, bursting with pride, raised his hand.

“Then we should take him to the city next. What sort of places would interest you, Roland?”

Dante nonchalantly wrapped his arm around Roland’s neck, gazing into his eyes. The foreign prince didn’t seem the least put off by Dante’s lack of respect for personal space.

“Hmm, let me think...” He touched his chin, pondering the question. Then his face lit up. “Oh, I know! Could you take me to the biggest library in the city?”

An hour later, they went to the library, which wasn’t that far from the campus.

“Wow! This is amazing! What a wonderful place!”

The long, wide hallways of the library were tunnel-like in nature, but the building sported plenty of natural light thanks to its high ceilings. The main walls arched toward the ceiling in a concentric circular pattern, and the halls of the main floor were so long they seemed to stretch on forever. It was, in a word, vast.

The walls were lined with shelf after shelf of books, reaching all the way up to the ceiling of the two-story central atrium. Texts with faded, timeworn covers sat next to crisp, recent ones in the stacks. It was like a species of animals spanning every generation living together.

“How many books are in the collection?”

“Around two hundred thousand.”

Gilbert knew the answer, being a frequent user of the library.

“Two! Hundred! Thousand!”

Roland’s eyes lit up even more than usual. Jade stared at him curiously.

“You seem really happy to see so many books. Are they, like, rare in Nortracha, or something?”

“Not quite, but the price of paper is higher than it is here, so they’re quite expensive, and we don’t get a huge variety.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that!”

“We have lots of forests to provide the raw materials, but I guess our paper-making technology is behind yours, which drives up costs.”

As Roland and Jade chatted among themselves, Dante stood behind them forlornly.

“*Pfft.* Books...”

“You don’t seem to be having a good time,” Oscar commented.

Dante pouted.

“I don’t like books, that’s why. Reading makes me sleepy, and I care more about reality than made-up stories.”

“Hmm, I should’ve expected as much, I suppose.”

“We would have been better off going somewhere more fun. Roland seems like a well-reared boy from a respectable family, so he’s got to be sheltered. It’d be fun to expose him to the gritty real world and see his reaction!”

“You know, Dante, we aren’t your puppets to toy with.”

“What? You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“You can be so exhausting to deal with,” Oscar grumbled.

Roland must have overheard their conversation. He turned around and looked at Dante with naive innocence in his eyes.

“Where did you want us to go, Dante? What sort of places could be more fun than here?”

“Oh, I got you interested, did I?”

“Very much so! Please tell me what you had in mind!”

Roland placed his hand on his chest for emphasis. He wouldn’t have suspected Dante of mischievous intentions.

“Just ignore him, Roland...”

“But he asked! That’s why I’ve thought up no less than three exciting places to go.”

“Please tell me about them!”

“In the first place, you can clear out your wallet fast while having a great time. In the second, you get to enjoy the company of many pretty girls. And in the third, you can feel really good without the slightest bit of effort. They’re all sort of borderline illegal, but don’t worry! I can teach you how to nimbly walk the tightrope between what’s above-and belowboard.”

“What a sleaze.”

“You really are sleazy, Dante.”

“Yup, a sleaze through and through.”

Dante wasn’t the least hurt by Gilbert, Oscar, and Jade calling him names.

“Aw, guys, you’re making me blush,” he said, grinning.

Roland was either childishly trusting, or he’d incorrectly assumed that Dante only had the best of intentions for his friends.

“Hmm, I wouldn’t know which location to pick. They all sound intriguing. Maybe we should start with the one where you clear out your wallet—”

“Dante was only fooling around. Forget about what he said.”

“Roland, we found the folklore section.”

It was the twins, Eins and Zwei, who successfully steered Roland away from Dante.

“Really?! Thank you kindly for finding those books for me!”

Roland beamed at them.

Cecilia smiled to herself, watching the interactions between the others. She was strolling through the library with Lean.

“They look like they’re having fun.”

“They sure do. Everyone in our little group is really nice, despite appearances, so they’re doing their best to make Roland feel welcome, regardless of what his

secrets might be.”

“Wait, why would anyone think he has secrets?”

“Because he showed up out of the blue a day after you got back from Nortracha? It doesn’t take much brains to figure out he came with you, but you’re acting like he didn’t, so yeah, he definitely has secrets.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of it... Ha-ha...”

Cecilia felt bad about not telling her friends about Roland, but at the same time, she was greatly relieved that they were going out of their way to be nice to him.

She watched Eins and Zwei lead Roland to a bookshelf. He jumped excitedly when he saw it and climbed a tall ladder to reach a tome he spotted on a high shelf. Huey rushed to hold the ladder for him, while Gilbert snapped about something. Cecilia guessed he was telling Roland off for not being careful.

“Maybe I owe it to Eins and Zwei to tell them?”

“Tell them what?”

“About Roland’s lineage. His true identity.”

She didn’t have decisive evidence, but Cecilia was pretty sure Janis was behind the death of the Machias twins’ mother. And Roland was Janis’ brother. It seemed wrong of her to let Eins and Zwei develop a friendship with him while being in the dark about his connection to their mother’s indirect killer.

“Don’t tell them,” Lean objected in a no-nonsense tone. “It wouldn’t benefit anyone.”

“But it’s not about that...”

“Sometimes, the right thing to do is to keep stuff to yourself. Roland wasn’t involved in Janis’ crimes, right? So why make Eins and Zwei prejudiced against him? Let them become friends if they get along.”

“That makes sense...”

Still, it bugged her. Would anyone want to be friends with a relative of a killer who murdered someone they cared about? It was too horrible for her to even

try to imagine how she'd feel in a similar situation, but her gut feeling was that she wouldn't want anything to do with the perpetrator's family.

What Lean said was logical, as Roland was blameless. But Cecilia couldn't shake the feeling that she ought to keep Eins and Zwei away from Roland, because their friendship would only end in hurt feelings.

"Don't tell those two anything, but keep an eye on how the situation develops. If they find out, let them blame you."

"Why me?"

"For not having told them. Let them direct their anger at you. Maybe even let each twin punch you in the face to unload those negative emotions."

"Easy for you to say..."

"Trust me, it would be for the best. You wouldn't be doing anyone a favor by nipping the possibility of them becoming friends in the bud. In fact, I think that's the wrong thing to do."

Even though Cecilia felt there was no clear-cut way of handling the truth in this situation, she was impressed by Lean's ability to make a decision and stick to it.

"Your thinking's so mature, Lean!"

"I'm sure it seems that way, Miss Never Grows Up."

"Hey, that's mean!"

"It is not. Being childlike is a positive quality, no?" Lean gave Cecilia a softer look. "You can mentally mature anytime. But once you do, there's no regaining your innocence. So my advice is, never grow up."

Cecilia blinked a few times.

"Yup. You sound like a real old-timer."

She snickered at her friend.

The group spread out, and everyone found something to occupy themselves with. They agreed to only spend an hour in the library, though, since there were other places they wanted to show Roland.

Finding the huge number of texts around him too suffocating, Dante went outside, dragging Huey along with him for company. Lean felt her muses awaken, produced a pen and paper from seemingly out of nowhere, and went over to sit at a desk to do some writing. Oscar was helping Roland find the books he was interested in. Eins and Zwei used the time to study, and Jade helped explain things they were struggling with.

Left to her own devices, Cecilia set about finding a certain text.

I don't really get the cataloging system at this library...

She'd been to the Vleugel Academy library many times, but it was her first time in the big city library. Not only did this one have many more volumes, but they were also organized in some Byzantine way she couldn't wrap her head around. It wasn't by author or by title, so it had to be by category, and she had no idea what category the book she wanted would fall into. Considering that they were stacked on shelves all the way from the floor to the ceiling, an hour didn't seem long enough for her to locate her quarry.

Let's see... We've got books about the history of cooking over here, so it might be nearby?

Cecilia was walking, looking up at the topmost shelves...until she crashed into someone's back.

"Wh-whoa!"

The person turned, hitting Cecilia's shoulder with their elbow. She lost her balance.

"Hey, watch out!"

"Careful!"

Just as she started falling backward, the individual she'd bumped into grabbed her by the arm, saving her from smashing her head against the floor and pulling her back up onto her feet.

"You okay?"

"Oh, it's you..."

It was only then that she noticed it was Gilbert she'd walked into. He placed

his hands on her shoulders to help her steady herself.

“Are you hurt? I didn’t pull your arm too hard, did I?”

“No, no. I’m fine.”

Gilbert sighed with relief.

“What were you doing here, Gil?”

“Looking for a book. You?”

“Same, but I’m not having much luck.”

Cecilia scratched her head, feeling a bit silly. Gilbert followed her gaze to the top shelf.

“What are you looking for? I’m somewhat familiar with this library. Is it something from the cookbook section over there?”

“Yes, I’m looking for a text with recipes for desserts!” Cecilia replied resolutely.

He turned back toward her. His eyes betrayed surprise at first, but he quickly squinted as he considered her warily.

“What do you need that for? Don’t tell me you want to bake something.”

“But I do! I’d like to make something for Roland, so he can have some sweet memories of his stay here. I haven’t been able to find the right kind of cookbook so far, though.”

Gilbert stared at her.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

He did look like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he gave up.

“Over there.” He turned to show her. “The dessert recipe cookbooks should be on that shelf... Do you know what you want to make?”

“I was thinking about *financier*! Or *canelé* would be good, too.”

“Why don’t you start with something simple, like cookies?”

“Cookies? Hmm...”

Both *financier* and *canelé* seemed like they might be difficult to make, but if she was going to bake something, she wanted a real challenge. A reckless thirst for cooking adventures had awoken in her.

“Even I know how to make cookies. We could bake them together.”

“That’s really nice of you to offer, but I want to do this all by myself.”

“Can’t you make an exception this once? Roland’s not the type to be offended by being served an unrecognizable dessert, but it wouldn’t be a good experience for him. If we bake together, we’ll have a better chance of success.”

“Hmm, I guess so! I can make him something on my own on some other occasion.”

“Exactly.”

Cecilia was completely oblivious to how desperate Gilbert had been to steer her away from cooking by herself.

“Okay, let’s borrow a book about baking cookies then! Where would it be?”

“Here, I think.”

Gilbert pointed, extending his arm behind Cecilia toward another bookshelf. He stood on his toes and reached with his other hand for the texts, putting Cecilia between the shelf and his chest. She looked up at him, and her heart beat a little faster.

“Got it for you... Is there something on my face?”

He noticed her staring at him, transfixed.

“No, um... How to put it? I’m just amazed at how big you’ve gotten, Gil.”

“You only noticed it now?”

“I didn’t think about it earlier, but you used to be shorter than me! I remember when you were only this tall!” She held her hand just above her knees.

He snorted.

“You weren’t much taller than that then, either!”

“Hmm, maybe not.” She looked down with a bit of a pout. “I miss those days.”

He’d eventually overshot her, and she’d wound up left behind. When they were both kids, she was a step above him, both when it came to physical and mental development. But now he was so much taller. He was an adult.

“I’m glad I’ve grown bigger than you. I wouldn’t be able to protect you well if I’d stayed weak and scrawny.”

“But I want to be able to protect you!”

“Why do you get so competitive about it?”

He burst out laughing. She puffed out her cheeks, upset that he wasn’t taking her seriously. Then he looked at her with narrowed eyes and held out the book he’d taken off the shelf for her.

“Here.”

“Thanks...”

She was still sulking, upset that he’d gotten the last word.

“So are you free this weekend?”

“Yeah, should be! I haven’t made any plans.”

“Would you like to go on a date?”

“Is there somewhere you want to take me? Ah, right! You want to go shopping for cookie ingredients!”

“We can do that, too, but that’s not what I had in mind. I just thought it’d be nice to go out together. It’s been a while.”

“Um, not that I don’t want to go, but...”

She was intentionally vague, caught off guard by his sudden desire to hang out with her again. Gilbert lost his patience.

“Pencil me into your schedule then,” he said decisively.

“But...”

“Gil! Can you help us with something over here?!” Jade called loudly, ignoring

the library's rules.

He glanced over at Jade for a second before turning back to Cecilia.

"They need me."

"Go, go."

She cocked her head, watching him walk away.

Maybe deep down I missed his attention...?

"I see Gilbert's really making moves on you now. He wasn't even deterred by my presence."

"Huh? Lean?"

Lean poked her head out from between bookcases. She was carrying a few tomes, maybe for use as reference for her own writing.

"I was also surprised to hear you agree so easily. I mean, I thought you'd give in eventually, but you didn't even put up much of a fight."

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

"The date, what else?"

"What date?"

"With Gilbert! He just asked you out and you agreed."

"Huh...?"

Cecilia tilted her head to the side, reviewing her earlier conversation with him in her head.

"Would you like to go on a date?"

"Don't tell me he meant it in the romantic sense...?"

"It definitely seemed that way to me."

Cecilia froze for a couple seconds.

"Wh-what do I do now?!" she exclaimed in a panic, clutching Lean's shoulders, her face crimson.

"You agreed to go, so you go? Or do you want to tell him now that you've

changed your mind?”

“I... I can't do that now...”

It'd be rude to turn him down now. She should've said no when they were talking earlier, but it didn't cross her mind that he was asking her out on a romantic date rather than a platonic date.

Lean wasn't much consolation to her overwhelmed friend.

“Think of it as a new experience! Good luck with your date!”



Hey Seeree, what do I do on a date?

Cecilia desperately wished she had a voice-controlled personal assistant she could ask for instructions, but there were no such things in this world. Since she'd inadvertently agreed to the date, she resigned herself to going.

It was the morning of the day she was to go out with Gilbert, and Cecilia was staring indecisively at clothes laid out on her bed.

He'd told her when and where to meet him earlier. She had until noon to get ready, but she couldn't put it off much longer.

“What do people wear on dates...?”

To further complicate things, she didn't even know if Gilbert was expecting her to turn up dressed as a boy or girl. She should probably dress up for the occasion, but what would people think seeing two guys in their finery hanging out together on the town? She didn't want to cause Gilbert trouble by sparking rumors that he preferred guys. He was likely expecting her to meet him as Cecilia, not Cecil.

“But then I'd have to leave this room looking like a girl! I absolutely can't do that!”

It was a boys' dorm. If anyone saw a girl coming out of one of the rooms there, well, it would cause quite a stir.

So that ruled out her going on the date in women's clothing. Cecilia picked up

the dresses her parents had sent her and put them back in the closet, so that they wouldn't distract her. Then she returned to the bedside to consider the remaining options, her arms crossed.

“Choosing the right outfit for Cecil isn't easy, either...”

Which one would look best? Which one was appropriate for a date? Putting together an outfit for a romantic rendezvous was a new challenge for her—she'd also never done that in her past life.

“Uh... Can't I just go wearing my school uniform...? No, I guess that wouldn't be acceptable.”

Just as she said that, someone knocked on her door.

“Come in!”

An unusual guest poked his head in—Zwei.

“Hey, what's up, Zwei?”

“Lean wants to see you.”

“Now?”

“Yeah, she said it's urgent.”

Cecilia blinked in surprise.



“Let's go on a date.”

He had a feeling she wouldn't refuse. It had been an underhanded invitation; he was sure Cecilia would accept, not because she wanted to go on a date with him, but because she wouldn't think of it as anything more than a friendly outing together.

Yet that also meant he didn't have high hopes for their meetup. She would accept, but she'd remain oblivious to his romantic intentions, and it would be just the two of them hanging out as friends, as usual. That was what he thought, anyway.

On the agreed day, Gilbert headed toward the clock tower where they were

to meet up. Since he had no expectations of this being a real date, he assumed that he wouldn't be disappointed by how things played out. But when he saw Cecilia there waiting for him, he realized with shock that nothing could have prepared him for this.

"Gil! There you are!"

The high-spirited voice was familiar. So were the blue eyes, the dazzling sunny smile, and the frantically energetic aura which didn't really befit a lady of noble birth. But the dark brown hair was not, which puzzled him. But there was something else which puzzled him even more.

"Why are you dressed like a girl?"

"Heh-heh... I got this from Lean!"

She was totally adorable, and she had a shy smile on her face. It was unusual to see her not dressed as a guy. She was wearing a long, dark brown wig and a comfortable-looking frilly dress in sky blue. She even had girly accessories and shoes. The wig must have been there to prevent people from recognizing her.

Cecilia spun around with joy.

"It's cute, right? Lean made it all by herself! I say this a lot, but she's so talented!"

She was elated to be going out in a girly outfit for a change. Gilbert had asked why she'd showed up on their date presenting as a girl instead of a guy, but it was as if she never heard his question.

I guess it was just what she happened to feel like, he reasoned. He'd known her for a very long time, but every now and then, she'd confound him doing something random like this.

Cecilia was looking at him expectantly, so he turned his attention to the dress. Back when Lean had made him and Oscar put on dresses, it occurred to him that her designs were unlike anything he'd seen before. He couldn't tell whether that was down to her modeling them on what she knew from her past life, or if they were her entirely original creations. In any case, the dresses she made for Cecilia always highlighted her cuteness and innocence.

“Yes, it really suits you. Lean matched the color of the dress to your eyes.”

“Oh, really? She didn’t tell me if that was intentional!”

“You look very pretty in this.”

He wanted to say “cute” but stopped himself, guessing Cecilia would take issue with that on the grounds that it was something you said to a little girl. So he went with his second thought.



Cecilia beamed at him.

“Thanks!” she responded, her voice filled with emotion.

She was just so cute.

“When she asked me to come over in the morning, I had no idea what it was about at first! She insisted that I absolutely had to dress up for the date and made me wear this.”

“Huh?”

As if not realizing the importance of what she’d just said, Cecilia animatedly carried on talking about the morning’s events, including how hard it was for her to sneak out of the boys’ dorm dressed like that.

“So, to sum it up, it was really tricky!”

“You dressed up because it’s a ‘date,’ date?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s why I... Oh...”

Only then did it dawn on Cecilia that she had admitted it. Her cheeks immediately turned crimson, and she darted her eyes nervously this way and that. She was so caught up in the novelty of wearing a cute dress that she’d forgotten why she was wearing it in the first place.

There, she said it...

The fact that Cecilia came to see him knowing it was a romantic date made him happier than the fact she’d dressed up for him.

Cecilia mumbled quietly, as if she was going to come up with some excuse, before she ultimately gave in and sighed. She looked up at Gilbert, blushing shyly.

“You’re not going to tease me about it, right?”

“No. I’m happy you think of it this way.”

Cecilia pouted like she wasn’t fond of his answer, but she didn’t appear angry.

“You’re the more grown-up of us two!”

He was baffled by her sulkiness.

“Well, shall we go?”

Gilbert offered her his arm, sure she'd reject it. Cecilia blinked.

“Okay.”

She nonchalantly wrapped her arm around his. Gilbert wasn't prepared for this. He felt his cheeks start to burn. She peered at him, cocking her head.

“Something the matter? Your face is really red, you know.”



“Is there anywhere you'd like to go?” Gilbert asked after they'd walked for a while.

Cecilia touched her index finger to her chin.

“Hmm, I can't think of anything. You really didn't have anywhere in mind?”

“No. My goal was to go out on a date with you. I didn't think further than that. My wish has already been fulfilled.”

“I see...”

“But if you're okay with me deciding on a location, there are a few nice spots for a date that I know of,” Gilbert offered, glancing at Cecilia questioningly.

She stopped walking. It finally hit her that this really was a date. Hanging out with Gilbert wasn't anything unusual for her. Back home, they would go out together every now and again, or keep the other company on errands. But Gilbert framing this as a date made all the difference. She felt her heart rate escalate.

“Oscar already has an advantage over me. I've got to up my game.”

“How does he have an advantage...?”

“Your trip together? Nothing could've prepared me for that.”

“Ah, r-right...”

Cecilia dropped her gaze apologetically, hearing a note of accusation in his voice. Besides making him worry a bit, she hadn't wronged him in any way by

going on that trip, so she didn't have anything to apologize for. Yet guilt still teased at her for some reason.

"Did you enjoy your stay in Nortracha?"

"Huh?"

She looked up, surprised at Gilbert's unexpectedly soft tone. Usually, he'd be cranky for quite a while, but today he seemed to be in a good mood. But then, as though he didn't want to seem out of character, he smirked and added:

"You haven't told me about your trip yet! You traveled so far. I hope you had some fun, at least?"

"I did, it was great!"

He narrowed his eyes and smiled.

They stepped into a café, ordered a late lunch, and ate it chatting casually. Cecilia shared highlights of her trip with Gilbert, while he updated her on everything that had happened on campus while she was away.

With the Prince of Vleugel Academy gone, things had been fairly quiet; the female students especially seemed to be in low spirits. Mystified by the low mood among the student body, the teachers set up a dedicated counselor at the academy. Silly as this was, Cecilia couldn't laugh at it. She felt bad that her absence had so negatively affected campus.

Then she asked Gilbert what he'd been doing while she was gone. It basically boiled down to him fretting over her, which only amplified her guilt. That being said, it also made her realize how cherished she was, which took the edge off.

Apparently, Jade been really jealous of her getting to travel to Nortracha. Dante was acting more restless than usual, worried about Oscar. It warmed Cecilia's heart to know that her friends had accepted Gilbert into their circle and were comfortable enough with him not to hide their emotions.

They spent roughly an hour at the café, after which they went to a general store and a chocolatier that Cecilia wanted to check out. Their last stop was a florist, where she purchased a bouquet for her room.

Cecilia smiled warmly as they walked back, the box of chocolates she'd

bought as a gift for Lean in her hands.

“Brings back memories from home, doesn’t it?”

“Hmm?”

“We used to hang out around town together like this a lot!”

Sher closed her eyes for a moment, reliving the past.

Since recovering her memories of her prior life, Cecilia had lived as a recluse, so she didn’t have any opportunities to make friends. As a rule of thumb, if she was going out, she’d be going with Gilbert. It wasn’t always by choice, though—even when she wanted to go to town alone, her brother or her parents would insist on that he go with her.

“Oh, Gil! Do you remember when that stray dog attacked you when we were little?”

“Yes, I remember that.”

His face sunk a little at the recollection. It happened when Cecilia was seven, and he six. They’d been taking a coach to a newly opened bakery her dad had found out about. At the time, Cecilia was very proactive about making Gilbert spend more time with the family, so she invited him along on the outing. But he hadn’t really wanted to go.

“Mom and Dad went on ahead, and then that dog attacked us! Thank goodness Hans was with us!”

The offending canine had sneaked past their guards and leaped at the bag of baked goods Gilbert was carrying.

“It was you who protected me then.”

“I guess? It didn’t feel like I did much.”

All she did was snatch the bag from Gilbert and throw it to the dog. It was obviously after the bread, and she just wanted to stop it from biting Gilbert.

Clutching the box of chocolates tighter, Cecilia exhaled loudly through her mouth, the emotions of that day coming back to her.

“You are right that I thought of myself as your protector in those days! When

did our roles switch?”

“Why does it matter to you so much? Moaning about it at every opportunity isn’t going to change anything.”

“Easy for you to say, Gil. You don’t understand the feeling of loss I’m experiencing!”

Cecilia pouted at him. Suddenly, she remembered her conversation with Oscar on their way to Nortracha.

“So that makes you just as overprotective of Gilbert as he is of you.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because preserving his social standing is more important to you than your own safety.”

“Oh, hmm... That’s one way of looking at it, I guess? I do want to keep Gil safe, that’s true! But it always works out the other way around, with him protecting me...”

That was it, really. She’d had a strong desire to protect Gilbert ever since she got to know him as a forlorn character in that video game. When she first met him in this life, he was a pitiful little boy. Right from the outset, she felt it was up to her to look after him.

I don’t feel that way about Oscar, though.

It was the opposite with the prince—he made her feel reassured, safe in the knowledge she could always rely on him. She had been terribly nervous about the trip to Nortracha, but when she found that Oscar was going with her, her anxiety evaporated. Thanks to him, she could loosen up and enjoyed the trip. She wouldn’t have been nearly as relaxed had someone else been with her. Although her improved mood had the drawback of propelling her to act recklessly, like when she went to search Janis’ study disguised as a maid...

To think I was scared stiff right up to the departure!

It was hard to believe how much of a difference Oscar’s mere presence had made.

Cecilia’s thoughts drifted in another direction. She looked up at Gilbert,

remembering something.

“By the way, Gil, how did your morning mission go?”

Roland had given Gilbert a list of locations where he thought Janis might be hiding, and he'd been checking them out that morning. Though technically, it was the Sylvie employees doing the groundwork, since the spots were spread out over a vast area. He'd just gone to get reports from all of them.

“We didn't turn up anything. Not that I'm surprised. If he's in the area, it makes sense he would try to make himself impossible to find.”

“Wait, he's somewhere around here?!”

“It's just an assumption. Think about it—his goal is to bring our country to ruin. Where better to base your operations than the royal capital?”

Margrit possessed an Artifact facilitating fast travel, but staying in the capital would still be the most convenient option for Janis.

“Now, what's worrying is that even though the king has been throwing all his resources at finding Janis under the assumption he's in the city, we've been unable to find him.”

Which meant that Janis might be concealing his presence with the aid of another of Margrit's Artifacts. Cecilia didn't know what all of her powers were, nor did the Church people at the shrine. Margrit had been the sole Holy Maiden candidate at the time, so the Selection Ceremony was simplified for her. Subsequently, nobody had ever witnessed her using her Artifacts.

Where in the world is Janis hiding...?

And where was Margrit?

Lost in thought, Cecilia continued walking beside Gilbert until she saw him raise his eyebrows at something. She followed his gaze to a building on the edge of the town where a lot of people had lined up outside.

“A new store?”

There were no less than twenty people in the queue, and they were all around Cecilia's or Gilbert's age. Eighty percent of them were girls. They were chatting enthusiastically, their cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Want to go take a look?” Gilbert asked.

“Sure!”

They followed the line to a narrow single-story building squeezed in the gap between two larger ones. There was nothing to make its wooden door at the end of a small alley stand out, and by all appearances, it looked like an entrance to an apartment. Except for one unusual detail—a small purple cloth banner with a white hexagram drawn on it that was hanging next to the door. It presumably served as the store’s sign.

“Ah, so that’s where it is,” Gilbert said, as if that hexagram was all he needed to figure this place out. Cecilia looked at him in confusion.

“You know it?”

“I think this must be where that new fortune teller has set up shop. Their predictions are supposed to be very accurate.”

“Oh, I heard about them too!”

Cecilia remembered Lean telling her about it.

“You know the fortune teller? They’ve been the talk of the town lately. Why don’t we see them for advice?”

Lean had mentioned it the day she manipulated Oscar and Gilbert into posing for her in dresses. After she and Cecilia left the boys in an unused classroom and went back home, Lean started pressuring her to make up her mind about which of the guys she preferred. When Cecilia wavered on who to pick, Lean suggested asking the fortune teller. Cecilia had thought it would be insincere and refused.

“Do you want to go in?”

She didn’t reply immediately. While she wasn’t superstitious, she’d be lying to say she wasn’t curious. In her previous life, she would check the daily horoscope on TV every morning, and whenever a magazine she bought had a horoscope in it, she’d give it a read, too.

“But wouldn’t it be boring for you, Gil?”

“I’m not into this kind of thing myself, but I don’t mind going in if you’d like to

check it out. Why don't we try it out since we stumbled upon this place together?"

"Okay, in that case, let's join the line!"

She was a little interested in having her fortune read, and if this fortune teller lived up to their reputation, maybe they could even tell her where Janis was hiding. They'd exhausted all other options, so why not try luck this time? She wouldn't take what they told her as gospel, but it might point her in the right direction...maybe.

Cecilia and Gilbert joined the line, which was now much shorter. They waited for their turn as previous clients walked out, saying things like "Amazing!" and "I can't believe how accurate that was!" About half an hour passed before it was their time to go in. A man standing outside told them to enter, and they opened the wooden door and went inside. It was quite dark in there, and two thick black curtains reaching down to the floor made it impossible to see what lay ahead.

A woman's head appeared from between the curtains. She wore her hair straight and loose, a black dress, and had a sinister aura. When she noticed the two of them, a look of surprise briefly showed on her face. She turned to speak with someone behind the curtain, presumably the fortune teller, before parting the heavy curtains and inviting them farther inside.

Beyond that was round table with a single person sitting behind it. It was impossible to tell their gender at a glance, since the large hood of their cloak almost completely obscured their face. Maybe it was their schtick, or maybe they didn't want to be seen. Their hands had an androgynous look to them.

"Please take a seat," the woman who'd ushered them in told them from behind.

Cecilia frowned.

Hold on...

Something was odd, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. Was it the fortune teller in front of them? The woman standing behind them? Something about the chairs? Or the building? She had no idea, but something

was definitely off, and it wouldn't stop bugging her.

"What answers do you seek?" the fortune teller asked.

Cecilia felt even more uneasy than before. She had no idea where the mixture of antipathy and impatience that was nagging her was coming from.

"Well? Is something wrong?"

"Cecilia?"

Gilbert looked into her eyes searchingly. She shook her head to clear the intrusive thoughts.

"I thought maybe you could help me find someone."

"I see. You wish for me to divine the whereabouts of a certain person." The fortune teller turned to Gilbert. "And what about you, young man?"

"I don't need a reading."

"There's no need to be shy. Since you're here, you might as well get a fortune. You pay for the time slot, not the number of readings, so it won't cost you extra. How about a love fortune?"

Gil's gaze turned cold in response to the tease.

"No, thank you."

He decisively turned away from the fortune teller.

"Fair enough. I will divine only for the young lady. No need to tell me your name. All I need is to hold your hand."

Cecilia offered them her right hand, but as she reached across the table, their eyes met. She recoiled, as if from an electric shock.

"Ngh!"

She snatched back her hand and got up from her chair, backing away from the fortune teller.

"Cecilia? What are you doing?"

Gilbert turned to her, confused. She retreated a few more steps as she watched the diviner with wide eyes. Then she addressed them, her voice a

growl.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding, Janis.”

Gilbert stood up at once and walked over to her, wary and like a coiled spring. The androgynous fortune teller tilted their head slightly, a smile still on their lips.

“Janis? Who might that be? You must be mistaking me for someone else.”

“What are you going by now, then? Jil Versul? Or do you have a new identity? Margrit’s Artifact may be able to change your looks, but it doesn’t alter your voice.”

That’s what had been bothering Cecilia since the start. The voices. The fortune teller, the lady who showed them in, and even the bouncer outside sounded familiar.

The fortune teller went very still for a moment, closing his eyes. Then he snapped his fingers. That instant, he transformed into Janis, and the woman behind him into Margrit. The bouncer had probably changed into Tino, the prince’s Nameless.

“Heh-heh, I commend you on your perceptiveness. The Artifact of Margrit’s I’m using only creates a visual illusion, which is why our voices sounded the same to you. Still, I didn’t think you’d see through my trick! I’ve even been practicing changing my voice, since I couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t show up.”

Janis didn’t seem intimidated in the least, which made Cecilia break out in cold sweat. She’d never have guessed he was hiding so close. His divining talents could probably be attributed to another of Margrit’s Artifacts.

“What are you scheming up now?” she asked him in a low voice.

“Scheming? You always think the worst of me! We’ve grown tired of life on the run, so we’ve turned to fortune-telling to make a living here.”

He was as nonchalant as ever. Cecilia had no doubt he was lying.

“But now that you’ve found us out, our little fortune-telling stint is over.”

“Your plan is to run away again?”

That would be no easy feat, given that they were in a small room where the only exit was behind Cecilia and Gilbert. Margrit was also close to the door, but Cecilia was confident she could overpower her in close combat while her brother took care of Janis. Without Margrit, Janis' combat abilities would plummet. Even if Tino got involved and the three of them managed to escape, they wouldn't get away unharmed.

"You're really not the smartest, are you? Didn't I just tell you I'm using an Artifact creating visual illusions? Did you think it only disguised our identities?"

"...What?"

Janis snapped his fingers again, and the scenery changed in the blink of an eye. He was still sitting in front of a round table and a couple chairs, but they were now in an empty lot. The whole building had been nothing more than an illusion. Now Janis had countless avenues of escape.

No sooner had Cecilia thought that than she heard a sharp voice from behind.

"Janis!"

She turned and saw Tino hopping onto a horse-drawn cart that must have been waiting there the whole time. Taking advantage of her distraction, Janis ran past her and leaped into the cart, which was already on the move. Margrit got on after him.

"Nice seeing you! Until next time!"

Janis waved at her. The cart grew blurry in the distance. Cecilia blinked, and it was gone without a trace.



After nightfall, the cart carrying Janis and his accomplices pulled up next to an abandoned church. It was one of his hideouts, and although it appeared to be in ruin at first glance, there were perfectly habitable rooms in the cellar.

Janis was the first to alight from their ride. He turned to Margrit, offering her his hand.

"Aren't you coming?" he asked in the voice of a kind, gallant prince.

She distractedly took his hand and jumped down from the cart. Noticing that she wasn't her usual self, he sent her a penetrating stare.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling off today?”

“No, it’s not that...”

Margrit was aware of the change in her behavior, and she also knew exactly what had caused it. It was that incident from the afternoon. The intense look in those blue eyes was haunting her.

“We had quite the day today, didn’t we?”

“Janis...”

“Yes?”

“Must we go forward with this plan?”

Her quiet plea didn't surprise Janis—if anything, he seemed to have been expecting it. He squinted slightly.

“Why not?”

“It’s too dangerous...”

“To me? Or to her?”

Margrit gasped. It was as if he'd read her mind.

She was worried about the risk to his life, of course. Gravely worried. Janis' power was probably feeding off his vitality, shortening his lifespan every time he used it. Despite suspecting as much himself, Janis kept using it without any restraint. He was throwing his life away, and that made Margrit quite distressed. But if he did have a death wish, she wouldn't dream of trying to stop him. She herself had experienced what it was like to have no control over your life, being denied even death. If Janis had also been forced to endure such maddening loss of freedom, she thought he had every right to be able to choose the time and place of his death if he so desired.

And if he did choose to kill himself, she wouldn't let him die alone. She would expire with him. That was something she'd decided long ago.

Her temporary life as Elza had been empty until Janis came along and helped

her find herself as Margrit. She'd do anything for the person who'd given her purpose and a place to belong, even knowing he was only using her. Even if there was not a hint of affection for her in his eyes.

But while she'd happily die with Janis, getting Cecilia involved in their plan didn't sit right with her. There were so many others to choose from, countless people whose deaths she couldn't care less about. As long as it wasn't *her*...

"It's okay. I'm not attacking you. It's understandable—you got along with Cecilia, and she even saved your life once," Janis said softly.

When Margrit was about to be swept away by a landslide, Cecilia had come to her aid. Though she could have saved herself using her Artifacts in theory, Margrit hadn't been able to activate them quickly enough, and the situation quickly went from bad to deadly.

Rocks kept falling down on her, yet she found herself rooted to the spot, too terrified to even open her mouth and cry for help. The paralyzing fear that overtook her back then still felt fresh.

"Are you okay?"

She would never forget the warmth of Cecilia's hand, grasping hers.

That said, she didn't want to be friends with the girl. She wouldn't have wanted to make nice with Janis' accomplices anyway, and if she stood in the way of their plan, she was their foe.

Enemy though she might be, Margrit didn't want Cecilia to come to harm. She wished that their plan could come to its fruition without her knowing anything about it.

Janis squeezed Margrit's hand and frowned.

"I appreciate you worrying about me, but there's really no need. As for Cecilia, I don't know what's going to happen to her, but you can rest assured that I'll do what I can to avoid causing you grief."

Making this easy promise that didn't actually guarantee Cecilia's safety, Janis let go of Margrit's hand. Then he stroked her hair gently.

"Let's go to sleep, Margrit. Sweet dreams."

“Janis...”

He didn't hear her. Her voice faded away into the darkness.

CHAPTER 4 Valentine's Day Event

February 14—a day for celebrating love.

February 14—a day of lovers.

February 14—also a day of fierce fighting.

“Prince Ceeeciil!”

“Gimme a break already!”

February 14—Valentine's Day.

Cecilia was running away like she hadn't needed to in a long time. Running as if her life depended on it, as fast as was physically possible for her.

Her pursuers were a gaggle of girls. More and more were flocking to her mob of fans in a joint effort to catch her. Some were even armed with broomsticks.

Once again, Cecilia was on the run from a horny horde of schoolgirls. The reason for this was, of course, that it was the biggest romantic event of the year—Valentine's Day.

Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3 is a dating sim for girls, and a Valentine's Day event is a must in that sort of game. Since this world was based on the game, there was an event like that here, too, except that the customs differed from those in modern-day Japan.

In this world, it was boys who confessed their love to girls, which they did symbolically by giving their crush a single red rose. Each male student at Vleugel Academy received a decorative rose pin to present to their chosen girl. If the rose pin was accepted, the students would officially become a school couple. The members of these couples were very likely to marry each other, assuming they weren't already engaged to someone else.

In the game, there's a special event on this day, in which one of the knights offers a rose to the heroine. In this world, however, there were no knights waiting with roses, nor a heroine willing to accept them.

Instead, there was a crowd of girls who'd turned into hunters...

"Please stop running, Prince Cecil!"

...and their quick-footed prey, Cecilia.

"No way am I stopping!"

The rules of Cecil's fan club—not doing anything that would be a nuisance to the school prince, and not trying to score points over other club members—were temporarily suspended as its members vied against each other to see who could catch their prince first.

"Don't give up, Cecil!"

Cecilia glanced up and saw Dante leaning out of a second-floor window, waving to her. From the grin on his face, she could tell he was enjoying the mayhem and had no intention of helping her. Still, she was desperate enough to grasp at straws.

"I don't need you cheering me on! Come down and help!"

"Nah, I don't wanna!"

His answer was unsurprising. Dante was reliably unreliable in situations like these.

She saw that Eins and Zwei were also watching her with amusement from a first-floor window. Roland appeared behind the twins and said something to them, following her with his eyes. They weren't going to help her, either.

"Some friends they are!"

Cecilia was annoyed that the guys were just enjoying the show.

Thirty minutes later...

"So that's why you came here?"

"Yup."

Cecilia was in Grace's lab in the research annex. She was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room, her knees drawn up to her chin. Slightly fed up, Grace half-closed her eyes.

“I wish you wouldn’t treat my lab as your personal emergency shelter.”

“It’s the best hiding place for me, though! Nobody ever comes here. Classes finished early on account of Valentine’s Day. Can I stay here until the evening?”

“You can stay, but not for very long. The cleaners are coming today.”

“Are you kidding? Why today of all days?!”

“Because only a small minority of research staff will be inconvenienced by it. About half of them are married. Most of the researchers here will be happy to leave early and spend the rest of the day with their family or significant others.”

The staff were extremely reluctant to let outsiders into their labs. This was probably the only day they could be persuaded to let the cleaners in.

“Although some refuse to go home even with the cleaners here...,” Grace added. “You’re saying the Valentine’s Day event got out of control? Why don’t you calm the storm by giving someone a rose already?”

“I thought about that, too, but then I’d be officially someone’s school boyfriend, right? That doesn’t sound all that great, either!”

“Well, if it did progress to engagement talks and the girl found out about your cross-dressing, she might be furious, I imagine.”

“Unless I picked someone who’s in on my secret. But Lean’s got Huey. And I can’t choose you, either.”

“No?”

“I thought that...someone else might bring you a rose today...”

She didn’t want to say Mordred’s name out loud since there wasn’t an obvious romantic vibe between him and Grace, but maybe, just maybe, the two did harbor warm feelings for one another. And if so, Mordred’s alternate personality might even kill Cecilia if she got in the way between him and his love interest.

It occurred to Cecilia that she could simply hide her rose... But then she realized it would only turn her fans’ pursuit of her into a treasure hunt. Each rose had a ribbon wrapped around the stem with the name of its owner written on it. Cecilia’s situation would really spin out of control if someone got their

hands on Cecil's rose. Running away from her pursuers with the rose was less stressful for her than hiding it and having to confront the dreadful feeling of someone finding it.

"By the way, I heard you went on a date with Gilbert."

"Huh? Did Lean tell you?"

"Yes, she mentioned it to me."

That surprised Cecilia, because Grace had been engrossed in her work until two days earlier, preparing for a presentation on the progress of her research. Where had she found the time to hear about Cecilia getting asked out and going on the date with Gilbert?

Not even bothering to face Cecilia sitting behind her, Grace kept her eyes on the papers on her desk, as if she were only chatting absent-mindedly.

"Gilbert also told me about it. Although to be precise, he didn't use the word 'date.' He came to seek my advice regarding your latest run-in with Janis."

Cecilia shifted in her corner, leaning forward in attention.

"And what did you tell him?"

"That events have diverged from the game's scenario too much for me to offer much of an insight..."

"...But?"

"Janis asked you to let him hold your hand when he was in his guise as a fortune teller. I think it's a fair guess that he's been using his power on his customers to awaken the Obstructions in them at a later date."

"Some time in the future? So you think he's plotting something big?"

"Perhaps. Either way, it's safer to assume he is. If he wasn't up to his schemes again, he'd have left Algram by now, I reckon."

"Yeah..."

"Well, I could be worrying about nothing." Grace closed that line of conversation. She turned to Cecilia, smiling a little. "Back to what we were talking about earlier—did you enjoy your date?"

“Yeah, it was nice! A throwback to the old days!”

“Lean also told me you went on a trip?”

“I did, and that was also fun! Did you know you can see the northern lights in Nortracha? I’ll have to add seeing them to my bucket list.”

Cecilia happily recounted the latest events to Grace, who cocked her head at her.

“And have you figured out which way your heart is swaying?”

“Huh?”

Cecilia was caught off guard by Grace—someone she assumed had zero interest in romance—asking her about her love life. A blush bloomed on her face. She scratched her head.

“Even you want to know that now?”

“I can’t deny my curiosity.”

“But I thought you didn’t care about love and stuff?”

“Perhaps I should’ve made this clearer. What interests me is seeing if you’ll find happiness. I’m not cheering for any of the available love interests, and if you decide you don’t want to be with any of them, that’s perfectly valid, too. I’m not so old-fashioned that I think a woman needs love to be happy.” Grace explained her thinking in her typically evenhanded way, her face displaying no emotion. Then she dropped her gaze slightly. “I’m well aware that I owe you for possibly having caused your and Lean’s deaths in your past lives.”

“Come on now!”

“Of course, the past is what it is, and it can’t be changed. Beating myself up over it would be entirely pointless.”

“...”

“Still, I would like to see you find joy in this world. Enough for two lifetimes.”

Cecilia froze for a moment before she drew her knees closer to her chest, making herself look smaller.

“So... I still don’t really understand my feelings, but what I know for sure is

that I really like both Gil and Oscar, and I don't want to hurt either of them. I want them both to be happy, you know? That's why I've been dragging this out, putting off my decision. You could say that's inconsiderate, but..."

"You're thinking too highly of yourself, assuming your rejection would consign them to a life of misery."

"Oof...!"

That was a critical hit. Cecilia shrunk back. Grace's comment was on point, but did she really have to be so blunt?

Grace forced a smile to her face.

"You don't need to worry about the guys. They're stronger than you think. Your rejection will hurt, and I'd be lying if I told you otherwise, but they're both perfectly capable of bouncing back from it."

"I get that much!"

"Also, allow me to give you a piece of advice to help you sort through your feelings. Wanting someone to be happy and wanting to be happy together with them are two very different sentiments. Stop pushing this whole matter to the back of your mind, and try to sort what you feel into these categories."

Cecilia was dumbstruck. It never crossed her mind that there was a difference between the two.

Grace got up from her chair, signaling that their chat was over.

"The cleaners will arrive shortly. You'll have to leave now."

"And you? Are you going home?"

"No. Mordred and Emily invited me for dinner. I feel a bit bad about going to their place so often lately."

"I see..."

Could Grace, who so confidently advised Cecilia about her love matters, be completely blind to her own budding romance? Or perhaps there really was nothing between her and Mordred, and she was only seeing love everywhere because of her own predicament.

Grace herded Cecilia out of the research annex. They'd spent quite a long time chatting, and it was almost evening already.

"Should be safe to go back to the dorm soon..."

Cecilia gazed at the sun hanging low on the horizon. She hadn't been able to go back to her room right after classes finished, because a whole bunch of female students were standing guard in front of it. Some boys had also joined them, closing any gaps through which she might've sneaked in. If it weren't for them, she might've tried to make a run for it...

Hoping the other students had given up on catching her now, she headed to the dorm. She would be safe if she could just make it to her room. The girls wouldn't follow her inside the boys' dorm, surely. As for the male students, they'd probably been put up to standing guard by the girls and wouldn't be crazy enough to try to barge into her room.

Cecilia could see the dorm now...

"Yikes!"

She should have abandoned all hope from the start. There was still a crowd of people in front of the dorm. She wouldn't mind a few girls looking around the campus for her shyly—she'd even think they were being cute. But a tight line of students wearing headbands emblazoned with the phrase I ♥ PRINCE CECIL! wasn't cute at all. There was no way she was getting past them.

"I guess I'll have to stay out of the dorms ..."

She'd have to keep away from there until nightfall at least. But no sooner had she turned back toward the school buildings than she sensed someone's presence behind her. She spun around and came eye-to-eye with a female student.

"I found him! Prince Cecil is over here!"

Her voice was like siren, alerting her compatriots. Cecilia heard a stampede of footsteps and excited screams. Her face turned pale. She broke into a run.

"Why are the girls here so predatory?!"

She knew why, though—she had awoken the beasts in them.

Pursued again, Cecilia ran inside one of the buildings. With so many people giving chase, open spaces put her at a disadvantage.

She sprinted down the hallway, looking around for a safe place. All the running she'd done today had left her exhausted, so she just wanted somewhere to hole up for the rest of the day.

But they're going to check all the rooms and find me... Even if I lock myself in, they'll wait outside until I come out.

She would need to be prepared to survive a siege.

As Cecilia kept running, going over all these problems in her head, she suddenly saw someone poking their arm out from behind a corner. It was too late for her to react. The person grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her onto the landing of a staircase. Before she could scream, a hand covered her mouth.

“Mmph!”

“Be quiet.”

She knew their voice, so she obeyed. She slowly looked up.

Gil!

It was her adoptive brother. When their eyes met, he smiled at her and took his hand off her mouth. He put his finger to his lips to tell her not to say anything. Then, a couple seconds later...

“Prince Cecil!”

Several girls came running from the direction Cecilia had been heading toward. She gulped, realizing that if it weren't for Gilbert, she'd have met that group head-on.

After the girls left, he tugged her by the wrist.

“This way.”

He led her up the stairs, all the way to...

“Wow!”

...the rooftop. Vleugel Academy didn't lock the doors to the roofs of their buildings. This one had a large surface area and many exits, so if the girls

showed up, they wouldn't be able to trap Cecilia. While she couldn't barricade herself up here, it was a good spot to lay low for a while.

She turned to face Gilbert.

"But why are you here?"

"It was getting late, and you still hadn't come back to the dorm, so we decided to go looking for you. I thought I might find you here, and my hunch was right."

"Wow! How did you know?"

"I guess I just know how you think."

He shrugged.

The campus was huge. Even if you excluded the outdoor areas, it was no easy task finding someone there. The girls kept spotting Cecilia because they were searching for her in a group, but to think that someone acting alone could find her?

"I guess I got all of my friends worried again. I was planning to be back in my room by now, to be honest..."

"You couldn't get to the dorm, I know."

Gilbert smiled in commiseration. He must've seen the girls and their helpers standing guard there when he was leaving.

"They should disperse soon, though. Oscar told them to go back to their dorm," he reassured her.

"All right! So I just have to hold out a little longer!"

"Yeah."

It was exceedingly rare for Oscar to use his authority to influence other people. He'd simply told the girls that he thought it was time they went back to their dorm, and most of them took his suggestion to heart. Dante or some other of his friends might argue with him if they were in the girls' shoes, but students who didn't know him well were too awed by his position to object.

Cecilia leaned back against the chain-link fence, glancing over at Gilbert

beside her.

“And what happened to your rose, Gil? Did you also have a bunch of girls chasing after you?”

“I had a few approach me, yes.”

“Hah, I knew it.”

He's really popular, she thought without jealousy. Gilbert smiled wryly.

“That's all you've got to say?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I expected as much.”

What was he talking about? Just as Cecilia shot him a questioning look, they heard a metallic sound. Turning in the direction of the noise, they saw the door they'd come through earlier was open, and a girl was standing in the doorway.

“Oh crap!”

Cecilia was about to book it when she noticed something was off about the girl. She gasped and stopped in her tracks.

The student had a dark aura around her. She was unsteady on her feet, and her eyes were bloodshot. But the most telltale sign was the dark miasma emanating from her body.

“An Obstruction?!”

“Why now?!”

The girl turned her head with a slow, jerking motion like a rusty windup toy. She looked straight at Cecil with vacant, unfocused eyes.

“Prince Cecil?” she asked, uncertain.

The scene was straight out of a horror movie. Cecilia let out a little scream.

“Don't tell me this is my fault?!”

“Well, it might've started with you...”

It was unlikely that the girl would fall prey to an Obstruction just because Prince Cecil hadn't give her his rose... Unless not getting a rose from her idol

was the last straw after other romantic frustrations. Or maybe her relationship had broken down because of her fixation on Cecil.

Regardless, Cecil was her target. The girl had come up to the roof looking for him. Cecilia couldn't run away now, knowing the girl was possessed. Dealing with only one Obstruction shouldn't be so hard, though. She even had Gilbert to lend a hand.

But her confidence evaporated when she saw what was in the girl's hand...

"A knife?!"

The girl was clutching a small dagger. It looked like a paring knife. Maybe she'd taken it from the canteen.

She locked her eyes on Cecilia, crouched slightly...and dashed forward. She was coming fast, and Cecilia didn't think of activating her Artifact in time. Instead, she kicked the knife away. The girl vacantly followed the dagger with her eyes as it traced a silvery arc before falling down. While she was distracted, Gilbert moved in to restrain her...

What's she got there...?!

Cecilia saw her take another shiny metal object from her pocket.

"Gil!"

She pushed him away. A gleaming silver knife appeared before her. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion. Cecilia screwed her eyes shut. Her mind was racing.

Will it hurt? I'm scared... It's all over... I don't want to die!

But better me than Gil.

The relief Cecilia felt knowing that it wouldn't be her brother getting stabbed took even her by surprise. An earlier conversation played back in her head.

"Wanting someone to be happy and wanting to be happy together with them are two very different sentiments."

Grace had told her that. She wondered why that line came back to her at that moment, but also, for some reason, it finally sunk in.

The silver knife was getting closer. A yard. A foot. Six inches. Five. Three. One...

“Don’t be dumb!”

Cecilia felt arms wrap around her waist, pulling her into an embrace. The attacking girl bounced off an invisible wall.

No sooner had the spaced-out Cecilia clocked that it was Gilbert who pulled her away, and that the protective barrier was the power of his Artifact, than he yelled at her, furious.

“What the hell were you thinking?!”

She shrunk back and squeaked out a response in a tiny voice.

“Sorry...”

Gilbert looked as if he were about to reproach her more, but in the end, he just scratched his head irately, managing to bring his emotions under control.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you. Thank you for saving me.”

It took him real effort to say that. He let go of Cecilia and walked over to the girl who he’d pushed back with his Artifact. With a touch of the mark on her forehead, he exorcised the Obstruction.

“Hopefully nobody will bother us for a while.”

He sat down next to Cecilia. It was only then that she realized she’d been crouching since she fell on her butt, paralyzed by fear.

“That was pretty scary, actually.”

She tried to laugh it off.

“Sure was, with you putting yourself in danger.”

“Instinct took over, I guess.”

“Well, don’t let it next time.”

Gilbert pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Ow! Ow!”

They both laughed and rolled onto their backs. The sky was a dark blue, soon

to turn black. There was a bright dot above them—probably Venus, the first bright celestial object to appear in the night sky.

“Oof! I’m so done with today!”

“We could’ve done without that last surprise, I agree.”

They looked at each other, still lying down. And when they did...

“Heh-heh-heh...”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

They started shaking with laughter—their bodies’ natural release of tension. There didn’t have to be anything funny going on to trigger it.

Cecilia and Gilbert giggled heartily for a while, and then talked about this and that. They discussed events from the past, and more recent ones. They brought up various anecdotes and shared memories, in no particular order. And when finally they exhausted all the topics they could think of at the moment, Gilbert sat up.

“Cecilia, this for you.”

“Huh?”

“Will you accept it?”

He held out a red rose. The ribbon wrapped around its stem had his name embroidered on it.

Cecilia was painfully aware of the meaning behind accepting a red rose today. So was Gilbert, of course. He’d really caught her. There were only two possible answers to his question: “I accept” or “I don’t accept.” She couldn’t wriggle her way out of this with a vague response.

“Gil!”



She got off the ground and sat formally, with her legs folded under her, in front of Gilbert. The evening had darkened into night, and with it came a heightened emotional sensitivity. Gentle caresses of the breeze on her cheeks made her break out in sweat. The only sound she could hear was her and Gilbert's breathing. Her lips trembled, and her palms felt sticky.

"I'll be honest with you!" she began, the words coming to her spontaneously for a change. "I like you, Gil. I love you, even! I care about you more than any other human being, probably. I care about your happiness more than anyone else's!"

He was more important to her than Lean, Oscar, her parents, or herself. Nobody knew her better than him, and nobody knew him better than her. She yearned for his happiness from the bottom of her heart.

"But here's the thing!"

Cecilia's voice quavered. She clenched her fists atop her knees so hard that she was cutting off circulation. She finally had an answer for him, but the cruelty of it was making her dizzy with anxiety.

She'd finally sorted out her feelings. The pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place when she rushed to save Gilbert earlier. For the first time, she saw the whole picture clearly.

"It's just that..."

She wanted him to find happiness.

"I'm sorry, Gil. I love you, but not in that way!"

She wanted him to find happiness, but it didn't matter to her who he found it with. As long as he was happy, she didn't mind who was by his side. That was the kind of love she felt for him.

"All right," Gilbert replied softly.

Maybe he'd been anticipating her rejection, since it didn't seem to ruffle him. The gentleness of his manner after what she'd said to him was heartrending. Her face felt hot. Warmth was welling from her eyes, one drop quickly following after another. Soon, she could barely see through the tears. She wiped them

with her sleeve, but they kept coming, dropping onto her thighs, even though it shouldn't have been her crying then.

“I’m sorry. You’ve been helping me with everything for so long... I’m sorry that I can’t reciprocate your feelings.”

“It’s all right.”

His voice cut straight to her soul. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him putting his rose back into his pocket. It made her sob again.

“It’s all right, Cecilia. You’re too kind, shedding tears for me. Thank you.”

She finally dared look up at him again. He was his usual self. Gilbert as she knew him. His expression was so normal, for a moment she doubted whether his confession had really happened.

He looked at her face, dripping with tears.

“Hey, let’s not cause a flood.”

He chuckled. Then he slowly stood up and extended his hand down to her.

“Why don’t we go back to the dorm, Sis?”

Hearing him call her that, she had to cover her face again.



There had to be an endless well of tears inside every human...

That was the pearl of wisdom Cecilia garnered that day.

There’s a phrase, to weep buckets, but Cecilia wasn’t just weeping buckets, she was weeping whole oceans. She couldn’t believe her body held enough water to produce all those tears. She cried so much that it made her throat burn and her eyes sting. It gave her a headache for some reason too, along with an unpleasant feeling in her nose, which had gone from sharp to tingly.

Her tears didn’t stop even after they’d left the rooftop and returned to the dorm. At a loss as to what else to do, she told Gilbert to go on ahead to his room while she stayed outside a bit longer to calm herself.

She found a bench near the dorm and took a seat, pressing a handkerchief to

her eyes. She sat there sniveling for a while, until the thought that Gilbert was unable to cry openly like she could passed through her mind. It made her awfully sad again, and soon big tears were rolling down her cheeks once more.

Cecilia wondered whether her tear ducts had gone haywire. A gloomy mood overtook her, and she thought that maybe after she was done weeping, there would be not a single tear left in her for the rest of her life.

I'm fed up with crying... My eyes hurt. I've got to pull myself together, she reproached herself, staring up at the moon. Suddenly, she heard faint footsteps on the grass. The sound was coming from the direction of the dorm entrance. She turned her head to look...

"There you are... Wh-why are you crying?!"

Oscar flinched in shock. Cecilia blinked.

"Oscar...," she murmured helplessly.

Finding her like this, Oscar assumed something terrible must have happened. He knelt in front of her, looking her over with fear and worry.

"What's wrong? What happened? Did...somebody hurt you?"

"Um..."

"I've asked you so many times to tell me if anybody—"

"No, it's not what you're thinking!"

She waved her hands in front of her face, agitated that Oscar always assumed she was the victim.

"Nobody did anything bad to me! This time, it was my fault..."

"What...?"

"I...I hurt someone."

She couldn't bring herself to say what exactly happened. Oscar was silent for a while.

"Is that someone Gilbert?"

"H-how did you know?!"

“I can think of nobody else you’d cry this much for,” he replied matter-of-factly.

She didn’t know what to say. Was Oscar that sharp? Or was she easy to read?

“So what happened? Were you guys arguing again?”

“Why ‘again’...?”

She remembered another time she’d argued with Gilbert. It was during the field trip, when he got mad at her for sharing a room with Oscar. She had no idea why that had angered him, but at the time, she’d assumed it must have been because she was so happy-go-lucky. Except now she understood why her sharing a room with another guy had made Gilbert so livid.

I’ve been hurting his feelings without realizing...

Her tears started flowing again.

“Are you okay?”

Oscar peered at her closely. Unable to speak through her sobs, she nodded at him instead.

“Ah.”

She didn’t know how to interpret his reply. He stood up and sat down next to her on the bench.

“You’ve been fighting?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, make up soon.”

“Will do.”

She said that, but she knew that everything would be back to normal the next day. Gilbert would chat with her as usual, and while she might be uncertain how to act around him at first, she would soon be comfortable enough to be herself again.

It was in Gilbert’s character to obscure his hurt and weaknesses from others. Plus, he was also hiding his pain out of consideration for Cecilia. She could tell his calm was only a mask, and she understood why he chose to wear it in front

of her—without it, she'd find it hard to cope herself. After twelve years of living together as siblings, they knew each other inside and out.

“Anyway, Oscar, were you looking for me?”

“Yes. I noticed you were still missing at dinnertime, so I thought I'd bring you something to eat.”

He put a small paper bag in her lap. She opened it to find it contained a sandwich cut in half. One half was standard fare, ham and lettuce, while the other was packed with chunks of chicken meat and fried egg—dinner leftovers.

“Yay! Looks yummy!”

“I thought you might be hungry.”

The delicious smell of grilled chicken lifted Cecilia's spirits a little. She hadn't even been hungry until then, or rather, food had been the last thing on her mind. But that instant, her stomach growled. She was a bit disappointed that all it took was food to steal her attention. Then she realized that she'd stopped crying at some point, though she couldn't say when.

Cecilia picked up the bag and fished out the chicken sandwich first. Normally, she'd start with lighter foods before moving on to the calorie-dense ones, but right now she was famished.

“Do you want any of it, Oscar?”

“No, thanks. I've had my dinner.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

Cecilia cocked her head, taking one last good look at the sandwich before biting into it. It hadn't gotten soggy from the meat juices yet. The chicken was well-seasoned, and its crispy skin and salty-sweet sauce paired fabulously with the bread.

“Yum! Oscar, this is so good!”

“Glad you like it.”

“This might be the tastiest sandwich I've had in my life! You've got to try some!”

“Do I, now?”

He narrowed his eyes at the sandwich she'd innocently offered him. Then he sighed and took her by the wrist.

“Huh?”

He bit into a part that she hadn't gotten to yet.

“Hmm, you're right. It tastes pretty good.”

Oscar wiped the corner of his lips with his thumb. Suddenly, his face turned red. He let go of her wrist, realizing he was blushing. Meanwhile, Cecilia consciously avoided eating the part of the sandwich he'd bitten into, though she couldn't say why. It wasn't out of disgust, though.

But... I can't just leave this part...

She didn't want to waste food, and it was a delicious sandwich. Her body was desperate for those calories. She'd been running around campus on an empty stomach, fleeing from pursuers and fighting off an Obstruction.

Cecilia took a small bite, then another, before she noticed that Oscar was staring at her intently.

“What is it...?”

He smiled with relief.

“You seem to be feeling better now.”

“Sorry I worried you.”

“No need to apologize. You didn't *make* me worry—I chose to worry about you.”

Cecilia scarfed down the rest of the sandwich. Then she looked up at Oscar sitting next to her.

I guess I should think of something to talk about...

She wasn't uncomfortable with silence, but she did feel like chatting. But what about?

“Ah!” She raised her head. “By the way, Oscar, what happened to your r-

rose?”

Just as she finished her question, it occurred to her that she shouldn't have asked it in the first place. If he offered her his rose, she'd be faced with the same choice as before. If she ended up saying something to hurt Oscar, she'd wind up too emotionally damaged to function for a while. Dumping two guys in one day would be too much. She wasn't resilient enough for that sort of thing.



On the other hand, what if Oscar revealed he wasn't interested in Valentine's Day, and he'd given his rose to the first girl who'd asked? That would definitely upset her. She might cry out something nonsensical like, "Why did you do that?!" which wouldn't make sense after he'd already explained himself.

Oscar blinked in surprise.

"You want it?"

"No! Don't take it out!"

"Right, I thought so."

He chuckled, and Cecilia felt silly. He found her panic amusing.

"I wouldn't give it to anyone else. But I know doing that right now would just stress you out. I don't want you to feel like you're obliged to accept..."

"You know me too well..."

She would, in fact, feel obliged to accept his rose, purely out of a sense of duty as his fiancée. But she knew that this would be a bad reason to say "yes," since it had nothing to do with her feelings.

"It would be meaningless if you accepted it out of obligation."

So he wasn't going to offer her the rose. On the one hand, this put Cecilia at ease, but on the other, it also disappointed her a little. She looked up at the starry night sky above, shutting out her contradictory feelings.

"Matters of the heart are complicated. You've got to consider other people's feelings, but you can't ignore yours, either. It's overwhelming."

"They can be, yes."

Oscar stood up and tousled Cecilia's hair.

"Deal with it."

"Huh?"

"You deserve to agonize over your feelings after playing with other people's for twelve years straight."

The gentleness in his eyes told her he meant this as encouragement.

“Are you going back, Oscar?”

“Yes. You can’t cry with me here,” he said, taking off his jacket and putting it over her shoulders. “Don’t suppress your tears when you feel the need to let them out. You’ll feel better afterward. Weep as much as you need to. But do take care not to catch a chill staying out late.”

“Sure.” She smiled, his thoughtfulness warming her heart. “Thanks, Oscar.”

Around half an hour later, Cecilia got up from the bench, ready to return to her room. She finished the last bite of the other half of the sandwich, looked up at the sky, and sighed. She’d finally calmed down enough to go back to her dorm.

Though Cecilia was no longer crying, sadness still tugged at her heart as she trudged down the hallway.

Gosh, it’s gotten really late...

There were still some students hanging out outside their rooms, but it seemed like the events of the day were largely over. Cecilia felt like she was the only one for whom it hadn’t ended yet, which made her even more dejected.

She stopped in front of her door, unlocked it, then closed it behind her after she went inside. A split second later, she heard a knock. Cecilia spun around in surprise. She opened the door and carefully peeked outside. It was Jade.

“Huh? Jade? Is something wrong?”

He smiled awkwardly. Cecilia guessed he had some business with her, but it was very unusual for him to come to her room alone. She let him in, wondering if something had happened to Roland or another of her friends.

Jade entered her room and locked the door behind him before turning back to her.

“Did something happen, Jade? Is Roland all right?”

“Roland?”

“Huh?”

Jade looked confused, as if he didn’t know who Roland was. Or rather, like he

did know who he was but hadn't been expecting to hear that name from Cecilia.

"Wait... That voice!"

Cecilia backed away from him. He hadn't spoken to her in Jade's voice, but in another she also knew well.

"Is that you, Margrit?" she asked cautiously.

Her visitor was unruffled by the accusation and made no attempt to deceive her. "Jade" covered his face with his hands for a moment, and when he removed them, the illusion was gone. In his place stood a tall, strikingly beautiful woman with long locks of hair—Margrit. She opened her eyes, her pronounced eyelashes sweeping upward, and looked at Cecilia.

"Yes, it's me. How have you been, Cecil? Or would you like me to call you Cecilia?"

Her dignified, cool voice resonated throughout the room.

The woman's intentions were difficult to decipher—she didn't seem friendly, but she didn't appear hostile, either. Cecilia warily took a few steps back, retreating toward the window, which she could use as an emergency escape route. It would be a big drop, but there was a low hedge below the window, so while she might sustain some injuries, she would at least make it out with her life.

Cecilia had wished for another chance to talk with Margrit again. But even she wouldn't blithely welcome a guest who'd wormed her way into her room in the guise of one of her trusted friends.

Margrit showed Cecilia her wrists to lay her fears at ease. She was wearing only a single Artifact—it must have been the one that granted her the ability to change her appearance. That meant the rest of her Artifact arsenal was somewhere else, and she didn't pose much of a threat.

"I understand that you're suspicious of me, but rest assured, I have not come here as your enemy."

"..."

“It’s not so easy to trust me, is it?”

A shadow of disappointment clouded her expression. Her eyes glinted with a hint of hurt at being kept at arm’s length.

Cecilia was moved by this, but she still chose her next words carefully, cautiously.

“Why are you here?”

“I have a request.”

“What sort of request?”

“That you run as far away from Vleugel Academy as you can.”

Cecilia frowned at her unexpected plea.

“Why do you want me to get away from here?”

“Because Vleugel Academy is Janis’ next target.” Cecilia opened her eyes wide. But before she could get a word in, Margrit quickly continued speaking, as if she didn’t have much time. “The students here are all sons and daughters of the nobility. They’ll be governing this country one day. But has the thought ever crossed your mind? About what would happen if they all died?”

“It...hasn’t...”

“Their deaths would severely destabilize Prosper. What’s more, their parents might conspire to overthrow the king, since the tragedy happened under his watch. This is what Janis is betting on.”

“What’s he planning to do?” Cecilia asked shakily.

Margrit glanced at her feet.

“I can’t tell you. That would be disloyal... Though the warning I gave you already counts as a grave betrayal, I suppose.”

“But—”

“I don’t care what happens to the others. I don’t have an ounce of sympathy for anyone in this country. But I owe *you*. That’s why I’m telling you to run.”

Cecilia couldn’t just thank her for the warning and get packing. She wasn’t

going to flee. If Janis was planning an attack on the academy, then she needed to thwart it.

She took a step toward Margrit, looking at her pleadingly.

“Can’t you stop Janis?”

“No, and I wouldn’t want to anyway.”

“But so many people could die!”

“I don’t care. Only he matters to me,” she replied coldly.

Cecilia didn’t think Margrit was lying. She couldn’t be persuaded to stop Janis unless he gave up on the plan of his own accord.

Keeping her eyes on her, Cecilia spoke in a low voice.

“Sorry, but I can’t just turn tail. I couldn’t possibly leave everyone to their fate and run to save my own skin.”

“I see...”

Margrit slowly approached Cecilia and touched her cheek with just the tips of her slender fingers.

“I wish you’d listened.”

No sooner had she said that than Cecilia became paralyzed, as if by the petrifying gaze of Medusa. She couldn’t lift a finger, move her eyes, or make any sound at all. Not even a cry for help.

No way!

There were now seven Artifacts on Margrit’s wrists. She guessed Margrit had used the one that changed people’s perception to render the other six invisible, getting Cecilia to drop her guard.

“I had taken into account that you might not heed my advice. I’m taking you away from here, whether you want it or not.”

Margrit extended her other arm sideways, and a dimensional rift opened at her fingertips. It was her portal-creating ability, which Cecilia had seen in action before.

“Let’s go, shall we?”

Instead of her fingertips, she pressed her palm against Cecilia’s cheek this time, and Cecilia began walking, her body entirely under Margrit’s control. Her ability to manipulate someone else’s movements seemed to only work when she was touching them.

Cecilia didn’t want to go through that portal, but her body kept moving toward it. She didn’t know where it led, but it was probably somewhere very far from the academy. If it weren’t, she’d have run straight back to campus, which Margrit must have taken into consideration.

Would it be so far that she’d lose all hope of making it back? Would she end up locked in a prison cell from which there was no escape? A terrible premonition overcame her, one where she walked into that portal and never set foot in the academy again.

She couldn’t speak, but inwardly, she was screaming.

I don’t want this!!!

“Cecil!”

The voice, which Cecilia easily recognized, was followed by a loud smash as the door to her room flew off its hinges. Margrit turned in shock, taking her hand off Cecilia, who immediately put distance between herself and her captor, running toward the person who’d kicked down her door.

“Dante!”

“You okay?”

He sounded atypically agitated.

Margrit took one look at him, then turned to leap through the portal. Dante rushed after her, but the portal closed before he could get to it.

“Oh shoot, she got away! That was the runaway Holy Maiden, right?”

Dante must have been frustrated. This was the first time he’d seen the Holy Maiden, too.

“Yes, that was her. But how did you know?”

“Easy. She was using some weird powers, and she was as beautiful as the stories say.”

“That’s not what I meant! How did you know she was here?”

Margrit had showed up disguised as Jade, so Dante shouldn’t have suspected anything.

“Ah, that.” He nodded and proceeded to explain what led him to bust open her door. “I saw Jade in front of your room, which was kind of unusual, so I stuck around for a while. And then I saw him coming from the opposite direction.”

One or the other had to be an imposter. Dante followed his instincts and ran to Cecilia’s room.

“Thankfully, I made it in time. Those guys just don’t give up, huh? What was the Holy Maiden doing, trying to abduct you?”

“Never mind that, there’s something more important!”

“What?”

Cecilia grabbed Dante by the shoulders, an urgency in her voice.

“Dante, get everyone together! The academy’s in danger!”

It took Dante ten minutes to gather Cecilia’s gang. Six of them were waiting in a room together: Gilbert, Oscar, Dante, Huey, Lean, and Cecilia. Eins, Zwei, and Jade went to check in on Roland. Margrit had seemed a bit thrown at the mention of the prince’s name, so Cecilia was worried that she might go after him. To be on the safe side, she asked the Machias twins and Jade, who turned up first after Dante called them, to see if Roland was okay.

She’d informed her friends of Roland’s true identity. She told the twins and Jade just before asking them to check in on the young prince, and then she told the others once they gathered in the room. If the circumstances had been different, she’d have sought Roland’s permission first, but there was no time for that.

With the exception of Dante, everyone was surprised to hear that Roland was one of the princes of Nortracha. Cecilia’s biggest concern was how the Machias

twins would take that news.

“He’s Janis’ brother, but he’s not an accomplice, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, can’t blame him for what his brother did.”

They smiled ironically. Maybe they were just really good at covering up their resentment, but Cecilia was relieved at their low-key reaction regardless.

The atmosphere in the room grew heavy after she informed her friends that according to Margrit, Janis was planning an attack on the academy. Knowing they would be targeted next made everyone anxious. Gilbert was the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

“Putting together what we already knew and this new information from Margrit, it looks like Janis has been using his power on the residents of our city in preparation for his attack on the academy.”

“Now that you mention it, perhaps his stunt on Advent Day was a rehearsal for this plan,” remarked Oscar.

“Yes, possibly.”

Gilbert stroked his chin.

Janis had placed about fifty people under the possession of Obstructions and let them loose on a rampage that day. If their assumption that Janis had posed as a fortune teller to awaken the seeds of Obstructions in his customers was correct, then the number of affected people would be ten times that of Advent Day, if not more. He could be preparing a small army if he was serious about wanting to wipe out everyone at the academy.

Dante chimed in:

“We can’t sit around waiting for Janis to attack. We’ve got to pre-empt it.”

“But what can we do? We’re as clueless as to his whereabouts as before,” protested Lean.

“Don’t ask me. I’m the muscle, not the brains.”

“We have to find their hideout. There’s no other option.”

“With Marlin’s help, right?”

“She’s on the case but hasn’t found any leads yet.”

Huey, who’d gotten in contact with Marlin and her band, shook his head at Dante’s question. Gilbert looked at them sternly.

“We probably don’t have much time left.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Janis might already be aware that we know about his plan. I don’t think he’ll be able to set it into motion tonight, but he’ll undoubtedly do it at his earliest convenience. I bet he’ll time it when we’re unlikeliest to stop it, too.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Oscar said quietly, trusting Gilbert’s assessment of the situation. “I won’t be able to mobilize the army for at least a few days. I can assign more guards to the academy immediately but authorizing anything else requires a lot of paperwork.”

“And what we say might not be given much credit anyway. We’re just a bunch of students!”

“I don’t think our concerns would be dismissed. They should be considered, if not readily believed,” Huey disagreed with Dante.

Cecilia was only half-listening, her mind preoccupied with something else—Roland. Margrit’s reaction to his name unsettled her. If she did something to him now, Cecilia felt like it would be her fault. But as much as she wanted to go with Jade and the Machias brothers to check if Roland was okay, her hands were tied. She had to stay and explain what was going on to the others.

“Guys, don’t you think Jade and the Machiases should’ve come back by now?”

Cecilia didn’t say that just because of her nagging guilt over having exposed Roland to danger. Jade and company had been gone for a really long time. Thirty minutes had passed since the rest of the group gathered, and it shouldn’t take that long to go over to Roland’s room and see if he was all right. Why hadn’t they returned yet?

“Maybe they got distracted on the way back?”

Dante didn’t seem worried.

“I reckon the chance of that is exactly zero,” Huey retorted.

The door to the room flung open. Eins and Zwei rushed in.

“There’s a problem!”

“We couldn’t find Roland!”

Everyone else exchanged glances. Cecilia went pale.

“What do you mean, you couldn’t find him?!” she asked in a panic.

“What do you think? He wasn’t in his room!”

“Jade’s still looking for him, but it seems like he’s not on the campus.”

Oscar covered his mouth with his palm.

“So Margrit took him...”

“Not necessarily,” Eins said, lowering his voice constitutionally. “Someone saw Roland leaving the dorm alone.”

“What?”

Cecilia was confused.

“He was in a great hurry and wouldn’t stop to talk to anyone.”

“What if...,” Lean said quietly. Everyone turned toward her. “What if Lord Roland overheard Lady Margrit and Lord Cecil’s conversation and went where he thought Prince Janis might be hiding?”

“No way! Roland doesn’t know where his brother is! Gil had all the possible hideouts Roland gave him checked already!”

Gilbert frowned.

“What if he didn’t tell us where Janis was likeliest to be found?”

“Why wouldn’t he?!”

“Maybe he knew that Janis would be put on trial if we found his brother before he did?”

“Ah, so you think he’s aware of Janis’ crimes, to some extent at least, and wants to protect him?”

Oscar caught Gilbert’s drift immediately.

Cecilia went even paler. Roland was on his way to Janis, his beloved older brother. But did Janis care about Roland at all? What if he didn't exactly welcome him with open arms...?

"We can't definitively say Roland was protecting Janis, though I'm fairly certain he didn't share with us his top guess as to where his brother is hiding."

"We have to find them both as soon as possible!"

"Sure, let's just go find them, why don't we...," Huey said sarcastically.

They didn't know where to start looking. Cecilia didn't have any ideas either, but if they didn't find Roland quickly, something terrible might happen to him...

Everyone was feeling the pressure.

"Um..." Zwei put his hand up. "I think I can help with this."

CHAPTER 5 Final Showdown

Roland was haunted by the nagging worry that his brother might be up to no good. The suspicion had taken root in his heart even before Janis' disappearance. To be precise, he'd first felt it when Janis' mother died.

Nobody knew Janis better than Roland, who was the closest to him. His oldest brother may have maligned Janis, and the second oldest ignored him completely, but Roland was always on his side. Which was why he was the quickest to notice a change take place in his sibling.

When Janis vanished without a trace, Roland's suspicions had transformed into agonizing certainty. He loved his brother. He really did. He loved him, respected him, revered him. He'd genuinely wanted to become like Janis, resigning himself to never being quite able to catch up to his idol.

Then he found out about his brother's misdeeds.

I have to stop him! was his first thought. He couldn't let Janis carry on like that. His brother wanted to die. Worse, still, he didn't want to die alone—he wanted to take as many lives with him as possible. How he would do this and why were two questions Roland couldn't answer, but his suspicions had proven correct.

He broke into a run. His destination was a derelict church on the outskirts of the city, which Janis had once described as a memorable place for him and his mother. Whether those memories were good or bad, Roland couldn't say.

Janis' mother, Chloe, was from Prosper Kingdom, and she would go back there together with him once every few years. On those occasions, they'd visit the graves of Chloe's parents, who were buried at the graveyard by that church. For some reason, Janis recounted those visits with joy. Roland, who was just a little boy at the time, hadn't understood what could be so fun about going to some old church, but he did know it must have been a special place for Janis.

The church is by a cliff over the sea. He recalled Janis' description of the vista

as he made his way through the city.

He had checked the locations of local churches in a book in the library. There was only one which met the criteria, so he was sure it was the one.

Janis is there!

In the darkness of the night, Roland stopped in front of the dilapidated church. It was built on top of a cliff jutting out into the sea, with the waves breaking against the rocks below. The atmosphere was so eerie that his knees were shaking, but he summoned up his courage and spoke loudly.

“Janis, are you in there? Please come out if you are! It’s me, Roland!”

His words seemed to sink into the silent darkness.

“I’ve come to take you back to Nortracha!”

There was no response. Roland mustered all of his willpower and yelled one last time.

“Brother!”

“...Roland?”

Hearing a voice in front of him, Roland raised his head and saw that the church door was open. In the doorway stood a man he knew very well. He had silver hair and amethyst eyes, an elegant nose, and slender limbs. A gentle smile brightened his face. It was none other than...

Roland ran up to the man and embraced him, tears in his eyes.

“Janis!”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to...to find...”

Roland choked on his words, too overwhelmed to speak. He had to fight to hold back his tears, overcome with a mix of both joy and sadness incomparable to anything he’d experienced before. He hadn’t come all the way just to cry into his brother’s chest.

“Janis, let’s go home! I’ll protect you. You don’t have to return to the palace if you don’t want to,” he pleaded with his whole heart.

“Roland...”

“Remember the place we went to in the north, where you can see the aurora? I bought land there. You could hide there as long as—”

“I’m not going back with you.”

Roland felt as though someone had dumped a bucket of ice-water on him. Overcome by shock, he widened his eyes at his brother.

“Janis...?”

“You go back on your own. You shouldn’t be here.”

“But—”

“Don’t be a bother,” Janis cut him off sharply.

Two figures appeared behind him. One was a woman, and the other was his Nameless. Roland remembered that the man’s name was Tino. Both remained silent, observing the exchange between the brothers.

Janis took a step away from Roland and spoke in a frigid tone.

“Let me tell you something. You’ve always idolized me, but did you know that I hated you all this time?”

“What?”

“I’ve loathed you from the very first moment we met. What’s to like about a good-for-nothing who doggedly follows you around all the time? I had to keep up appearances because of our father, but how I wished I could’ve just been rid of you.”

“Janis...”

Roland’s voice trembled. He noticed his legs were also shaking. His heart filled with a cold emptiness as he struggled to make sense of what Janis had just told him.

“Do I scare you? Good. Go back to Nortracha, and never, ever show yourself to me again. You disgust me.”

Janis turned to Tino, who handed him a narrow sword in a scabbard—a rapier. Janis drew it, throwing the richly decorated sheath to the floor like a

piece of trash. He swung the blade once, then pointed it at Roland. There was no hesitation in his movements.

“I meant what I said. Leave this country at once, or else—”

“Who do you take me for, Janis?!”

Roland grabbed the blade with his bare hand. Janis sucked in air. Blood started trickling from Roland’s hand, flowing down his forearm in rivulets.

“You can’t deceive me so easily! You only said all those horrible things to make me leave the Kingdom of Prosper for my own safety, didn’t you? Well, you don’t need to worry about me.”

Roland pulled the rapier closer so that the tip was against his forehead. He tugged at it, slicing his skin, and blood started running down his face, too.

“I’m committed to this, Janis.”

“Stop!” his brother cried out frantically.

“Roland!”

He turned upon hearing his name and saw a strange glowing pattern on his shoulder. The next moment, a blinding flash of light forced him to shut his eyes tight.

“Your game’s up, Janis!”

Roland fell onto his behind. When he opened his eyes, he saw Cecil standing in front of him, protecting him from Janis.



“I left a mark on Roland’s back, just to be on the safe side.”

Zwei explained that, somewhat apologetically, to Cecilia and her friends earlier. He’d marked Roland as a target for his special ability—Transfer. He’d done that without telling the prince’s knowledge, since he knew that Roland had a habit of leaving the campus on his own and feared that he might get lost and need someone to rescue him.

They could transfer up to six people over to Roland, by having Zwei send

three and having Lean send three more, using his Artifact.

They decided to send Cecilia, Gilbert, Oscar, and Zwei over to Roland. The others would stay behind in reserve on campus.

The first thing Cecilia saw after getting teleported outside the church was Janis pointing a rapier at his brother.

“Roland, are you okay?”

She quickly stepped in between the stunned prince and his older brother. Roland’s hand and forehead were wounded, so she guessed he’d been trying to defend himself.

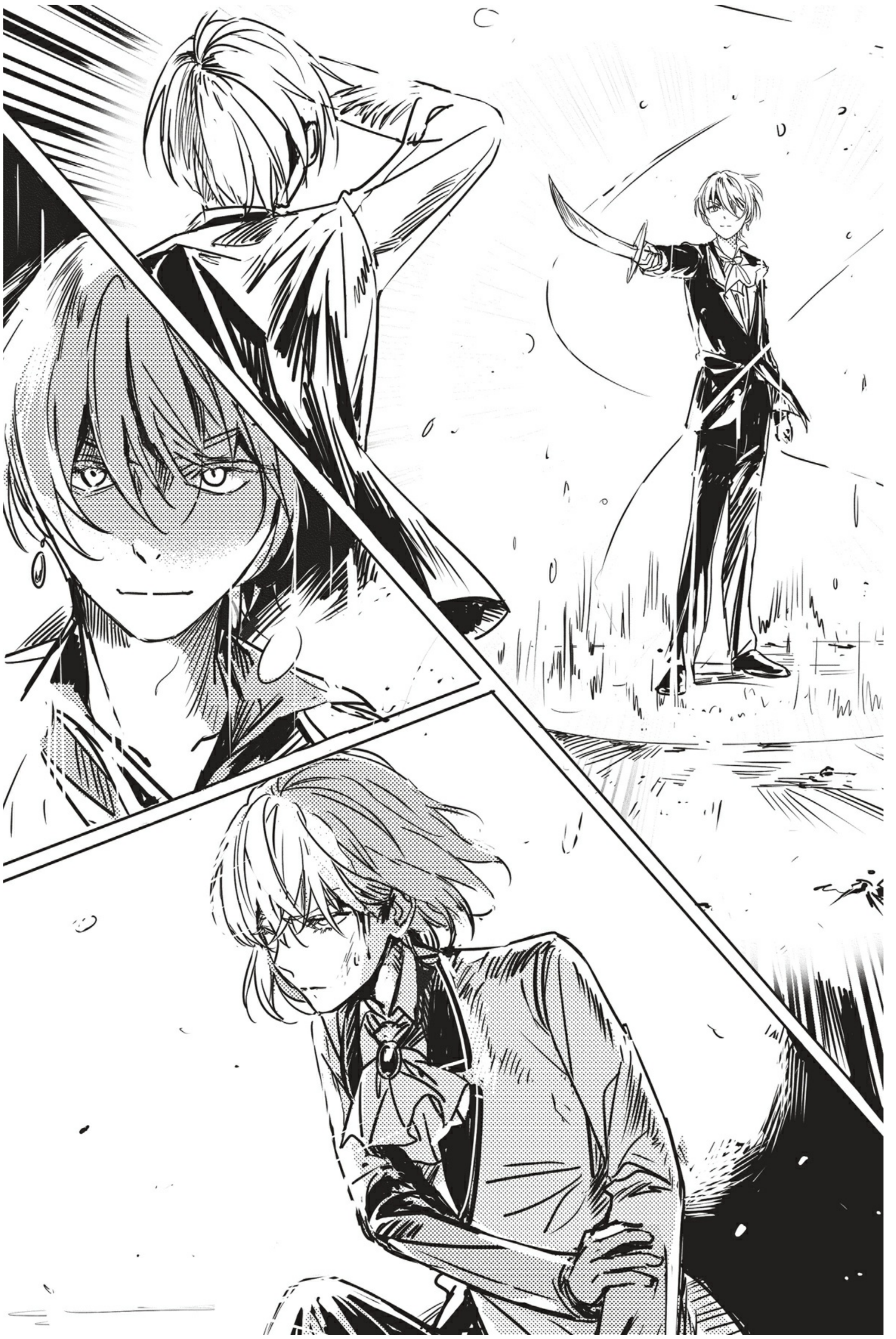
Roland gasped and clung to Cecilia’s legs.

“Cecil, no! Don’t hurt Janis!”

She looked down on him in confusion, surprised that he’d want to protect his brother even now.

“Seriously, you again? How utterly infuriating! Do you always have to get in my way?”

Janis growled, and scratched his head wildly, grinding his teeth. He then slapped the back of his hand. On cue, a terrifying roar sounded from far away. Cecilia turned back to him, aghast.



“What did you just do?”

“Started the attack. You left me with no choice. I couldn’t have you interfere, could I?”

Janis turned back to Tino behind him, giving him an order with a glance. Tino nodded and ran off in the direction of the roar. Oscar tried to intercept him, but Margrit barred his path, allowing Tino to escape into the forest.

Satisfied that his Nameless had made it away, Janis faced Cecilia again.

“I already knew I’d have to hurry things along after Margrit told me what she’d done, but I wouldn’t have guessed you were low enough to use Roland to get to me.”

“We didn’t use him!”

“No? Then what do you call it?”

Janis glared at her with resentment, sending a chill down her spine. He’d been so detached the last few times they’d met. Now he was raw emotion. Was this because Cecilia’s persistence had gotten under his skin? Or was it because he believed they’d exploited his brother?

“Where’s Tino going?”

“To control a vast army of little ants. They only obey me or him. I had planned on recruiting more, but even this number is capable of destroying your academy.”

Cecilia turned to Zwei, her eyes wide in horror.

“Zwei! Go back! Tell everyone to evacuate campus!”

“S-sure!”

“And take Roland with you!”

“I’m not going anywhere!”

Roland clung to Cecilia’s clothes like a child throwing a tantrum. Nobody had ever told him of Zwei’s ability, but he must have guessed it was some sort of teleportation when Cecilia and her friends appeared out of nowhere.

“I’ll bite off my tongue if you take me back against my will!”

“Don’t be like this, Roland!”

“I have to stop Janis!”

They heard the howls of the possessed again, likely in response to Tino arriving at his destination to take the lead. Given that they could hear the yelling despite their distance from the city, it must’ve been a pretty big crowd.

Things were spiraling out of control.

“Zwei! There’s no time! Go back on your own!” Oscar urged Zwei.

“Okay!”

He put his hand on his chest and disappeared in a flash of light.

Janis clapped slowly, as if applauding a child’s minor accomplishment.

“You had the messenger come with you just in case, while the most resourceful of your team stayed behind, hmm? How very clever.”

He was presumably referring to Dante.

Janis leisurely approached Cecilia. Oscar and Gilbert quickly stepped out in front of her to guard her. She addressed him.

“Why are you doing this? Do you really want to bring our country to ruin this badly?”

“I’ll raze it all to the ground.”

“What...?”

“The country which gave rise to the Obstructions in the first place. The country which killed my mother, sentencing me to a cruel fate. And the country that corrupted me with a horrific power. That’s what I want to destroy.”

His statement confirmed their suspicions. Janis wanted to die and take Prosper Kingdom with him. This whole grand plan was basically his suicide.

After his death, Nortracha would be held responsible for not having stopped him. That was his intention—that was why he acted in the open, in his own name as the third prince of Nortracha.

Margrit dropped her gaze to the ground. Even if she knew Janis' plan, perhaps this was the first time she'd heard his motives.

"Why don't you slay me as the greatest enemy of your nation? I won't go down without a fight, mind you."

Janis placed a hand on his chest. Dark miasma rose from his body at once, a pattern of thorny vines appearing on his skin. He'd hatched his own Obstruction.

"Janis!" screamed Margrit.

Perhaps she didn't know about this element of the plan. Judging from how she panicked, Janis must have taken a considerable risk.

"Damn...!"

"Cecil, stand back!"

Oscar and Gilbert readied for action, assuming a defensive stance. Cecilia squeezed Roland's hand.

Janis didn't go berserk like the others who were possessed. Rather than losing control of his emotions, he seemed to have lost them completely. He took a swing with his rapier and adopted a battle stance, aiming its cutting point at Cecilia.

And then, he broke into a run.

"Janis!"

"Roland!!"

Roland wriggled away from Cecilia and sprung out in front of her. He tackled his brother, locking him in a tight embrace.

"Janis! My dear brother! Please, stop! Don't add more crimes to your name!"

Janis stopped moving. Even though he was under the influence of an Obstruction, he just stood there, staring at his brother.

"Ro...land..."

Janis' voice sounded hoarse. His dark eyes were fixated on Roland's back.

Roland let go of his brother and delivered an emotional plea.

“Janis, snap out of it! Please!”

As he made this desperate entreaty, his eyes brimmed with tears, which started rolling down his cheeks, one big drop after another.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to lessen your suffering! That you had to endure that pain on your own! It’s true—I’ve been following you like a shadow. But I swear I’ll always be by your side from now on! I’ll do what I can to be a shoulder you for you to lean on when you need it!”

Janis tightened his grip on his sword. He swung his arm back.

“Roland!”

Fearing the worst, Cecilia dashed toward them. Not that she could’ve made it in time. Janis thrust his rapier straight at Roland’s chest.

“Urgh...”

A low groan accompanied the sound of blade sinking into flesh, soon followed by the dripping of viscous liquid onto the ground.

Janis was standing in a puddle of blood, staining his boots red. But the blood wasn’t Roland’s.

“Mar...grit...”

Margrit, her chest soaked in blood, raised her hand and brushed her fingertips against the mark of the Obstruction on Janis’ forehead. As the Obstruction was exorcised, light returned to Janis’ eyes.

Having regained consciousness, Janis stared at Margrit in disbelief. He let go of the hilt of his blade, which slid out of her chest and clattered to the ground. Now that nothing was plugging the wound, blood began to gush forth, spraying onto the ground. Margrit looked as if she were about to fall, but Janis caught her in his arms.

“Why did you do that? Why did you protect Roland?”

“You seem confused. It wasn’t him I protected.”

“What...?”

“Do you not understand? What I protected was your sanity. Killing your brother...would damage you...beyond repair...”

Margrit’s breathing was labored, and her voice was fading in and out.

Janis pressed his free hand to his chest. He also seemed the worse for wear. Maybe it was the strain of controlling so many Obstructions he’d summoned, or the aftereffect of having been a host to an Obstruction himself.

He fell to his knees, the color drained from his face. Dark rings appeared under his eyes, and the look in them told of impending doom. He didn’t seem to have long left.

“Do not...fear...Janis. I’m here...with you.”

“Mar...grit...”

She summoned the last of her strength and helped him up to walk. They stopped at the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea, clinging to each other so as to stop themselves from falling. Then they turned toward Cecilia and her friends. Margrit caught Cecilia’s eyes and her lips curved upward as she mouthed, “Thank you.”

“Margrit!”

“Janis!”

Cecilia and Roland ran toward them, but the duo didn’t wait—they jumped. Cecilia got to the edge of the cliff and looked down, but all she could see was darkness. The only thing she could hear was the waves breaking against the rocks.

Epilogue

When Janis and Margrit cast themselves into the sea, all of the possessed townspeople recovered, and Tino—who'd been commanding them—disappeared without a trace. The attack never took place, and nobody was harmed.

A search for Janis and Margrit commenced within an hour of their suicide jump, but nothing came of it. They were presumed dead, and Janis' name was erased from the list of Nortranchan royals. Roland protested this, saying it was too soon to give up hope, but nobody listened.



Fast-forward to the end of March...

“So in the end, they’re holding the inauguration ceremony at the academy,” Lean said, her voice filled with emotion.

She and Cecilia were in a small room adjacent to the lecture hall. Cecilia was dressed in a white maiden outfit, like the one Lean had to wear for the Advent Day celebrations.

The Selection Ceremony had been concluded and Cecilia’s initiation as the new Holy Maiden was to take place that day. That of course meant she’d be appearing as herself, not Cecil. It would be a very solemn affair, but Lean was in a chirpy mood.

“That’s good for you, though! You won’t risk getting attacked by bandits on the way!”

“I guess so. The altar at the shrine got busted in the last incident, so they couldn’t hold the ceremony there even if they wanted to.”

In the game, if Cecilia is chosen as Holy Maiden, she’s killed in a bandit attack on the way to take her vows at the shrine. In their world, though, the altar used

for the ritual had been damaged in their fight against Janis. Consequently, Vleugel Academy was selected as the venue for the initiation.

“At first, the Church people insisted on going on with the original plan and holding the event at the shrine, but Gil gave me this idea. He said I should tell them I had received a divine revelation telling me to change the venue, and that the shrine clergy were such fanatics they’d believe it...”

Gilbert gently pushed her back; she stood up and told the gathered crowd she’d had a divine revelation. The clergy agreed to hold the ceremony where she proposed at once.

Only a small number of people would be participating—the cardinal and a handful of acolytes. Out of the Holy Maiden’s knights, only Oscar, Gilbert, and Dante would be attending, since the others were still under the impression that Cecil was a completely different person from Cecilia. This accommodation was put forward by Gilbert, and the clergy approved it without any problems.

“Gil took care of everything, as usual.”

Cecilia scratched her cheek, smiling awkwardly. It frustrated her that she hadn’t been able to do anything for Gilbert, even though she owed him so much.

Lean crossed her arms.

“It’s all back to normal between the two of you already?”

“Huh?”

“After you dumped him. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Lean was direct as usual. Cecilia froze, her mouth hanging open. She hadn’t told anyone that she’d rejected Gilbert’s advances. Nobody besides Lean had hinted that they knew about it, so she’d been sure that it was her and Gilbert’s secret.

Lean raised a brow and looked out of the corner of her eye at her stunned friend.

“Maybe I’m the only one who figured it out? Gilbert’s been acting normal, and I guess it takes someone who knows you really well to spot the difference

in your behavior.”

“Oh...”

“It’s amazing how well he can hide his distress after the shock of rejection. I wish I had his resilience. Or maybe he’s so calm because he hasn’t quite given up on you yet?”

“I don’t know, maybe?”

Cecilia frowned in consternation, remembering the lunch she’d had with Gilbert a few days after Janis’ and Margrit’s deaths.

Gilbert had invited her to have lunch with him in the conservatory. It was just like old times—but in light of what had happened between them, it made Cecilia pity Gilbert...until he’d said something to her that made that feeling go away.

“I haven’t given up on you, you know?”

“What?”

“You’re pliable, so I’m sure I could make you change your mind with a push every now and then. There’s another option, too—if your engagement with Oscar was canceled, you might come back to me of your own accord.”

His gentle smile belied the impact of what he’d said. Cecilia swallowed a chunk of the sandwich she was eating without chewing, suddenly terribly nervous. Gilbert picked up on that at once.

“Didn’t think I’d be so stubborn?”

“Um, yeah...”

He could read her like a book, which wasn’t anything new. Not knowing what to say to him, she stared at the ground. On the one hand, it was flattering that Gilbert, who typically didn’t get attached to anything or anyone, was so persistent in his love for her. On the other, she again felt guilty for not being able to reciprocate his feelings.

“We’re both stubborn, aren’t we? I can’t give up on my love for you. And you’re insistent on seeing me as nothing more than family.”

"I'm sorry I—"

"And that's okay. Let's carry on as normal. I promise you that it won't make me uncomfortable."

That last part must have been what he wanted to communicate to her the most. He'd picked a crumb off her cheek and ate it. Then he'd smiled at her.

Was he really serious about not giving up hope of being together with her one day? If he was, it must have been taking a lot of effort on his part to act like nothing had happened, yet he was persevering for her sake.

Somebody knocked on the door, interrupting Lean's and Cecilia's conversation.

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

They exchanged glances, both knowing who it was. Cecilia's ceremonial outfit wasn't the most comfortable to move around in, so Lean dashed out of her chair and opened the door to let Oscar in. He wasn't in his uniform that day, but in casual wear.

Cecilia looked at him and widened her eyes.

"Is something the matter, Oscar?"

"No, I just came to check in on you. Thought you might be anxious before the ceremony, but you seem all right."

He smiled, relieved that she was her usual cheerful self. Touched by his thoughtfulness, she smiled back at him.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous, but I stopped stressing out so much when they told me I didn't have to go to the shrine!"

"Do you really hate it that much?"

"I don't dislike it, but I could've gotten killed by bandits on the way there, you know! It was a huge source of anxiety for me."

"Huh..."

Her worries must've sounded far-fetched to Oscar, who only rubbed his

forehead in befuddlement.

“Ah. Well, it’s good they’re holding the ceremony here, then,” he said in the end, figuring it must have had something to do with Cecilia’s memories of her past life.

Lean made her way to the door, keeping her eyes on Cecilia and Oscar.

“The inauguration ceremony will be starting soon. I’m going to take a look at how the preparations are coming along,” she said in her fake innocent girl voice.

She left them alone.

“That costume looks heavy.”

Oscar looked Cecilia up and down with sympathy. She stood up from her chair and lifted the skirt by the hem.

“It looks that way, but it’s not!”

“Really?”

“But it’s got so many ornaments that I’ve got to be super careful not to damage anything.”

The outfit resembled the white robe Lean wore for the Advent but was more glamorous. Its many decorations made it look gorgeous.

“It’s kind of like a wedding dress, pure white and so long it’s almost trailing!”

“I suppose so.”

“But I’d like to wear a more voluminous dress for the big day!”

“The big day...?”

“Yeah! I want my dress to have a subtle red accent to match the color of your hair. What do you think, would you like that?”

“...”

“Oscar?”

Cecilia looked at him in surprise. He was stunned, and a blush had formed on his cheeks. What was embarrassing about what she’d said? She cocked her

head at him.

“Oscar, did I upset you somehow...?”

“What big day are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“Maybe I’m getting confused, but were you just talking about your plans for our weddi—”

“Uh, stop! Don’t say it! I get it now!”

She pressed her hands to his mouth, only then realizing that what she’d been so casually chatting about was a subject of great importance.

“I got carried away and spoke without thinking! Let’s just forget I said anything, okay?”

Oscar stood motionless for a while, staring calmly at the flustered Cecilia. Then he gently took her by the wrists and slowly moved her hands off his mouth. He was free to talk, but he considered his words carefully before speaking.

“I can’t wait for the big day, Cecilia.”

He smiled.

“Er... Which big day are we talking about now?!”

“You want me to say it?”

“N-no, it’s okay!”

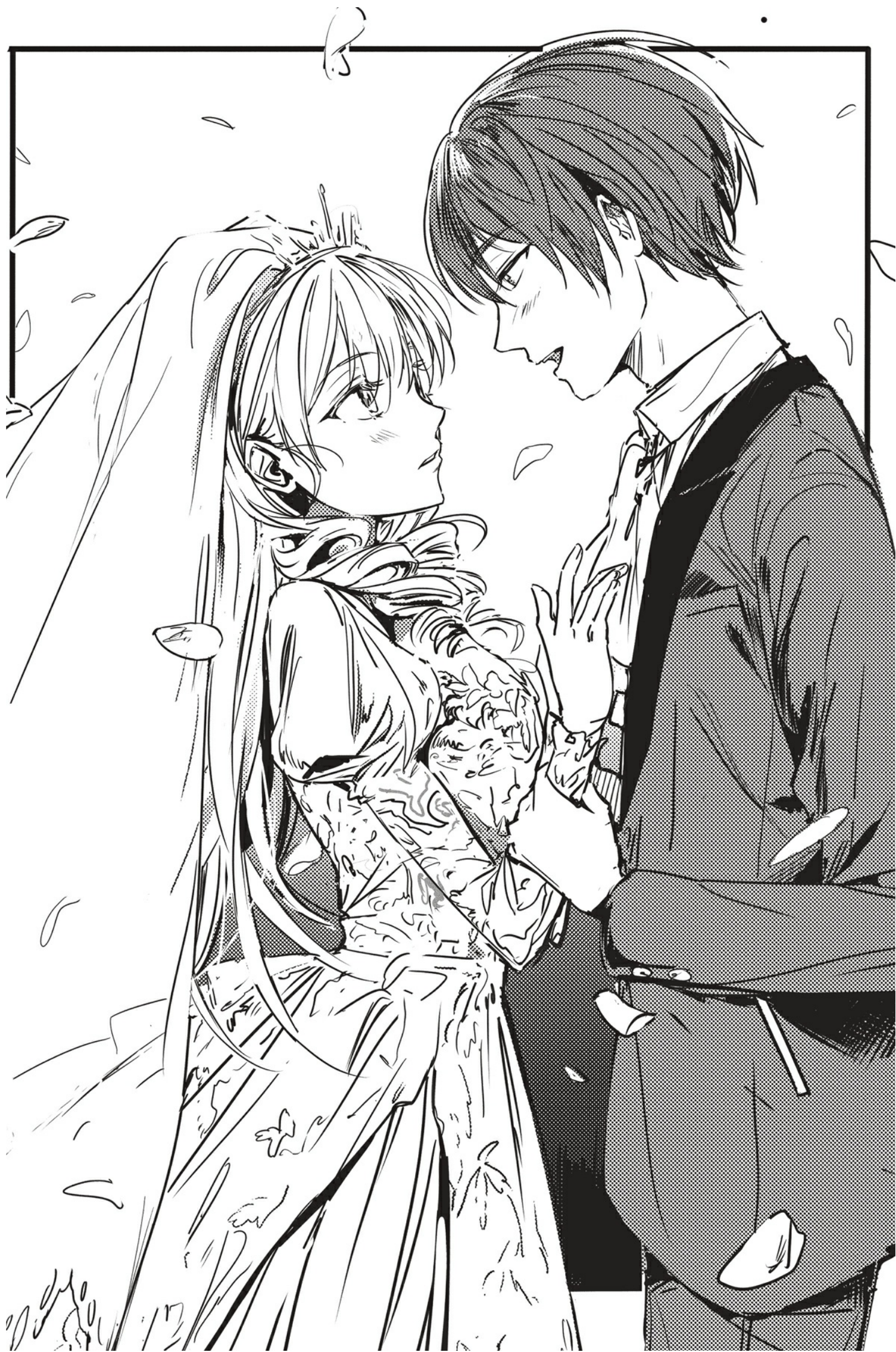
Her face turned red. The door opened again, and Lean stuck her head in.

“Lady Cecilia, the cardinal is calling you,” she said in that innocent voice again.

“R-right, I’m coming!”

“Take care,” said Oscar.

“Will do!” Cecilia replied breezily.



She covered her face until the blush went away, and then, tensing up a bit, she made her way to the lecture hall where the ceremony was to take place.



“You’ve gotten so good at keeping up appearances,” Lean said provocatively to Oscar without looking at him as soon as Cecilia was out of earshot.

“Don’t mock me...”

Oscar’s face turned even redder than before. His blush extended to his ears and neck. Even the back of his hands took on a scarlet hue. He covered the bottom of his face with his hands, peering over them at Lean, who’d been eavesdropping on him and Cecilia.

“Anyone would react like that in my place.”

“I’d say it’s too early to celebrate. It’s not because she’s madly in love with you that Lady Cecilia thinks of your marriage as a done deal.”

“I know that as well as you do, but it still makes me happy when she talk about it. I can’t help it.”

Oscar was regaining his composure, but his statement brought a fresh flush of heat to his face. He covered it with his hands again.

“Fantasize all you want. But if my dear friend really ends up tying the knot with you, you’ll *have* to ensure her happiness. Otherwise, I’ll hate you forever.”

There was a threat in her voice as she said that. Oscar was silent for a moment. Then he smiled.

“Well, that’s easy.”

“Oh? Feeling confident?”

“I know I can do it.”

Lean looked out of the corner of her eye at him. A little smile was playing on Oscar’s lips.

“My, my...,” she said, quietly thrilled with anticipation.



The Selection Ceremony was over, and so was Cecilia's inauguration as the new Holy Maiden. Despite her new title, little would change for her in practice. The citizens of the country were told that a new Holy Maiden had been chosen, but they were kept in the dark about her identity. Meanwhile, the students of Vleugel Academy whispered in surprise that the Church hadn't gone with Lean.

Come April, a fresh crop of students started at Vleugel Academy. The excited new arrivals had multiple objectives: to study, to make new friends, and to have new experiences. But the most important of them was meeting the school prince.

Vleugel Academy had its very own prince.

The prince had a golden crown of blond hair and dazzling sapphire eyes. He was slender-limbed, with an androgynous beauty that attracted students of all genders. He strolled down the academy hallways with silent steps, as graceful and elegant as a pure white rose.

If another student happened to trip up in front of him, he'd swiftly catch her, and whisper in a sweet voice:

"Are you all right, princess?"

That would be enough to send a crowd of students squealing with excitement.

The prince's name was Cecil Admina—but he was just the alter ego of Cecilia Sylvie, daughter of Duke Sylvie, who'd gone to great lengths to avoid being nominated as a Holy Maiden candidate...only to wind up as the new Holy Maiden in the end.

A new academic year of Prince Cecil charming students at Vleugel Academy had begun.



"A letter for you, Your Highness."

Roland listlessly accepted the missive from the maid in his private chamber at the royal palace of Nortracha.

It had been almost two months since the death of his brother Janis. No funeral had been held, and no matter how many days went by, Roland still couldn't accept that his brother was gone forever. Janis' name had even been officially removed from the list of members of the royal family of Nortracha.

Consequently, the fourth-born prince Roland, who had never imagined he would have any chance to succeed the throne, became the crown prince. This caused quite a stir in Nortracha, and Roland had been kept busy taking measures to reassure the citizenry and prevent unrest. This didn't leave him much time for him to personally mourn his brother.

Roland loved Nortracha, but he had mixed feelings about devoting his life to a country which accepted the erasure of his beloved sibling as if he'd never existed in the first place. Still, he had so many cherished memories of living with Janis in Nortracha that he couldn't bring himself to reject his new duty as the crown prince.

Then the letter arrived. Roland had thrown himself into a whirlwind of work to help keep his feelings bottled up. Receiving private correspondences had become unusual.

The sender had not written their name on the envelope. Roland didn't recognize the stamp on the wax seal, either.

He opened the envelope. Inside was not a sheet of writing paper, but a picture. A landscape with mountains in the distance, against a purple sky. On the right-hand side was a withered tree, and in the middle a shimmering, wavy curtain of green and yellow light.

"The aurora!"

Roland quickly turned the postcard over. There was a short message for him on the back.

Sorry I couldn't keep that promise.

"Let's see the aurora together one day"—that was the promise Roland had made with none other than Janis. Postcard and envelope in hand, Roland

dashed out of his room to catch up to the maid who'd brought him the letter.

“Who is this letter from? When did it arrive?”

The maid was thrown by the prince's agitation. Other servants who happened to be nearby also stopped what they were doing to observe what was going on.

“I don't know... Isabelle asked me to take it to Your Highness.”

“What are you saying, Anne? I didn't give you any such letter.”

“Wh-whaaat?”

Listening to the maids' confused exchange, Roland clasped the postcard tighter still. He gazed out of the window.

“Janis...,” he muttered to himself, joy welling up in his heart.

EXTRA **Only You and Me Tonight**

On their way to Nortracha, Cecilia and Oscar shared a room in a border inn. This is the story of what happened that night.

“If you do come over here to me, you accept that I might...do something.”

An hour had passed since Oscar had given Cecilia that warning. They were still in the same bed. Oscar sighed very, very deeply.

He was looking at Cecilia. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing calmly. In her peaceful slumber, she looked like a marvelously detailed doll, or a perfectly realistic sculpture.

She’s beautiful...

Yet it wasn’t her beauty which elicited his deep sigh. Well, maybe his appreciation of her looks also played a part in it, but the main reason for it was that he was feeling fed up, tired, angry, and unjustly tested.

He loudly exhaled all the air from his lungs again. His sighing was poised to continue as long as the distance, or rather, the proximity, between him and Cecilia remained the same.

Why does she sleep like this...?

She was nestled with her head at his chest, sleeping soundly as she clutched his pajama shirt in her fist. Sometimes she’d make a little sound, dreaming.

So cute...

She really was adorable. Insanely so. Maddeningly so. The distance seemed to have been designed to provoke Oscar to maximum effect. It couldn’t have been worse.

He watched her delicate shoulders undulate as she breathed, fighting with all his might against the urge to put his arm around her and pull her into an embrace. Strong as the impulse was, however, he’d managed to resist it so far...

“I warned you, Cecilia. You can’t hold me accountable...”

“Mnn...”

“No. Don’t come any closer...”

As if to tease him, Cecilia had rolled over even closer to him, passing well beyond the area of the bed he’d barred her from. There had been barely any gap between them before that, but as if that wasn’t bad enough, her body was now pressed against his. Oscar’s heartbeat ramped up.

“Right. I’ll sleep alone.”

Oscar sat up. Cecilia was still clutching his shirt, but her hand soon lost the its fight against gravity and fell back on the bed.

As Cecilia had kept inching toward Oscar in her sleep throughout the night, he’d kept moving away from her, until he was right on the edge of the mattress. There was no room left. Turning in his sleep would’ve ended up with him falling off the bed.

Also, his ability to think rationally was at its limit. It really was as if someone had been cruelly testing his self-restraint, and he couldn’t put up with it anymore. If his self-control did fail, it wouldn’t cause a scandal or anything, but he was a man of principle, and wanted everything to be done the right way.

I’d like her to make it clear what she thinks about our relationship before we do anything like that... Argh, my mind’s going places I don’t want it to be!

Oscar scratched his head wildly in an attempt to get the intrusive thoughts out of his mind, then set his feet on the floor.

He could come up with an excuse later if he needed to explain himself. Right now, he needed to get away from Cecilia, for both her sake and his own.

I’ll fit on the sofa if I tuck my knees in, he concluded after looking around the room.

There wasn’t a spare quilt, but he could put a coat over himself. *That should do.* Regardless, it was the lesser of two evils compared to not being able to get a wink of sleep sharing the bed with Cecilia.

Resisting his desires, Oscar shifted his weight to stand up from the bed.

“Where are you going, Oscar?” Cecilia asked, like sleepy toddler who didn’t want her parent to leave her alone.

She’d grabbed onto his shirt again with one hand and was rubbing her eyes with the other.

“Er... To get a glass of water.”

“Lemme come with ya...”

“Why?”

Oscar didn’t need water, but of course he couldn’t tell her the real reason why he was getting out of the bed. Her tone was masculine, as if she were in her Cecil role again.

Is she still half-asleep?

Come morning, she probably wouldn’t even remember waking up and talking to him at night, or having slept clutching his shirtsleeve.

“Are you thirsty?”

“Nah...”

“Then stay in bed.”

He couldn’t have her follow him. If she were thirsty, he’d go get her a glass of water, but otherwise it was best to leave her to fall back asleep. He couldn’t tell her he was going to sleep on the sofa, or she’d make a fuss about feeling guilty for making him uncomfortable. Oscar couldn’t read Cecilia’s every thought like Gilbert could, but that was obvious even to him.

The problem was, she wasn’t letting go of his shirt. He tried pulling his hand away from her, but she kept clutching his sleeve tightly in her fist.

“Let me go,” he said in a low voice.

“I don’t wanna be cold...”

“What am I, a hot-water bottle?”

“Uh...”

On closer inspection, she had goose bumps on her arms. She wasn’t lying

about being cold. So that was the reason she'd kept moving over to him. Oscar sighed, feeling slightly disappointed. Not that he'd seriously entertained the possibility that she'd been subconsciously moving toward him in her sleep because of a secret desire for him.

Well, we are pretty far north...

The shutters on the window were rattling in the wind. It was far colder here than in Algram, but the inn rooms were pretty well-insulated, so Oscar barely noticed the difference. Cecilia, though, must have been more sensitive to cold.

Women have lower skin temperatures than men do, right...?

She was also sleeping in a chemise, while he had on a set of warm pajamas. It was a winter chemise, but it was made in Algram, where the season was warmer.

She tugged at his shirt.

"Oscar..."

"Don't use that begging voice, please."

"Nngh..."

"No moans, either!"

She must have known, on a subconscious level at least, that he'd give in if she begged. Cecilia tugged at his shirt again to stop him from leaving.

"Must be Gilbert's fault you're so spoiled..."

"Nnn? Gil's fault...?"

"Forget it."

He didn't want to talk about her brother—the mere mention of his name arouse jealousy in him. He looked at Cecilia, whose eyes were only barely open.

"You sure you want me back in bed?"

"Hmm?"

"I gave you a warning, didn't I?"

"Warning...?"

“Don’t play silly now...”

She was adorable, but trying to get a straight answer out of her when she was so sleepy was an impossible task. Cecilia had the upper hand—and since Oscar couldn’t be sure if she understood what was going on, he had to behave.

He put his legs back under the covers. Sensing he’d given up on leaving, Cecilia wiggled back to the middle of the bed to give him some space. Oscar positioned himself so that he wouldn’t be at risk of falling off. He paused to think for a moment before lifting the quilt a bit.

“Want to come closer?”

He could’ve just asked someone to bring them an extra blanket. It was the middle of the night, but some of the guards must have been awake to keep them safe. Surely they wouldn’t mind fetching a blanket. But the reason Oscar decided against that was...revenge against Cecilia. He’d warned her not to push past his limits, yet she’d moved to his side of the bed and stopped him from leaving. Granted, she wasn’t fully conscious, but he still felt that she should pay him back for that in some way. It would be his little treat.

Cecilia half-opened her eyes and sleepily scooted over to him, snuggling up with her head against his chest as before. She was fast asleep a few seconds later.

“So it’s lights out as soon as you feel warm, hmm?”

Just like a little kid, he thought, stroking her honey-blond hair. But the sweet scent of her body wasn’t like a small child’s—it was that of a grown woman. And he found it mercilessly tempting.

Oscar sighed, wondering if he could actually drift off next to her. At this point he was mentally prepared for a sleepless night.

Cecilia always got her way with him. Worryingly, he’d been letting her get away with more and more lately, since being wrapped around her finger had begun to feel quite good to him. He was really hopelessly in love with her.

Oscar wrapped his arm over her, drawing her closer. She giggled happily.

“Aw, Ichika...”

“Huh? Ichika? Who’s that...?”

Oscar didn’t like the sound of Cecilia fondly calling another’s name in her sleep. It should be his name she was calling out...but no, wait, had she done that, Oscar wouldn’t be able to restrain himself any longer.

“I don’t know who this Ichika is, but it’s me, Oscar, by your side tonight.”

He said that out loud only because he was sure Cecilia wouldn’t hear him. She was too deeply asleep to register that he’d said something to her. But hearing his own voice made the fact that he was sleeping next to Cecilia seem more real to him somehow.

I have her all to myself tonight...

He had Cecilia—the popular girl (boy?) at the academy, his fiancée, his crush—all to himself. It was just the two of them that night.

Something came over him that moment. A devil’s whisper. His carefully suppressed desire reared its head.

“Mnngh...”

Cecilia moaned in her sleep, her voice so close to his ear. He became acutely aware of the fact that he was holding her in an embrace, much tighter than when he’d reached over to draw her toward him. At some point, he’d unconsciously wrapped both his arms around her, holding her so that their bodies were pressed together snugly, heart to heart, melting into each other’s warmth. She was so delicate. He heard her joints move as he slid down on the bed, his ear rubbing against hers, her heart thumping. He slid lower and nuzzled her neck. When her breath tickled the back of his earlobe, the flames of passion engulfed his body.

To Oscar’s temporary relief, a sense of bliss and love came first, but his primal urges soon followed. He quickly parted from Cecilia before his lust could totally blind him.

“What am I doing...?!”

His voice was husky with desire. Even though he feared he might lose control and take liberties with Cecilia, Oscar couldn’t force himself to leave the bed. He

lay there, at an arm's length away from her, gazing at her face.

"I love you."

How many times would he have to say it before his one-sided struggle to rein in his desire was allowed to end? Not that he wanted her to wake up and reply to him. Voicing his feelings gave him a bit of release, allowing him to keep his distance from Cecilia.

"I love you."

As expected, she didn't say anything in reply. But...

"Tee-hee..."

She giggled, obliviously innocent as usual.



Cecilia woke up when the morning sunshine streaming in through the windows fell on her face. She looked up at the ceiling and exhaled deeply, feeling very heavy for some reason. She turned her head toward the window and saw the sun was already high. Had she overslept? She narrowed her eyes, sighing.

Am I unwell?

Waking up late, her body feeling heavy—those weren't good signs. Her head was still hazy from sleep, but she thought she should get up and get dressed. But for some reason, she couldn't get up.

"What's going on?"

Cecilia stared back at the ceiling, puzzled. She couldn't sit up. Something was preventing her from moving. She realized that her body wasn't heavy, but that there was something pinning her down. Something like a big wooden log was weighing her down. It was wrapped around her, preventing her from moving. It was too heavy for her to extricate herself.

Suddenly, the thing around her pulled her closer. It was only then that it became clear to her she hadn't gotten stuck under a strange log—obviously. It was an arm.

My back feels so warm...

Someone else's body heat was warming her back.

Cecilia was fully awake now, but her head was spinning, and she couldn't make sense of the situation. Hearing a sleepy moan behind her, she jerkily twisted around, anxious to see who it was. She must have anticipated their identity some level, of course. It was Oscar, still asleep.

"!!!"

Cecilia let out a voiceless scream of shock. She *had* noticed she was unusually warm last night. She hadn't been sleeping very well because it had been so cold the past few days, but she'd slept like a baby last night, despite remembering being cold when she got in the bed. Was this extra warmth from Oscar the reason for her good night's sleep?

That was so embarrassing... She wanted to dig a hole and hide in shame.

She was still staring at Oscar in bed next to her, not knowing what to do, when somebody knocked on the door. Without waiting for a response, a servant stuck her head in. It was one of the maids who'd come with them, aware that Cecil was Cecilia in disguise.

"Good morning, Your Highness and Lady Ce...cil...ia..."

The servant must have come to wake them up when they didn't show despite the late hour. She saw the two of them in bed and just stared for a moment, dumbstruck.

"Er..."

"..."

"..."

Their eyes met before the servant girl glanced at Oscar, peacefully asleep with his arm around Cecilia. The maid straightened her back.

"I sincerely apologize for the intrusion! I'll let the kitchen know to serve breakfast at a later time. Please excuse me!"

"N-no, wait!"

But the girl had already shut the door behind her. It was silent in the room again.

A moment later, Cecilia turned toward Oscar and cried out almost tearfully.

“O-Oscar, wake up! Let go of me! Someone’s just come and seen us!”

Oscar shifted and slowly opened his eyes at last.

“Os—”

“Good morning, Cecilia,” he said sleepily, smiling at her with pure happiness.

Cecilia’s panic disappeared in an instant, replaced by profound bashfulness.

“G-good morning...,” she managed to reply, blushing. Oscar gave her another smile, and his heavy eyelids shut again.

Afterword

Hello everyone! It's Hiroro Akizakura here!

Thank you so much for picking up *Cross-Dressing Villainess Cecilia Sylvie*, Volume 5!

I'm feeling quite emotional here. To be honest with you, I didn't think the story would make it to its fifth volume. I wouldn't have written so much if it weren't for you, my dear readers. Thank you for supporting *Cecilia Sylvie*!

In this volume, we reach the end of the scenario of the game the world is based on, *Holy Maiden of Vleugel Academy 3*, Janis' evil plans are thwarted for good (?), and Cecilia finally starts to firmly gravitate to just one romantic interest. I can finally breathe easy now that I've safely brought all these plot threads to a conclusion!

I actually wanted to focus more on romance, and see Roland heal from trauma, but hey, I've got to leave something for the next volume! I'm good at the romantic stuff, so trust me, you've definitely got something to look forward to!

I'll be publishing bit by bit online whenever inspiration strikes, so if you get tired of waiting for the next volume, check out the Web story!

I've got some news for you—a *Cross-Dressing Villainess Cecilia Sylvie* audio drama will be available soon! Huh? That's old news? Well, it used to be offered only as a bonus that came with the books, but now it's going to be available for purchase as a stand-alone product. And this time, it's finally going to feature Cecilia as well! Now that's exciting, right?! I wrote the script for it, and it's all brand-new stuff, of course! Don't miss this fresh installment of Cecilia's manic love comedy adventures!

As always, I have so many people to thank for contributing!

First of all, a huge thanks to Dangmill for the cover art and illustrations! The

cover art is gorgeous as ever. All the covers Dangmill has created for me are my special treasures! And the illustrations—so adorable! I love them!

Shino Akiyama, thank you for creating an amazing manga based on my story! I have you to thank for my books reaching an incredible half a million copies sold. I can't wait to read more of your manga version of Cecilia's adventures!

Another big bunch of thanks goes out to everyone at Beans Bunko editing department! Thank you for taking my crazy fantasies, turning them into novels, and delivering them to my readers far and wide! You made it possible for me to stay afloat as a writer. I hope we'll get to create lots more fun books together!

Last but not least, my dear readers! As I already wrote earlier, it's thanks to you that I can keep publishing my stories! Allow me to keep entertaining you in the world of my imagination!

I feel blessed to have so many supporters who've enable me to make my novels a physical reality! I'll keep doing my best for all of you, so please be there for me!

May fate allow us to meet again on the pages of another book...

Hiroro Akizakura

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