



Kakkaku Akashi
Illustration by Kayahara

2

Miss SAVAGE FANG

✦ The Strongest Mercenary in History Is Reincarnated

as an Unstoppable Noblewoman ✦

A detailed anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, dark hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a blue, open jacket over a black lace bra and a black skirt. She has a small black bow in her hair. The background is a soft, glowing light with some sparkles.

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Colette

Imperial princess of Colorne,
a military superpower.

After being rescued from a
kidnapping by Mylene—whose
heroics she witnessed with her
own two eyes—she started to
care for her as more than just
a friend.

**THE ALLURING
PRINCESS**

Mylene

A girl imbued with ultimate magic power whose hair signifies she is beloved by God. She is the reincarnation of the strongest mercenary in history, Savage Fang. Her current agony is her class's entry for a festival at the magic academy she attends.

"Let's show everyone just how beautiful we are."

"Hey, when you're dressed like this, it's *more* embarrassing to stay uncomfortable."

Albert

His feelings for Mylene are beyond a crush—he reveres the very ground she walks on. At first glance, he looks like a beautiful girl, but he's actually Eltania's prince and Mylene's betrothed. After seeing his vision of an ideal "man" in Mylene, he became her devoted worshipper.

"Welcome to our café! How many are in your party?"

"Please, don't stare at me-e... I-I'm still a prince, you know..."

Melissa

A priestess who can receive prophecies from the Lord Eltania, and a classmate of Mylene and company. When she received a divination stating that the person with the Hair of Sulberia would impact the world, she decided to spy on Mylene.

A MAIDEN'S TRIAL

“This ends *now*.
I’ve had enough
of your shitty
threepenny drama!”

The magic light condensed and hardened into the shape of a sword, taking on a reddish-white hue. The blade shone brighter with each pulse of magic I fed it—



Contents



Prologue: The Zealots Creep in
the Shadows

Chapter One: Normalcy

Chapter Two: Power

Chapter Three: Cause and Effect

Chapter Four: Priestess

Chapter Five: Contact

Chapter Six: Prophecy

Chapter Seven: Infiltration

Chapter Eight: Festival

Chapter Nine: The Future

Interlude

Chapter Ten: Preparations

Chapter Eleven:
Blossoming Women

Chapter Twelve: Café

Chapter Thirteen: Theatre

Chapter Fourteen: Mythos

Epilogue: The Little Lady
Fights Closefisted

Afterword



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YEN
ON
New York



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Kakkaku Akashi Illustration by Kayahara

Translation by Sarah Moon

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SAVAGE FANG OJOSAMA Vol. 2 SHIJOSAIKYO NO YOHEI HA SHIJOSAIKYO NO BOGYAKU
REIJO

TONATTE NIDOME NO SEKAI WO MUSOSURU

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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue: The Zealots Creep in the Shadows](#)

[Chapter One: Normalcy](#)

[Chapter Two: Power](#)

[Chapter Three: Cause and Effect](#)

[Chapter Four: Priestess](#)

[Chapter Five: Contact](#)

[Chapter Six: Prophecy](#)

[Chapter Seven: Infiltration](#)

[Chapter Eight: Festival](#)

[Chapter Nine: The Future](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Chapter Ten: Preparations](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Blossoming Women](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Café](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Theatre](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Mythos](#)

[Epilogue: The Little Lady Fights Closefisted](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



PROLOGUE

The Zealots Creep in the Shadows

Not a single beam of sunlight reached the stone room. Only the flame in the furnace dyed the rustic walls in golden glow as the shadows of several people floated in the dim.

“Pearlman’s failure comes as a surprise.”

An androgynous voice echoed softly from the deep shadow within the hood of a robe. The uttered name belonged to someone who was supposed to be with them—someone with a *face*.

“You think so? But Pearlman was away from violence for quite some time.”

“But his skill was genuine. And his synthesis with Dia Milus was successful.”

“He was quite vigilant, I will give him that. I rather trusted the fellow, but alas.”

A number of voices expressed their dissenting or assenting opinions. The majority sided with the first speaker.

Pearlman was the name of a professor at Zelfore Academy who’d helped popularize contraband narcotics to the children of nobility who attended there.

But in truth, he was a high-ranking member of a cult known as Gods of the Moon. He was a mighty sorcerer with ability to house one of the cult’s gods in his body and wield its powers.

“I suppose *surprise* is the most apt way of putting it. It appears we cannot take the powers of the cursed *God’s Gift* lightly.”

That mighty sorcerer had been defeated—by a lone girl.

That was why they had all gathered in this room. Because the impossible had transpired.

A frivolous-looking man lightly tapped a stack of papers. “It’s bloody incomprehensible. I heard this Mylene Petule was an unscrupulous, self-destructive witch who needed no help in her own demise. It seems out of character for her to defeat someone as powerful as Pearlman to save her friends.”

The owner of the androgynous voice folded their arms again. “Correct. According to our reports, her personality underwent an abrupt shift one day.”

“Odds are, Eltania did something to her. That filthy, cursed god!” a man of incredibly large stature howled in anger.

The hooded cultists nodded in unison. The light of the flame illuminated their deep hatred toward the god Eltania in their twisted frowns.

“But we cannot ignore this. The vessel Eltania so devotedly constructed is most suitable for *our* lord. We must prepare the ultimate vessel for our Sovereign God Lesewelk’s resurrection—Mylene Petule must die.”

Though the speaker’s voice was soft, the words were turbid with malice. The animosity was directed not only at Eltania, but at Mylene herself.

“The more I think about it, the angrier I get. If that cursed Eltania hadn’t meddled, Mylene would have fallen to destruction on her own—everything would have gone according to our design.”

“I hear the *current* Mylene Petule is steadfastly devoted to her training. She was powerful enough to defeat Pearlman—if she invokes Eltania to possess her, it’s game over. We must do something to stop her before it’s too late.”

“You’re saying we must strike quickly?”

The frivolous man cheerfully broke the gloom in the air. With a smile in his voice, he said, “One of our grandmasters has already been defeated—I don’t

think we can be too careful.”

“...Fair point. I suppose we shouldn’t write her off as just a girl.”

The murmuring voices of the frivolous man’s comrades were gloomy in contrast. They realized just how grave the situation was.

But the man continued, merrily as ever, “So I have a suggestion—why don’t we use *Garoh*?”

“Mm...” The large man grunted when he heard the name Garoh, the *hungry wolf*.

But a placid voice firmly shot down the idea. “We can’t use him—he’s still undergoing adjustment. According to his nature, we cannot afford even the slight possibility of failure. I think you’re aware of that.”

“I am. But if he lost to Eltania’s *bitch*, wouldn’t that only prove he wasn’t worthy in the first place?”

“Bold words, Victor. Besides...” The owner of the placid voice lowered their tone and weaved these words into the gloomy air: “It’s the *opposite* scenario that’s truly terrifying. If *he* gains complete control over his powers, he might *overtake* chaos and return everything to nothingness. Remember your place, everyone. We serve a calamity with sentience.”

“Ohh, well, excuse me. If he’s *that* powerful, I’d say that’s all the more reason we should witness his power for ourselves at least once.”

The man called Victor kept his smarminess in his playful apology. Evil magic smoldered between the glaring pair—only to be extinguished like a candle blowing out.

“...Well, no matter. The existence of someone like you is chaos as well. We all share the doctrine of our Sovereign God.”

“I’m not surprised you’d say that,” Victor snorted cynically, spreading his arms wide. “It’s that sentiment that brought you here in the first place.”

The androgynous voice snorted quietly, but there wasn’t a hint of annoyance in it.

“If you ask me, I don’t care one bit about God. But I heavily sympathize with

the doctrine you all proselytize, and I'm very interested in what kind of world a bunch of like-minded people can create together. I mean to stay and help, until our ideal world is achieved."

Victor put a hand to his chest and bowed as if he were giving a recitation. His speech received a chorus of snorts.

"That is most agreeable of you. Now, tell us, how *specifically* do you mean to help us?" With a slight twinge of annoyance, the owner of the placid voice remained calm as a stagnant pool of water.

Both parties likely foresaw such an exchange. The corners of Victor's lips twisted upward in delight. Those were the words he was waiting to hear. Like an actor making a grand entrance from the wings, he grandly removed his hood to reveal his face, shining with beauty.

"Allow me—Victor Ludland—to dispose of Eltania's *bitch*. From what I've heard, she possesses a bewitching beauty. As she will become the vessel for our Sovereign God, I'd love to see her for myself."

Victor smiled like a young lad. Slight of frame and pure of smile, his boyish beauty turned the heads of men and women alike...but beneath his shining eyes lay the filthy sludge of chaos.

"So I was right... *That* was your goal all along."

"Well, I'd also like to see Garoh completed, if all goes well. Violence isn't exactly my forte either, but I think I'm more comfortable with killing than Pearlman."

"Yes...yes, I suppose you are. Our lord does enjoy your clear and crafty *modus operandi*."

But everyone in that room was cut from the same cloth. Men who claimed they were comfortable with killing and others who accepted it without question. Even the owner of the arguably gentle-sounding voice spoke in a way that could hardly be deemed normal.

"All right, we'll let you handle God's Bitch for now. How you do it is up to you. Either way, our existence is gradually becoming known. At this rate, we might as well put on a garish show—what better way to announce the dawning of a

new era.”

“Then you’ve chosen the right man for the job! Garish showmanship is my specialty.”

“Indeed it is. Well, don’t fail us, Victor.”

“Understood. I, Victor, shall present the perfect show for our Sovereign God Lesewelk! To that end, may I borrow some capable helping hands?”

“You may. I have high hopes of your success.”

With a satisfied smile, Victor gave the grand bow of an actor, then changed the direction he was facing with a broad pirouette. As he waved his hand and put the room behind him, he returned to his former frivolous demeanor.

“When he said he was comfortable with killing, that wasn’t just a line,” the androgynous voice murmured as Victor walked away.

“Victor: the father of tragedy. His faith is flimsy, but his earnest sympathy for our doctrine and his praxis are exemplary.”

The owner of the androgynous voice rose, turning away from the circular table. Before them stood a statue of a man with a beast’s head, looking down at the table.

“Life is like a fluid stream. If the water stops flowing, it stagnates and rots. And likewise, all living beings must flow with blood. If their blood stops flowing, they die. To prevent this—the world must always be in a state of flow.”

The androgynous person turned around again, glancing at the remaining leaders—the grandmasters.

“We are the wave. The only tiny pulse remaining in this world. Before this world rots, we must destroy Eltania—harbinger of the stagnation called tranquility—and return it to a state of everchanging chaos.”

They raised their hands slowly. Their movement was calm but evoked a distinct madness.

“Glory to Lesewelk! Sovereign of Gods of the Moon.”

“A chaotic world!”

“A fluid world!”

And with that, the fanatics made their move...

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A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with ornate scrollwork at both ends and a small central ornament.

CHAPTER ONE

Normalcy

Time had passed since the narcotics trafficking scandal that shook the academy. It was hardly more than a few months, but the only students who still remembered it vividly were those directly involved and racked with guilt, and the teachers were also desperate to forget that the cause of it all was one of their own.

And as for Pearlman—the wolf in teacher’s clothing who was strict on some occasions, gentle at others, and rising in popularity—it was only a matter of time before his name was forgotten.

But some people still remembered him vividly. I was one of them. And while I sometimes let myself get lost in the peaceful days of my second life, I wasn’t carefree enough to completely forget about the enemies who threatened the peace.

And as for the others who still remembered—

“Huff...huff...! I can do this all day!”

“And so can I...Princess Colette!”

—they were my two royal friends, Colette and Albert.

Colette imbued her practice sword with magic and unleashed it at her opponent, her tight, muscular body dancing as she swung. And Albert, while aware of his inferiority in strength, kept pace with the combat-superior Colette,

aiming to support her to the best of his abilities.

They were facing off against me.

Realizing his reserve energy was insufficient, Albert opened the entirety of his magic and charged at me. He was trying to provoke me into giving Colette an opening to strike me.

Not constricted by the notion of how a woman or man should be, he respected people for their talent—it was a tolerant worldview that I admired. The guy had balls, to eagerly play the part of a pawn not out of weak-mindedness, but out of statistical pragmatism.

I twisted my upper body to dodge the broad sideswipe of his sword. His attack missed me, but Albert let his momentum carry him behind me, flanking me with Colette on the other side.

Meanwhile, Colette understood his sudden move. Albert had telegraphed it to her clearly. They were both talented warriors and had arrived at the same answer simultaneously. I didn't know about Albert behind me, but from Colette's gaze, I could tell the two had exchanged a glance.

A magic energy nurtured by her bloodline, talent, and hard work surged inside of her. It would be an attack I couldn't block with one hand while fending off Albert with the other. And because of that—

I spun backward before Colette could strike.

“Wha—! Bffehh?!”

My wide movement confused Albert, but the jab to his chin made him cry out in pain immediately after. I had kicked him while I was spinning backward. The force of my kick sent Albert's lightweight body flying... Then there was a resounding thud behind the spot where he once stood.

I let my momentum carry me back to my original position, giving me ample time to fix my stance and block Colette's sword.

“Oof...!”

“Excellent swing, Princess. I see you've improved not only your swordplay, but your magic as well.”

I had taken the impact of her blade, but it was Colette who was gasping for air. Colette swung at me, and I blocked her sword. As we repeated the dance, our respective confidences reached an equilibrium, then reversed.

The moment Colette let me see the intense pressure and fatigue she was under, I repelled her sword with vigor.

“Ah!” she yelped, shocked from the sudden surge of numbness in her.

Her practice sword flew, hitting the stone floor with a pretty clank. Meanwhile, I thrust my practice blade at her with ample breath and grace.

“You put up a valiant fight, Princess. Your spirit and strategy have improved yet again. I am deeply impressed.”

With a soft smile, I sheathed my practice sword and offered Colette my hand. Her dropped jaw twisted into a smile as she took it.

“Dammit all! I lost again!” Colette screamed loud and bitter to console herself. Then she grinned again. “That was...amazing! I was sure we’d win this time, but not even the two of us together could touch you!”

“Ow-w-w...I agree, Princess. While I didn’t think we could beat Miss Mylene, I thought we would at least last a little longer... I’m shocked that she still had the energy to defeat us, even though she was going easy on us.”

As I helped Colette off the ground, Albert approached us, rubbing his chin. Their praise made me itch a little, but I forced a composed expression onto my face and said back to them, “Well, if I had to describe my fighting style, it assumes a siege of multiple opponents.”

My sword technique was inspired by my mercenary days where one versus a crowd—or a crowd versus a crowd—was the norm. In my past life before my current one as Mylene, I’d taken these sorts of battles for granted.

When I was going up against Albert and Colette, who had never really practiced as a team before, I could easily defeat them both while still dividing a fraction of my magic between them.

“Cooperative combat is a highly specialized skill,” I explained. “Its biggest asset is the ability to attack simultaneously, but to succeed at landing a joint

strike, you must both be hyperaware of your opponent's position—sometimes that even got in your way, right? And while it's true that I held back my magic, I suspect neither of you unleashed your full potential either."

"Hmm... You know, you're right," Colette said. "I suppose landing a simple cooperative attack requires a burst of energy."

"And our opponent's positioning did indeed add more clutter to our minds," Albert agreed.

"Exactly. You both are fast learners. I am incredibly pleased."

I couldn't help but smile at my two capable pupils. After the fight with Gods of the Moon, Colette and Albert had begged me to train them. Before the ordeal, I used to train after class as a habit, and Albert and Colette often joined me, but since Colette and I were nothing more than friendly rivals, while we might spar or offer casual words of advice, I was not in a position to actually teach her anything.

But now, Colette had humbled herself and begged me to teach her magic and the sword.

"We don't want to suffer the same humiliation twice," she replied in earnest. "Of course I'm desperate to learn."

And it was Pearlman who had changed her. Learning of the existence of a cult with magic beyond human knowledge and being kidnapped by them had forced Colette to swallow her pride as my friendly rival and beg to become my student.

"I feel the same way," Albert said. "Next time, I want to be able to stand proud and help you, Miss Mylene."

The crisis had also made Albert uncomfortably aware of his inadequacy. His valiant spirit defied his angelic looks—and I couldn't have been prouder.

"At the very least..." I began, "with that fighting style, you shouldn't need any help from me. As I've said a thousand times, Albert, you are the prince of Eltania. You must understand that your life does not belong you alone."

But my praise could only apply to him as a man. He was a prince, so I could not let him sacrifice himself like a pawn in a fight.

“Er—o-of course I’ll be more defensive in a real battle. After all, the great Miss Mylene taught me so!”

“If you value my teaching so much, here’s a lesson you ought to cram into your skull first: You should never be in a *real battle* to begin with.”

“Oh—oh...!”

If Albert were defeated in combat, Eltania would be forced into a war of retribution. And if it came to that, Gods of the Moon would make great strides bringing about their *world of chaos*. The motherfucking world from my past life, that is.

I’d beaten him over the head with that advice, but he just wouldn’t take it. It made a guy wanna clutch his head and scream.

If we weren’t at school right now (back garden aside) and away from potential witnesses, I would have scolded him and given his head a good smacking—but I was already putting all my energy into minding my language. There was no way I could land a proper punch in these conditions.

It ain’t easy being a little lady.

“Now, now, don’t tease him so,” Colette said, offering some kind words to the cowering prince. “A little spirit is nice—shows his potential as a man.”

“If you ask me, Princess, you need to tone it down a little as well. But as you are technically the princess of another nation, it frustrates me that I cannot use stronger language with you.”

If ya asked me, *Colette* was the one who needed to calm her shit. Colorne and Eltania were both considered powerful nations, but the truth was that there was no comparison between the atrophied Eltania and Colorne, an empire that had spent the last several decades at war.

If Colette were to die, the lion would rampage in a berserk rage. I wasn’t all that interested in world peace, but if war literally erupted across the whole world over, I couldn’t exactly say it wasn’t my problem.

“Wise as ever, Mylene! Well...if you promise to be my wife, I suppose I could take the advice of somebody I’m entrusting the future to.”

If marrying her was all it would take to get her to listen to me, I could think of no better scenario than that...but as Colette pouted hintingly at me, my lips twitched a little.

I'd lived as a girl for a long time now, but I still felt like a man at heart. Colette was a beautiful and openhearted girl—becoming intimate with her was not unappealing.

“Princess...you're *still* going on about that? Do forgive me, but that is a burden far too heavy for the shoulders of a common daughter of the nobility such as I...”

But it was painfully obvious that coupling with an empress from the most powerful empire in the world would be beyond your common hassle.

For a start, it was highly dubious that Colorne would allow its princess to marry another woman. In which case, I guess I'd be regarded as a mistress of sorts? Yeah, no thanks. I'd rather not be tucked away in a closet somewhere until I die.

“Q-uite right!” Albert stammered. “Besides, Miss Mylene is the pride of Eltania! And, with all due respect, she is also *my* fiancée, you know?!”

Yes, in addition to all that, I'm engaged to this guy. If the princess from the neighboring empire plundered their prince's fiancée, the entire kingdom of Eltania would lose face. And Eltania and Colorne's relationship would be screwed.

“I know there's many obstacles,” Colette conceded. “And as I am now, I am unworthy to stand by your side, Mylene.”

“*Please*, Colette, don't flippantly dismiss everything as an *obstacle*!”

“Can I help it if everything else seems trivial in the face of love?”

Luckily, Colette was a smart girl. She seemed to understand the intricacies of the issue and wasn't planning on marrying me tomorrow. (Then again, behind her words, it was clear she was keen to screw everything up royally in the future.)

Colette and Albert snipped back and forth like this for a while, until the

princess suddenly glanced at the clock.

“Would you look at the time? It pains me to leave, but I had a little matter to tend to.”

She seemed to be telling the truth—though something in her words felt a little off to me.

Albert voiced my suspicion. “Oh my, it’s not every day that Princess Colette prioritizes an errand over spending time with Miss Mylene—is it important?”

“Let me guess...is it related to the scandal?”

Colette was, in a word, self-righteous. She did the things she wanted to do and didn’t do the things she didn’t want to do. She had a *characteristic* simplicity to her.

Having said that, it was incredibly unusual for her to cut short her training session with me to run an *errand*. If it was so important that she couldn’t refuse, I could only conclude it had something to do with our little run-in with Gods of the Moon.

“Mm...yeah. Well...I suppose you could say it’s related to it...and not related to it... No—it’s a personal matter. Aww, are you worried about me?”

“I merely thought...that it might mean your errand was related to me as well.”

“There you go again, Mylene. Always so cold.” Colette innocently snickered.

It seemed it truly wasn’t anything to worry about. Perhaps it was quite simple, and Colette was just interested in other things. I was a little miffed that she’d meant what she said, but it was better than something legitimately serious.

Still, it was a little concerning that she seemed nervous. Was it something she felt guilty about?

“Well, I’ll take my leave, then. See you later, Mylene, Prince Albert.”

“Oh! Er, yes, see you tomorrow, Princess Colette,” Albert stammered.

“Do have a safe walk home.”

If she won’t tell me willingly, there’s no point in thinking about it.

Colette waved and slipped out of the back garden where we trained.

Well, guess I might as well take her cue and call our training session quits for the—

“Miss Mylene, what shall we do after this? If you have the time, I would love to receive some more lessons from you... At the very least, I’d like to catch up to Princess Colette.”

“Yes, Your Highness. If that’s what you want, I shall gladly comply.”

If he was game, then I was glad to join him. Little guy had balls, asking someone stronger than him to kick his ass—I liked it.

“Heh... Now, come at me however you wish.”

Saying this, I gripped my practice sword again. As I watched Albert stand firm and let the magic energy flow within him, I snorted and smirked.

Would ya look at that? Weak little prince is growing up.

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with ornate scrollwork at both ends and a small knot-like ornament in the center.

CHAPTER TWO

Power

“Thank you so much, Miss Mylene! I think I’ve made progress.”

“Oh, thank *you* for giving me an opportunity to review the basics. If there’s anything else you need, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

As the schoolgirl thanked me profusely and dashed away, waving with vigor, I plastered a smile on my face and waved daintily back.

It had gotten quite late. Noticing the counseling room was deserted, I yawned and gave a stretch just short of what would be called unladylike.

It would be time for lights-out soon. I had stayed up this late helping a classmate study magic—while wearing my good-girl mask, mind you! Just look at me. Teaching! Sometimes I’m shocked at how nice I’ve gotten.

I scoff...but in all honesty, it wasn’t all an act or a fanciful whim. Aside from the upper crust, the students at the Zelfore Academy of Magic were all sons and daughters of nobility. I had to get them in my debt—which was an exaggerated way of putting it, but at the very least, if I made a good impression with them, they might be useful connections for me in the future. It was a calculated wager.

And then again, I was telling the truth when I said it was a good review for me.

Most of the first-year curriculum here consisted of basic techniques. It was

material I had already studied on my own, but there were sections I'd skipped over. Those were new to me. And teaching somebody else the material out loud was the perfect way for me to retain it.

So anyway, that's how these nighttime study consultations had come to be a habit of mine. It made me realize I'd really gotten the hang of this *well-bred little lady* life.

I looked around the mostly empty room. One of the seats that should have been occupied was empty today. I clasped my hands and heaved a heavy sigh.

I hadn't seen Colette since she'd left our evening training session early. The mysterious errand of hers was starting to tug on my conscience. If it was something she couldn't tell us about...if it had something to do with Gods of the Moon—

"Shit..." A curse escaped my lips. I'd forgotten I was in the counseling room, but thankfully, I was too quiet to be heard.

Even if somebody had overheard my profane utterance, my good-girl facade was so expertly constructed that they would doubt their ears. I tried to console myself with this thought, but traces of anger still remained.

If I'd known Colette was gonna be out this late, I should've gone looking for her before lights-out. I wasn't gonna sleep well with this on my conscience.

Oh well. Guess I'll search for Colette after curfew. Heaving a decisive sigh, I departed for my room.

The girls' dormitory at the Zelfore Academy of Magic was (and I hear it's the same for the boys' dorms) divided into double rooms. Though it had its imperfections, Zelfore was a prep school for little rich kids—if there were some *mistake*, they'd be in big trouble—so the rich kids were paired off with roommates who served as their watchers.

That being said, a fellow student guarding you didn't amount to much. It was customary for a roommate to *coincidentally* have an extra-long bathroom break just before you got into trouble. And it was a friendly relationship with your roommate that made such things possible.

In other words, those debts the other students racked up in the counseling

room came in handy. My roommate Holly had her own fair share of debt as well. She was a homely girl with red hair. We weren't in the same class, but since she was quiet, we got along okay.

If I give her the backstory, she should help me with my current problem.

"That girl really is a pain in the ass. Okay, I'm technically hurting my own ass voluntarily, but still."

I made sure I was alone in the hallway as I cursed under my breath.

Shit, this ain't like me. I don't even know for sure it's about Gods of the Moon. Why am I so pissed off just because Colette went off on her own for a few hours?

If my former self saw me like this, he'd gag. I gave a self-deprecating snort as I arrived at my room and touched the doorknob—and erased all traces of emotion from my face.

Somebody's in there. And it's not Holly.

I paused.

Don't tell me they came to get me at school.

I masked my magic energy as much as I could, then burst into the room!

"Mylene!"

The moment I entered, somebody called my name and ran toward me.

I filled my fists with magic, thinking it was Gods of the Moon. But what I saw instead was—

"Wha...Colette?!"

It was my friend who'd disappeared earlier that evening. While I was stunned and immobilized, she flung her arms tightly around me.

"Wh-where the hell have you been—what're ya *doin'* here?!"

"Mmm! It's my *authentic* Mylene! I've missed you! We haven't had many chances to be alone lately!"

"*Aaagh!* Get off, you clingy bitch!"

I tried to pry Colette off me without hurting her, but her iron grip proved impossible escape. But after I let her squeeze me for a while, Colette suddenly relaxed her hold on me. Just when her clinginess had gotten unbearable, it was almost a letdown to be suddenly free.

With a little cough, I gave the widely beaming girl a dubious stare. “Ah, shit... what the hell are *you* doing here? First ya leave evening training early, then ya disappear until curfew—what gives?”

As I scratched my head thinking about how she was driving me crazy, Colette gave a little snort, and her smile softened.

“Hee-hee! You were worried about me, weren’t you? I can tell.”

I spat quietly, angry that she saw right through me.

Yeah, that’s right, motherfucker. Your keen sense of human emotion despite your naive exterior is peak-royalty shit—and it pisses me off.

Savage Fang would roll his eyes if he heard about this. But the truth was, a part of me was relieved to see Colette smiling.

“Shut up,” I muttered. “So what’s up? If you’ve got nothin’ to say, I don’t mind, but what the hell are you doing in my room this late? What did you come here for? I doubt even the great powers of Colorne can pacify the dorm matron.”

It irked me to be stuck in the palm of her hand. I evoked the name of the dorm matron—a name that sent terror down the spines of all the students in the girls’ dormitory—and asked Colette what she was doing in my room at this hour.

Crossing her arms in satisfaction, Colette gave a snort. “I didn’t come here for anything! I didn’t come here specially to see you either, Mylene.”

“Huhhh?” I raised my eyebrow at her nonanswer.

She had no reason to come here, and neither had she come to see me. That only meant she was here to see my roommate Holly, but she was nowhere to be found.

“Hee-hee... You’re smart. Surely you’ve figured it out by now?”

Colette's smug. Like she thinks she's won something. Could it be—

"No...you didn't—!"

"I'm waiting in my room before lights-out—wouldn't you say I'm a model dorm resident?"

Did this bitch pull some strings and switch room assignments?!

The Zelfore Academy of Magic was a school attended by sons and daughters of the nobility. As such, the school was used to their entitled complaints. It took a lot to get them to consider the personal wishes of the students...

"Oh god... You used the incident to get your way. And that's what your little errand was this evening..."

"Now, now, don't put words in my mouth. All I did was tell them they would get in trouble if my father found out about the incident."

The academy had a weakness. The princess of the great empire of Colorne had been kidnapped by a drug-pushing cult and nearly lost her life. It was a huge scandal, and her school was covering it up. If Colorne found out that its princess was involved in such an incident, we'd have an international crisis on our hands.

The academy sure was brazen.

Colette was the victim of the incident, and it was she who had requested it be kept secret. Now she was using that as a weapon to get her way.

"Use all the tools you can use—I'm just putting your motto to practice. Now we can always be together, Mylene!"

An angelic smile appeared on Colette's lips.

But looking at things pessimistically, you could say Colette had become a hostage *because* she was well aware of her worth—it was beyond unscrupulous. As I watched her, smiling innocently as she casually explained her scheme, I saw shadows of the future empress in her.

I just had to pray her cunning wrath would never be directed at Eltania—

"Argh..."

When you consider she did this all out of love for me, I guess it wouldn't hurt to let it slide.

"I like to get a good night's sleep. I hate noise."

"Indeed! Lack of sleep is the enemy of beauty, as they say!"

"Do they, now...? Anyway, I've gotta change. Turn around." I gave the still smiling princess a cynical smirk.

Er, is this what they call hungry eyes?

I slowly unbuttoned my uniform. *Why do girl clothes have to be so annoying? Wait, I guess it's rich-girl clothes, not just girl clothes.*

I suddenly felt a pang of longing for my former mercenary days—but then I felt a *presence*.

"Hey...don't stare at me."

"I don't see the problem. We're both girls. And we'll be sharing a room. We shouldn't let a little thing like that bother us, now, should we?"

When I saw the hungry look in Colette's eyes as she watched me change for bed, I gave her a death glare. From the way she was acting and the things she was saying, it was pretty clear that she *wanted* me.

When I met her in the future of my first life, I had heard she was unmarried... but I guess that didn't matter now. Colette wasn't going to make a move on me until she considered us equals.

"Well, I'm going to bed. Turn out the light whenever."

"Then I suppose I shall sleep as well. May I turn out the light now?"

I nodded as I climbed into bed and Colette waved a finger at the magic stone lamp in our ceiling. The room fell into darkness as the magic stone, imbued with feeble magic energy, slowly faded out.

Another day behind me, another busy day ahead of me tomorrow. Better get a good night's rest.

".....Hey."

I guess that was wishful thinking.

“Hum? What’s the matter, Mylene?”

“Why are you getting in bed with me?!” I sat up and scolded Colette, who was lifting my covers and sneaking into my bed. “Your bed is over there, bitch!”

“Don’t be like that. We finally get to share a room together, so it’s time we became more intimate.”

“Weren’t ya gonna hold off being *intimate* with me until you were satisfied with yourself?”

“I’m just showing a little affection, that’s all. To cement our future together... yes?”

Colette gave a bewitching grin, her ample body clad in thin fabric. To be honest, I felt dizzy. Though I felt I had completely acclimated to being a lady, if I didn’t think too deeply into it, I still considered myself male.



duhhhhh...

No, this is different. With a woman this enchanting, it doesn't matter whether I'm male or female. Seriously...Colette is a devil.

"Please...let's not play games, Princess. The time has not yet come, correct?" With the clearest rejection I could muster, I pushed Colette away.

"Mmf!" Colette puffed her cheeks out a little and sighed, releasing her lustful frustrations. "Fine...I understand. Anticipation is half the pleasure. But don't forget that I am already yours. If you wish it, you can have me anytime...yes?"

With a taunting uncrossing of her voluptuous thighs, Colette slid off my bed.

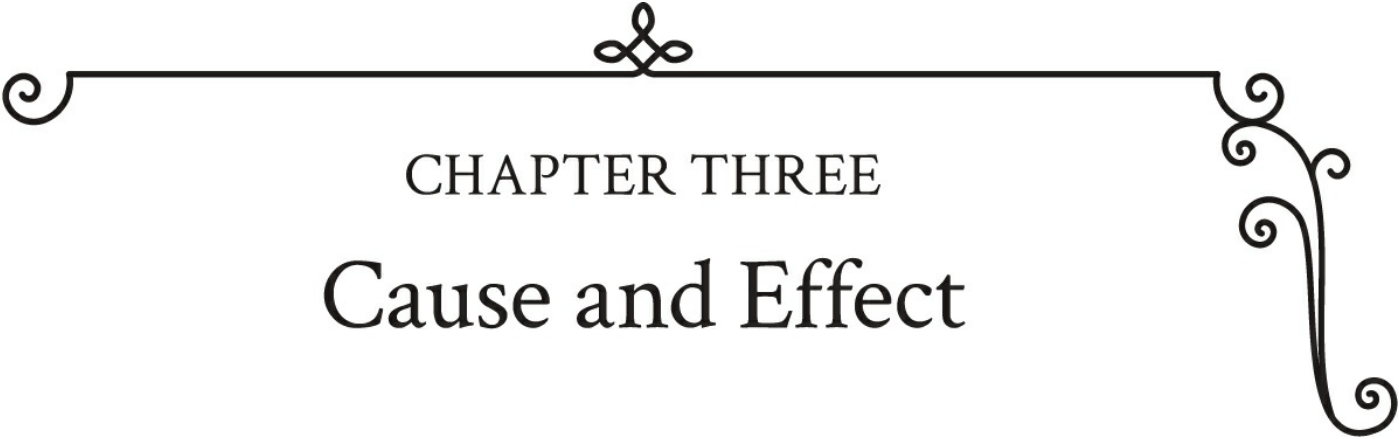
And before I realized it, I was sighing quietly. *"I am already yours," my ass. You haven't changed a bit. You're still that crazy princess who gets what she wants no matter what.*

If I just surrendered to her proposal, everything would be so much easier. But crossing that line carried a lot of responsibility—responsibility I wasn't ready to take yet.

Shit, what a big mess I've got myself in.

I didn't even know who to blame: the pathetic teachers who helped Gods of the Moon, or *God Himself*.

Somehow managing to calm my bloodshot eyes and my racing heart, I closed my eyes, dreading the even busier days that were sure to come.



CHAPTER THREE

Cause and Effect

“Good morning, Miss Mylene!”

“Ahh...nng, good morning, Prince Albert.”

Morning in the classroom—

Prince Albert’s voice brought me from my half-dead stupor back to sanity. I quickly donned my good-girl mask.

My fatigue was the result of a restless night in the wake of Colette’s seduction. Because Albert had seen the soulless look in my eyes earlier, his eyebrows were lowered in concern.

“Pardon my asking, Miss Mylene, but...are you all right? You look terribly tired.”

“Well, last night I... Let’s just say some things transpired.”

I was rather proud of my good-girl façade, but upon closer observation, Albert had a somber look in his eyes. Since I genuinely was exhausted, I didn’t want to bother telling him why. I gave him an exhausted smile, willing him to understand.

When you’re feeling tired, sympathy from a friend really hits you hard. I wanted to ease his worries and explain to him why I was fatigued, but it was obvious that doing so would only further complicate matters.

“Good morning, Prince Albert.”

“Good morning, Princess Colette... What is it? What’s that smug look of triumph on your face...?”

Guess there’s no point in my silence. The source of my strife will proudly and loudly blab everything to him.

I shamelessly pressed my hands to my head.

“Huh? What-what? How can you smile so proudly when poor Miss Mylene is so exhausted?”

“Why, because what transpired last night was a good thing for me. I’m just basking in bliss.”

“What...are you talking about? Is this somehow connected to Miss Mylene’s fatigue?!”

I was right on the money.

The two were locked in this strangely fierce competition. There was no way Colette would keep her juicy secret to herself if it would help her get a huge lead on Albert.

“M-Miss Mylene!”

“*Kee-hee-hee...*” Colette cackled like a slimy nobleman about to force himself on a poor village girl. “Why don’t you tell him, Mylene? Tell him about *us*.”

“You *what*?!” Albert hissed, taking the bait.

“Last night...there was a change of room assignments in the girls’ dormitory. Princess Colette and I now share a domicile.”

“You *what*?!” Albert repeated the line, but with an even bigger reaction. His eyeballs swirled in vortexes. “Th-then, the reason for your fatigue...it isn’t—!”

“Since this was our first night sharing a room, we deepened our relationship. Well...I think I’ve made my superiority quite clear, Prince Albert.”

“You *what*?!”

Oh, give it a rest.

With a loud sigh, I clutched my head again. My reluctance to explain the situation had only made things worse. I started to sense a collective curiosity directed at us. If the squabbling pair escalated and sparked rumors about the princess of Colorne stealing the fiancée of Eltania's prince—well, that would be hell. It might have been too late to stop them, though...

“Let me explain to avoid a misunderstanding—nothing happened. I am your humble fiancée, Prince Albert, and naturally, Princess Colette wouldn't disrespect that.”

“Hey! Um, thanks for the spoiler warning? You're no fun.”

When she heard my logical and indifferent explanation, Colette looked genuinely startled by my “spoilers.”

“Heh...? Oh! Is that...true, Miss Mylene?”

“I would never lie about such a thing. I wouldn't want a misunderstanding.”

“Oh... Th-thank goodness!”

When he saw the way Colette and I were acting around each other, Albert finally let out a sigh of relief. There were actual tears in his eyes. *Way to make a guy wanna kick your puny ass... But I'll let it slide this time.* This was Colette he was dealing with—he couldn't help but be a little puny around her.

“Oh...it's just Princess Colette and Prince Albert up to their usual bickering.”

“I don't envy poor Miss Mylene.”

Well familiar with their dynamic by now, the breathless, eager students in our vicinity sighed and scattered in disappointment.

Thank God they're both dumbasses... If they were usually quiet and well behaved, the school would be a whirlpool of rumors by now.

Albert sighed and said, “Could you please refrain from such tasteless jokes?”

“Sorry, my bad. I let the devil in me get a little carried away.” Colette cackled freely. With a cold sweat beading my brow, I couldn't exactly join in her levity.

But if I acted annoyed, that'd only make things worse... I know it's common knowledge, but nothing good comes from griping.

“Oh, bloody hell...” As the adrenaline faded, my mask began to slip a little. But then I noticed her.

A girl was still watching us. As the other students ambled away, she just stood there. But there was more to it than that. She was on guard, appraising us with the gaze of an enemy. I sensed a faint smoldering aura and magic emanating from her.

I casually returned her gaze.

“Mmf...!”

She clearly snubbed me.

Since she had looked away, I couldn’t see the look on her face, but she was a maiden with a petite frame and soft, well-maintained golden hair.

The girl looked familiar—she was probably in our class. *Right...I think she was one of the kids who gave me a good staring-down during the welcome ceremony on the first day of school.*

Since she hadn’t done anything of note since then, I’d completely forgotten about her. But that didn’t mean I could rest easy. Not every friendly face could be trusted. Pearlman had taught me that lesson.

And it wasn’t like I scanned my surroundings out of habit every day, but with a death glare so obvious, I sure as hell would have noticed her watching me before.

So. If she started staring at me now, it must be because—

She’s with Gods of the Moon. Did they hire her to spy on me?

Though well aware of it, I let my gaze grow sharp and very unladylike. Forcing me to take caution of her like that was a foul move.

“What’s wrong, Mylene?”

“Something troubling you, my lady?”

The voices of my companions snapped me out of my head.

“Sorry...it’s nothing,” I answered, finally forcing my graceful, ladylike smile back onto my face.

Those two had known me a long time. They could tell I'd flipped into a different state of consciousness when they called my name. They turned dubious eyes on me, then at each other.

That was a close call. If someone from Gods of the Moon was watching us, I wanted to let them go about their business a while longer. And to do that, I couldn't let them know that I was onto them.

"Oh, how utterly troublesome," I murmured so quietly that not even Albert and Colette could hear me.



...All that felt like ancient history now.

The minute hand of the clock made a few revolutions until it was lunchtime.

"Say, Mylene?" Colette asked with restraint. *Colette*...had called my name with *restraint*.

"Yes, Princess?"

Her anxious tugging of my sleeve vividly expressed her unusual bewilderment. I never thought I'd see such a side to Colette. It was like, she was...softer than I thought?

Colette gave the source of her bewilderment a hard sideways stare. I followed her gaze to find a pillar—or what could hardly be called one. Rather, it was a protrusion on the wall of the hallway. A petite girl was peeking out from behind it.

Needless to say, it was the same blond maiden who had been shooting an *impassioned stare* earlier. It felt a bit strange to call a young lady like her a "maiden," but the tender look to her face subconsciously evoked such a word.

Also, the sloppy way in which she was spying on us and the way she scurried to hide herself reminded me of a little rabbit.

"What in the world is she doing...?"

"Don't ask me, Princess..."

She was the root of Colette's bewilderment. The way she was hiding was just too fishy. Our little spy was starting to attract the stares of those around her.

Gods of the Moon, my ass. Now I feel stupid for being so wary of her this morning.

"What shall we do? Do you want me to go talk to her?" Albert asked hesitantly, not out of respect for me, but to our painfully obvious pursuer.

There's no point in letting her go about her business... As I watched the girl, who was still drawing ample attention to herself, there was no way in hell I could see her belonging to the same group as Pearlman: a cult of gifted mages who wanted to—and could—bring about the *end of the world*.

If she were playing dumb on purpose, I'd have to reluctantly commend her on a scheme well played—

"Oh— You needn't trouble yourself, Prince Albert," I replied. "It appears it's *me* she wishes to see. I'll have a little chat with her at the next bend in the hallway."

I relayed my plan to them in a hushed voice. If the girl really was spying on me, it would be beyond foolish to voice my plans out loud, but from the way she was acting, I didn't think I needed to worry about it.

As we turned the next bend in the hallway, I spun around. And there she was, the little maiden, scurrying toward me.

".....!!"

When faced with the three pairs of eyes staring down at her, she went stiff and gasped slightly. The way she froze in shock made her look even more like a rabbit.

I forced the persuasive sting out of my voice and spoke gently to her. "So...I think you've been following us for a while. Can we help you with something?"

Out of my periphery, I saw that Albert and even Colette were grinning kindly through their discomfort. Pity was a powerful emotion—it let even the most insolent princess give someone a warm, concerned smile.

And as for our little rabbit who found herself suddenly surrounded by the

objects of her surveillance—

“I...I dunno what you’re talking about...”

She uttered this only after letting her eyeballs dance to and fro and back to my eyes several times before finally looking away.

It was an excuse so sloppy that I would hesitate to call it deception. And her nerve was so weak she couldn’t even look her subject in the eye.

For fuck’s sake... Why was I ever wary of her?

To be fair, I guess it was still possible that she was unknowingly being used by Gods of the Moon or somebody affiliated with them...

“Er, I’m not sure what I should do. Do you have any concerns I can address?”

In as considerate a tone as I could manage, I let her know she had no need to hide from us. But if I’m being perfectly honest, I’m not sure that was the right move. I’d never experienced being kind to somebody who was obviously terrified. As I stood there, wondering if I was coming on too strong, I started to feel stupid.

...But I don’t think I misread the first vibe I got from her.

When she heard my persuasive tone, the maiden’s eyes darted to and fro again for a while, then sharpened into a clearly antagonistic gaze.

“Mylene Petule...! You’re not fooling *me*!”

And with that, she turned around and ran—with what was probably all her might. And I just stood there, confounded. I didn’t even have an opportunity to ask what she’d meant.

“Mylene...did you *do* something to her?” Colette asked, shaking me out of my daze.

“I have no memory whatsoever...that’s all there is to say,” I answered reflexively. “I got into all sorts of scrapes the minute I first set foot on this campus.”

But then I bit my tongue. Because truth be told, I did have some idea.

While the upperclassmen and puffed-up kids had stopped picking fights with

me as of late, after I first joined Zelfore, I'd made a name for myself as a troublemaker.

That being said, I never beat up anybody without just cause. And since I highly doubted the little rabbit was one of *them*, she either had a grudge on their behalf or there was some misunderstanding. Either of those possibilities were entirely feasible.

When she'd said, "You're not fooling *me*," she was probably referencing all the supporters I'd garnered recently. As in, I'm tricking everyone into liking me, but I can't fool *her*.

"Hum...? But she looked overly vengeful, considering."

Colette was right. I couldn't imagine what sort of nonsense she'd been fed to make her spit out the kind of cliché line a villain would say. That's just how rigid her guard was around me.

At the very least, she was probably trying to show me how she wouldn't lash out at me as long as I didn't attack her first.

Albert scratched his chin and voiced a concern that was outside our trains of thought. "Hmm...well, one thing's for certain, Miss Mylene: I got the sense from her gaze that the circumstances behind her grudge were anything but ordinary."

From the way he talked, it sounded like he knew her well.

"Prince Albert...are you familiar with her?" Colette asked, voicing my own question.

Albert looked bewildered. "Um, yes? Of course I do, she's in our class. Princess Colette, might I suggest you try prying your eyes off Miss Mylene every now and then?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but I don't know her either," I admitted.

"M-Miss Mylene, not you too?! She's *Melissa*! The *Priestess of Eltania*! Haven't you had interactions with her as *God's Gift*...?"

Yeah, I guess it really was messed up of me to not know the name of a fellow classmate...

But just when I started to feel a little guilty—though Albert’s answer made sense to me on one level—my spine felt like it was hit with a ball of ice.

Now I see...if we’d met *before I became Mylene*, her attitude would make sense. If she had crossed paths with the Mylene from back then—who was hated as a viper even by her own servants—she would surely sense something incredibly amiss about the way I was behaving now. I don’t know how the encounter between her and the former Mylene had played out, but it was surely more than traumatizing enough to fill her with hatred and hypervigilance.

But what made my spine run even colder was her name. *Melissa of Eltania*—that was a name I did remember. How could I ever forget it?

“By *Melissa*...do you mean Melissa Tullio du Lulutrois?”

Unless they happened to be name twins, it had to be—

“Yes, that’s the one. So you *do* know her.”

“Yes... Yes, I do. My memory of her is hazy but there.”

She’d started *that* war. The beginning of the end—she was the populist who the Mylene of my first life had executed.

And she’s the Priestess of Eltania now?

The duchess who was deeply trusted by her people and resisted Mylene’s tyranny until the bitter end—she was the Priestess of Eltania.

And here I was starting to get anxious because Gods of the Moon have been in the shadows lately.

Judging by Melissa and Mylene’s relationship in the former timeline and by the way she’d just acted around me now, it was highly likely that Melissa had gotten wise to something early on.

“I would *love* to learn more about her.”

She might have a key piece of information I needed to know. As an icy excitement filled my veins, I raised the corners of my mouth and showed my teeth.

“Too bad...from the way she was acting, it will likely be difficult to get her to talk,” Colette said.

I quickly slumped. *Colette's right. She's a skittish rabbit girl...I don't do well with that type. Though if she's a citizen of Eltania, maybe I could use my connection with Albert to get to her...*

“Well. How shall we deal with her...?”

Scaring the shit out of people was my specialty. But dealing with a timid rabbit without frightening her was a new challenge. If I made her cry, my campus life would be difficult moving forward... I just might need to carefully draw up my plan of battle.

As a new lead and a new obstacle unexpectedly fell into my lap, I heaved a sigh.

A decorative horizontal line with ornate scrollwork at both ends and a small floral ornament in the center.

CHAPTER FOUR

Priestess

After Melissa left us, we settled down at our table for four in the cafeteria (which, by now, was more or less our designated spot) for lunch.

As I elegantly cut the impeccably sliced carrot glacé before me into bite-size pieces, I could hear Colette groan above me.

“So, just *who* is this Priestess of Eltania, anyway? From her name, I assume she’s connected to the Lord Eltania in some way.”

As to be expected, the topic of conversation was Melissa.

She had long disappeared from our presence, but the girl who was spying on us—on me, rather—had been referred to by Albert as the Priestess of Eltania.

Eltania was the kingdom in which we resided, and it was also the moniker of its namesake deity. The “Eltania” in the title “Priestess of Eltania” likely referred to the god, not the kingdom.

“Yes, quite right,” Albert said. “Throughout the ages, the Priestesses of Eltania have been known as the Lord Eltania’s most devout believers. They’re also said to possess a unique supernatural ability that allows them to receive fragments of the Lord Eltania’s divine prophecy.”

It seemed my guess was generally correct. Though I wouldn’t have thought they could receive messages from a god. My lips twisted into a sneer, putting my skepticism on full display against my will.

Albert shot an awkward smile at me before continuing, “That’s right, Miss Mylene, you don’t believe in God. But the Priestesses of Eltania have predicted countless natural disasters and hardships throughout the years. In addition to natural disasters like *the Great Flood of Imron*, *the Eruption of Mt. Zevent*, and others, they even prophesied conspiracies like *the Case of the Silver Spoon*.”

The prince felt sad that I denied the existence of the god he still believed in. But I guess I needed to open my mind a little, too. All the names Albert had just dropped were events that had come up in my very basic education as a daughter of nobility. That was just how significant those disasters and conspiracies were.

Yeah... Now that I’ve heard Albert’s explanation, knowledge tucked away in the back of my memory is coming to the surface.

The disasters Albert mentioned had been mitigated with minor casualties *because* people were evacuated and precautions were taken.

Aha...up until now, I thought God couldn’t possibly exist, but I need to come to terms with the fact that maybe there is one.

I still didn’t believe in the Lord Eltania. Not that I didn’t believe Eltania *existed*, per se. Rather, I had a hard time believing in the god’s personality—if you could call it that—or the actions He took.

Why and how did the Lord Eltania bestow a bitch like Mylene with such abilities? If He’d chosen a less shitty person, the former timeline would have had a much nicer ending.

“It was her...Melissa... She was the one who prophesied those events, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. She belongs to the sole bloodline who can make sense of the enigmatic words of the Lord Eltania.”

That aside, if Melissa really had such a power, could it be that the reason she’d started surveilling me now was because she *sensed* something?

“Hmmm...,” Colette pondered. “None of the stories of the Eltania faith are ringing any bells for me.”

“I suppose someone from Colorne would see it that way, since your country has religious freedom and many faiths coexist. Are there any teachings you believe in, Princess Colette?” Albert asked, a smirk on his face.

“Not really, no. You make your own path in life. I’m not anti-religion, but I don’t believe in anything I can’t see or feel with my own senses.”

That’s why Albert was smirking—he knew Colette would say that. (Then again, I felt the same way as her.)

“But you cannot deny the fact that people like Pearlman exist,” Albert argued.

“Mm...fair point.”

But now, I had to accept the existence of deities. And ironically, it was a cult with an intense hatred of the Lord Eltania that had made me a believer.

The fact was Pearlman wielded powers that could only come from a god. In that regard, the existence of beings beyond human knowledge was a practical explanation.

“However, I agree with the princess—we have the power to pave our own path in life.”

“Yes, Mylene, I knew you and I were cut from the same cloth.”

The fact also was I had seen with my own eyes how the Lord Eltania hadn’t lifted a finger to save His “Gift” when she was condemned to die, His people when they were suffering, or His own kingdom the very moment it burned to the ground.

And many years ahead, there would come a time when Eltania would forsake even the clan of Priestesses who had been devout and true to Him all throughout history.

I ignored the melancholy smile on Albert’s face and sipped my tea.

But if that frightened rabbit of a girl truly did have such powers, I was now faced with a plot development I never asked for.

“You do pave your own path in life. Having said that, I’ve developed quite an interest in this Melissa girl,” I stated.

I had no idea what powers a Priestess had, if any. The Priestesses might foresee major events by their own powers, not from God, or it was possible that they orchestrated these events themselves.

But if their abilities were genuine, I might be able to glean some new information about the *Fall of the Kingdom of Eltania* from Melissa.

In other words, I could learn something about the looming threat—Gods of the Moon.

“I would most definitely love to speak directly with her,” I reiterated.

“From the look of her, that’s not going to be easy,” Colette said, gesturing with her chin to Melissa, who had returned and was lurking in the corner.

She knelt beneath a table where students were eating, peering up at us with languid eyes. I’d discovered that she was surveilling me just a little while ago. Yet, the reason she hadn’t entered my line of sight was—

“.....!”

—because whenever our eyes met, she would run away.

“Seriously. This doesn’t bode well...”

“Oof!” In her haste to flee, Melissa had banged her head on the table. As I watched her run away, tears glistening in her eyes, all I could do was heave a deep sigh.



A week had passed since the *Melissa the Spy* debacle. And Melissa was still surveilling me. By now, the entire school was abuzz with rumors of the petite female student observing the girl with the Hair of Sulberia and her two royal friends.

And yet, whenever I met her gaze (in other words, whenever she was *caught*), she would run away. Melissa must have thought her spying was going rather undetected.

“She’s here again today,” Colette groaned. “Goodness, doesn’t she ever get bored...?”

“She is quite dedicated,” Albert agreed. “I don’t see why she doesn’t just watch us bold and in the open.”

No longer feeling threatened by her presence, Colette and Albert smirked as they watched her observing us not-so-discreetly from behind a tree.

Meanwhile, as I swung my practice sword, it occurred to me that didn’t have a good handle on what she looked like. That was because she always ran away whenever I looked at her. It was frustrating—like she was some kind of fairy.

“I’m sure she doesn’t trust us enough yet. Never mind her, both of you—your magic armor is weak.”

“Oops.”

“I’ll be more careful, Miss Mylene!”

When I icily chided their lax magic energy, they both quickly sharpened the mana surrounding their bodies. If you surrounded your body with magic energy, you received a certain degree of protection from attacks. Draping yourself in magic armor throughout your daily life would protect you from surprise attacks.

We still weren’t certain of Gods of the Moon’s endgame, but at the very least, we knew they wanted a *world of chaos* or whatever. Even a princess was a sacrificial pawn to them, so there was no telling what they might do.

By keeping ourselves in a constant state of magical protection during our waking hours, and by training ourselves to be able to use other spells at the same time, we could raise our aggregate baseline. We also needed to learn to stop expending needless energy so we could learn magic techniques that would be stable in the long term. That was the goal of our current training regimen.

“Well...I do think this training is sensible, but it certainly is tiring,” Albert said.

“Indeed. It’s most favorable and worthwhile, but because of it, I sleep like a log every evening when I return to my room!”

Cloaking yourself in magic armor all day might have sounded like a simple exercise, but it was actually rather difficult.

You had to pace yourself, mindfully expending your magic energy while continuously exerting more strength than normal; it was akin to going about

your daily life while training for a marathon in ancient times. How long you could keep this up depended on how much magic you exerted, of course, but most people couldn't last longer than an hour.

And we had gotten to a certain level of competency in just three days. Now we were starting to get enough mental bandwidth to carry on a conversation (though we slept like the dead at night). Those bloody royals. All those generations of selective breeding had given them talents that should honestly be illegal.

To a guy like me, who was born without the ability to use magic, the powers of the nobility were something to envy. Especially scum like Mylene, born with the divine gift like Hair of Sulberia—it all struck me as grossly unfair.

Then again, I was now one of the gifted few. With the exception of when I taunted my enemies, I wanted to be humble about it and make as few foes in life as possible.

I replied to Colette, “However...I do feel like you're making distinct progress.”

Setting that aside, I liked to think we'd put in the effort to deserve it. In just the past few days, Colette's and Albert's magic capacities had risen to a whole new level. They were still nowhere near Pearlman, but not even the great general of Colorne would be able to relax and think of Colette as a *beginner* in a fight. And even Albert was in a relatively good place, Eltania-wise. He'd be able to kick the ass of your average punk his age without issue.

“And *who* was that directed at?” Colette giggled.

“Both of you,” I replied, a dauntless smile on my face.

But that wasn't all I had meant. To be sure, they were both showing impressive progress. So impressive that I felt a clear satisfaction from having taught them. But *that* wasn't the only progress they'd made.

“I'm watching you...!”

Our spy Melissa was still on our tail. *That* was the main progress I felt.

“She's clearly gotten much closer to us,” Albert observed.

“Yes.”

Albert was right. Our observer was watching from a closer distance. Ever since her first ambush, Melissa had kept her distance as she watched us, but with each passing day, the distance was getting shorter and shorter.

You couldn't exactly call her vibe "friendly," but be it out of carelessness or whatever else, she had clearly lowered her guard around us.

Melissa had chipmunked a sandwich in her cheeks. She likely felt comfortable enough to eat now. No, scratch that...her vulnerability was probably born from negligence.

Colette leaned in and whispered, with a grin on her face (and a hint of sadism in her voice), "What should we do? I think she's close enough now that we could catch her if she ran away."

I sensed panic in Melissa's aura. She must have sensed we were up to something shady.

Colette was right. We were easily close enough to grab her. With the three of us working together, it would be easier than catching a rabbit. And of course, a part of me just wanted this whole stupid game to be over.

"No...let's not," I said. "This is the perfect opportunity to undo the misunderstanding."

It would be a waste to get too hasty. Now that we'd come this far, a part of me wanted to let Melissa tag one of us "it." Simply nabbing her would be faster, but it would suck if we freaked her out to the point where she didn't want to talk to us. This just wasn't one of those situations where we could *force* her to blab.

"Understood... It's all right. I'm sure we're almost there!" Albert said, raising a spirited fist above his head.

"Yes, indeed," I replied. (Though hell if I knew whether we were *almost there* or not.)

From the look of things, I really was the enemy in Melissa's eyes. I wasn't sure if the animosity came from a prophecy from the Lord Eltania Himself, or from something the other Mylene had done to her in the past. Either way, it had to be something out of the ordinary to make that timid little rabbit approach me

with such determination in her eyes.

“This is just so damn frustrating...”

I had my own fair share of animosity, too. And I could tell it would take time to clear up the misunderstanding.

Guess I'll just wait it out for a while.

I swung my sword and readied my stance. And I stared at the tip of my blade, my eyes sharpening to slits.



CHAPTER FIVE

Contact

“The way I see it, wouldn’t us simply waiting lead to no progress at all?”

We were having one of our lunchtime training sessions when Colette lowered her brows, swallowed the food in her mouth, and broached the subject as if it had just come to mind.

Without naming the individual in question, there was no need for any one of us to point out exactly what this wall was we had hit. Even without her there, she was always at the center of our conversations.

“I’m watching you...!”

We were talking about our little spy—Melissa Tullio du Lulutrois.

Perhaps out of negligence, Melissa had closed the gap between us ever since our first contact. But over the past few days, she had stopped getting closer.

She never let down the veneer of surveilling us, but she was hiding herself less and less now. She was observing our actions out in the open.

But nothing more than that. Melissa had halted her gradual approach. She had stopped at a comfortable distance and was not making contact.

She was like a twig on the surface of a lake. The breeze that was carrying her to the shore had completely halted on its waters—that’s the vision her behavior evoked.

“You wanted to ask her some questions, didn’t you, Mylene? Well, you’re at a stalemate now.”

“I’m well aware of that, thank you...”

I sensed a twinge of annoyance in Colette’s tone. She was probably out of patience. And to be honest, I felt like I wasn’t being myself either lately.

It would be so much easier just to nab Melissa and make her talk. But instead, I cast a glance at her. Despite the aura of timid terror that shrouded her, Melissa was now able to glare back at me.

That was why I couldn’t nab her... I’m not sure what to call it—burning with a sense of duty? Anyway, she strangely gave off the impression of someone with a strong sense of obligation. At the very least, she didn’t seem like I could get her to speak freely to me by using normal classmate tactics.

And yet, I still couldn’t bring myself to use force either—

I’d never met Melissa face to face in my past life. I only knew her in name as the badass duchess who’d spent her final moments standing up to the tyrannical Mylene to protect the common people.

But even in that rotten version of Eltania, there had still been many who were ardent supporters of Melissa Tullio du Lulutrois. Maybe it was because my best friend martyred himself for her...but I just couldn’t see myself taking a hard line against her.

Then again, looking at her now, I wasn’t sure I should believe this *badass duchess* shit in the first place.

“Prince Albert. Do pardon my asking, but couldn’t you be the go-between and arrange a chat with her?”

“I would be honored to do anything I can to help, Miss Mylene...but I’m afraid she’s already rejected my offer once.”

If she wouldn’t even listen to her own prince, then I guess it was time to start considering my more forceful options (as much as it didn’t sit right with me).

“That was a lovely lunch. See you both later,” I said.

It went without saying, but even amid all this stress, I still got hungry. With a

silent moment of gratitude over another day of great food, I gathered my empty dishes and rose from my seat to return them.

“That was quick.” Colette tilted her head and gave me an odd look. “Why don’t you wait until we’re finished so we can go together?”

Usually, we always put back our dishes together, even when we finished eating at separate times.

“Oh, I left my uniform for the afternoon physical education class in my room. So I’m just going to retrieve it now. I’ll see you later in class.”

Ordinarily, I would do as Colette suggested...but I wasn’t doing this on a whim.

When I gave the excuse that I’d forgotten something, Colette gave an understanding nod. I grabbed my tray of dishes and took them to the counter. I thanked the cafeteria dishwasher, then sighed quietly to myself.

Okay. I’d better get my stuff quickly so I won’t be late to class.

I put the cafeteria behind me. And as I marched swiftly toward the dorms, I sensed the presence of a little rabbit, scurrying behind me.

I slowed my gait to match the little presence behind me...and heaved another quiet sigh.



Keeping pace with Melissa made me very late.

By the time I got back to the schoolhouse, afternoon class was just about to begin, so there was a little urgency in my step as I made way through the hall.

I was headed for the dressing room. I had to hurry—there would be no point in my going all the way back to my room to retrieve my uniform if I was late for class.

A startled Melissa quickened her pace, not wanting to lose sight of me. *In what universe were there spies with loud footsteps?!* I wondered, but she probably felt there was no point in her hiding anymore.

When I arrived at the dressing room, I found it empty, despite the fact that we were having our afternoon physical education classes. I would be in deep shit if I didn't hurry.

I unbuttoned my uniform blouse. Whenever I was in a hurry, I couldn't help but wish that girl clothing wasn't so annoying compared to boy clothing. I liked to think I was used to it by now, but it was little moments like these that made me think maybe I wasn't as adaptable as I took myself for.

Wait, screw that—I've got more important fish to fry.

I casually glanced at the door...and there were Melissa's eyes, fixed on me. Even though we were the same sex, I still felt oddly embarrassed having her stare at me like that while I changed. I mean, Colette saw me undress every night before bed, but that was more...casual...? Or something.

"Shit..."

What the hell am I even thinking about...? I awkwardly and deliberately averted my eyes from Melissa. As I calmly and gracefully undid the buttons of my blouse, I cursed under my breath, willing myself to ignore Melissa's staring.

Okay, maybe I was a little too self-conscious of *my* own body. But now that I was down to my underwear, I felt a strange sense of danger...and I wasn't sure why.

Why do I feel so...? But it was then that I realized the source of my discomfort: *Why hadn't Melissa entered the dressing room?*

Melissa was in my class. *That* was how she was able to keep constant watch over me, but it also meant we had the same curriculum. She had to change into her uniform now, or else she wouldn't make it to our afternoon class.

No, wait...ditching just one class today wouldn't be a big deal for her. Maybe that's her intention.

As I stole a sideways glance at Melissa, I noticed she was still staring at me. Either she wasn't going to class, she wasn't aware of the time, or both.

But that wasn't all.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

Melissa shuddered at the sudden booming voice.

When the unwelcome (but inevitable) turn of events transpired, I clutched my head and sighed. Melissa wasn't the only thing outside the dressing room door. Now there were also a silhouette darting left and right.

Well, no shit. She was staring into the dressing room for a good minute. Of course somebody was gonna yell at her.

"Come here."

"Urg?!"

I grabbed the frantic Melissa's arm and dragged her into the dressing room with me. Her eyes wide with shock, and I pushed her against the wall—

"Shh." I pressed a finger to her tiny lips, willing her to shut up.

"Hey! Is somebody in there?!" Barely a moment later, a teacher's voice boomed from the other side of the door.

"Mylene, first year of the Phoenix Class, sir."

"O-oh, it's you, Miss Mylene. I think a peeping tom just rushed into the dressing room—did you see anything?"

Luckily, it was a male teacher. Meaning, he wouldn't barge in after us. Melissa squeezed her limpid eyes shut as I silenced her by placing my hand over her mouth.

"No, sir—I'm the only one here. I'm quite all right; you may leave."

Melissa's eyes shot open. She didn't think I would cover for her. If I had malicious intent, I would have acted on it long ago, but that concept hadn't made it into her brain.

"Er, hmm. Well, if you say so, miss..."

The teacher surely saw me draw somebody into the dressing room, but he couldn't barge in with girls inside. I heard a note of dissatisfaction in his voice, but since he was a male teacher, there was a line that he just couldn't cross with daughters of the nobility.

"Afternoon class will begin shortly. Try not to be late, miss."

“Thank you, sir.”

And in the end, the man disappeared with the sound of footsteps.

I exhaled softly and pried my fingers off Melissa’s mouth. She was frozen stiff. But she soon thawed, her face turning red.

Her mouth opened and closed like an ocean wave, and her eyes swam to and fro as she stared at me. I had to laugh at how obviously sketchy she looked. No wonder the teacher had sounded so nervous.



“I’m well aware that you’ve been surveilling me, but peeking in the dressing room is a bit uncouth.”

“Urk...”

Melissa finally realized the extent of what she had done. She seemed to regret it, but she couldn’t say anything to her *archnemesis*, lest I find out.

Silence fell in the dressing room, but Melissa didn’t run away. After a while, she slowly turned her gaze back to me.

“Wh-why did you save me?”

It didn’t matter that we were both girls—peeping at a prep school earned you a severe punishment. While she was still somewhat frightened, I sensed that a clear wave of relief had washed over Melissa. But the biggest emotion she was feeling then was confusion over my covering for her.

“Because I know you’ve been watching me. I don’t particularly mind being seen like this, and I trust you had no unrighteous intent just now? I felt your behavior didn’t warrant angering an instructor.”

I answered as logically as possible, making sure she knew there was nothing to feel guilty about. There was just one thing I wanted to keep to myself, however— “Besides, a friend of mine is in your debt. So I simply couldn’t bring myself to hate you.”

The crude, wife-loving face of my friend from my mercenary days popped into my head as I said that. Melissa probably wondered what I was talking about. She didn’t remember helping anyone. But that poor friend of mine had worshipped her so much that he sacrificed his life to avenge her. I’d never met Melissa in my past life, but I somehow couldn’t hate the little shit now.

Melissa gave her head a curious tilt but narrowed her eyes slightly. She was glaring at me again, at a much closer distance than before, but I didn’t sense any of the harshness from our first meeting in her gaze.

“I was right...you’re different,” she murmured quietly. But in the quiet of dressing room, her voice echoed loudly enough to give me chills.

“Mylene Petule never...*she* never smiled like that.”

My heart felt like it was wrapped in ice. It was a piercing coldness, crushing my chest like a giant fist.

Her eyes drooped as she stared at me, but they were filled with the quiet tenseness of a frozen lake surface.

“Who *are* you...?”



CHAPTER SIX

Prophecy

“What.....do you mean?”

My blood felt like it was frozen, but my body was on fire. That was the last question I was expecting to hear, but I managed a calm tone in my reply.

I didn’t suppose her finding out I wasn’t the real Mylene would cause any huge problems. The poor saps at the mansion all thought I was the genuine article, and as long as my father thought I could benefit him in some way, that would be enough.

Neither Albert nor Colette had known Mylene before she became *me*. And considering the former timeline, I did believe they would both choose me over the girl I’d replaced.

Nobody was actually harmed by me taking over Mylene’s body. But the unfathomable truth that a girl I barely knew for a month had discovered my darkest secret—well, that was bound to make my blood freeze.

“I meant what I said. The Mylene Petule I met in the past was a hopeless piece of shit.” Melissa’s eyes turned to angry slits as she looked up at me.

Ordinarily, I might have thought the gesture to be adorable, but since she was seeing *something* beneath the surface as she stared into my eyes, I just felt like I was going to be sick.

“When I encountered her before, she didn’t have an ounce of grace. She

skipped on hospitality, never lost a chance to complain, and she thought that everything should and would go her way—the stupid bitch.”

But Melissa proceeded to talk shit about Mylene. And I found her quite convincing. Listening to her rip Mylene to shreds made me wonder what the old Mylene must have done or said to her when they first met.

For the first time in a while, I thought back to the moment I took over this body. The surreal experience of having the worst reputation for something I didn’t remember doing reminded me of how it felt when I’d gotten drunk and made an ass of myself. Adan really gave me shit for that—but I digress. Looking back on that day would just make me embarrassed.

But the more time I spent in this body, the angrier I started to feel about all the *childhood scrapes* the former Mylene had gotten into here and there. Still, hearing the scornful words directed at me was mildly effective.

“Again, you may look like *Mylene*, but you’re not *her*. Anyone who knew Mylene Petule years ago would have suspicions.”

And yet, it was those words that made my blood run even colder. To people who knew the *former* Mylene, I definitely was an anomaly.

“So, what are you trying to say? That an impostor has taken my place?”

“I doubt it. Your hair and divine magic could only be gifts from the Lord Eltania. Nobody could imitate them. That’s why I think it’s something else.”

To be able to deduce this far, she must have had some sort of tangible evidence. Though I had no clue just how much she had caught on to—

“What interesting things you say. Is that why you’ve been surveilling me?”

My unique Hair of Sulberia—maybe that was the only reason for her surveillance. If she didn’t like the former Mylene, the discovery that I wasn’t at all like her should have actually been good news for Melissa.

In Melissa’s eyes, I didn’t see any resentment toward Mylene for forgetting her sordid past and living a life of leisure. The look in her eyes carried weight—it was the kind you would only give to an archnemesis.

“I can’t tell you... I can’t trust *you* either.”

But I couldn't get her to tell me the reason why. As the mystery I was so close to grasping slipped out of my fingers, it took everything in me not to curse out loud.

I took a deep breath in and out to calm myself. Then I smiled daringly and said, "Is that so? Then why don't you see for yourself just how trustworthy I am?"

It would seem that our Melissa absolutely despised the former Mylene. If I gave her a reason to hate me now, it would be back to square one. So I needed her to get to know me. To see with her own eyes just how different I was from that bitch in the past.

"I could *never* trust you. But it's quite clear to me now that you're not *that* bitch." Melissa broke off for a moment and hung her head. And when she looked up again, the fear in her gaze was gone. "But yes...I will observe you unabashedly. I will see you who really are with my own eyes."

She walked toward the door, glaring coldly back at me. And still holding my gaze in her icy one, she left the dressing room.

Aha...quite interesting indeed. So, she calls the Mylene before I took over her body "that bitch."

At first, she'd really made my blood freeze, but thinking about it with a clear head, I realized this was anything but bad for me. If anything, I'd found a new question I needed to ask her.

Melissa must have had some exclusive information to be able to say something so absurd with such confidence. It might *be* a prophecy from Eltania. If her powers were genuine, I'd love to pick her brain about this motherfucking situation I was in.

But first—I have afternoon class to attend.

Though the results were fruitful, I had spent more time than I meant to. I was practically one step away from being tardy.

I resumed my changing and ran my arms through the sleeves of my uniform. *Okay, I'm almost definitely tardy but still early enough to get off with an apology. Better hurry.*

My habitual good-girl demeanor came in handy at times like these. I was about to put my hand on the door, but it opened on its own before I could.

And on the other side of it...was Melissa. That made sense. She was in my class and took the same courses as me. Unless she was going to ditch PE, she needed to change clothes, too.

Her eyes were wet with shame and her cheeks puffed with red.

"I'll tell the teacher you'll be late, Melissa."

"Sorry..."

Melissa—the priestess with unfathomable powers who'd faced the one she hated head-on (though trembling all the while). A little while ago, I had seen traces of the Mylene-resisting duchess she would later become.

But maybe I overestimated the girl just a wee bit...? Whenever I caught glimpses of the ditzy priestess, I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

With a barely audible "Thank you..." at my back, I headed for my PE class.



Our afternoon gym class began.

After a word of apology to our infamously strict teacher, I was let off with a warning and was now doing some light stretches.

Our sword instructor was known for being a hard-ass, but he probably took my reputation as a good student into account when he let me off with a warning. Compared to the other students, I was given exceptional treatment.

Then again, Albert and Colette putting in a good word for me was also part of it.

"Melissa Tullio du Lulutrois, I have been apprised of the situation—are you feeling better now?"

Ah. Sounds like Melissa just arrived late.

I had told the teacher that Melissa was feeling ill. The teacher's question flustered her, but she nodded meekly just the same.

“All right. Well, take it easy today. And if you ever feel ill again, be sure to tell me in advance.”

She got off with a warning, too. I guess being a model citizen did have its perks—and not because *God is always watching* or anything grand like that. If you rack up a good reputation, it'll help you out of a jam someday.

Melissa took a deep breath in and out, then she resumed her regularly scheduled spying on me. The once annoyingly stagnant distance between us was a bit closer now.

“Miss Mylene,” Albert whispered in my ear, noticing the reduced distance. Before, Melissa wasn't so close that he needed to whisper not to be heard, but now she was close enough to hear a conversation at a normal volume.

“Is there a problem, Your Highness?”

“Er, no, I was just thinking something must have happened between you and Melissa. She's clearly closer to you, isn't she?”

Physically, she was closer. But Albert probably meant psychologically. I sent a small glance at her. She puffed her tiny cheeks and looked away.

“Well, a few things did happen, yes. Though not at all what I was expecting.”

“Ooh, I'm a little intrigued. How did you manage to close the gap between you?”

I'd given him a vague answer because I didn't want to bother explaining it to him, but Albert was being abnormally assertive.

There wasn't much to tell, but he had been rather sensitive about Melissa over the past month. I guessed it wouldn't hurt to tell him.

“When I was changing in the dressing room, Melissa was peeping. And when a teacher was going to scold her for it, I gave her a helping hand.”

That was as much as I could tell him. The word “peeping” did sound quite problematic, but even though from the teacher's perspective, it looked like somebody was peeping in on the dressing room, Albert and Colette knew without my saying that any “peeping” Melissa had done was solely for the purpose of surveilling me.

“You did *what*?!”

“Grah?! Um, please don’t scream in my ear?”

I guess I’d misread him. Albert’s sudden yelp revealed to me his true colors.

Shaking hysterically, he shrilly whispered, “Wha—na—she was *peeping* on you undressing, Miss Mylene...?! What utter insolence...!”

His face was bright red, out of either anger or embarrassment. No, wait, both. Albert was always easy to read.

“Please, Your Highness, calm down. Melissa is a girl just like me. She *always* stares at me—you know this, don’t you? It just happened in a slightly different location, that’s all.”

“B-but Miss Mylene...! Peeping in on a dressing room is completely different!”

“If she wanted to see my bare skin, she would have had a better time of it changing in the dressing room with me. Melissa didn’t have such motives, and you and I both know it.”

“Nnggg! I...I know it in my head, but in my heart, I—!”

I felt a heavy weight on my brain not unlike a migraine...I didn’t think Albert would get so upset over it. Just when I thought he was finally mellowing out with age, his bad sickness had come back with a vengeance.

But then again...I couldn’t deny I felt a strange sense of embarrassment while she’d been peeping on me.

Then Colette jumped in to assist. “Mylene’s right, Prince Albert. They’re both girls, so there’s nothing naughty to it.”

“W-well, I suppose...you’re right...”

My eyes widened in pleasant surprise. It was unusual of Colette to be the one to consoling Albert.

“Besides, I’ve watched Mylene undress at night many times!”

“Grrr! You insufferable woman!”

Yeah, I guess Colette isn’t the consoling type.

I felt stupid for getting my hopes up. Especially since Colette was the *master* of satisfying her own desires by unscrupulous means.

“Please, tone it down, you two. Everyone’s watching us. Show some restraint, Princess.”

“Aw, but things were just getting interesting. You’re no fun, Mylene.”

“G-grr! Well, if you insist, Miss Mylene, then I’ll drop it...!”

But it was rather clear that he didn’t want to let it go.

How can I get this dumbass to chill?

Just when our argument was reaching the point of no return, our teacher yelled loudly enough for the scattered students to hear.

“That’s enough warming up, class. I want you to pair up and practice sparring today.”

Perfect timing. Now the raging Albert (and the princess fomenting his rage) would need to behave and do as the teacher said.

We’re in pairs, eh? Guess I know who I’ll be sparring with.

“Mylene, be my partner as per usual.”

“Gladly, Princess.”

It made the most sense for me to partner with Colette, since she was the closest to my level. She was the only person in the class who could put up a decent fight against me. And while Albert cursed his own helplessness, he accepted it.

“Miss Melissa, if you need a partner, would you like to spar with me?”

But today, he was a little different.

With a gleam in his eyes, he approached—rather, he *confronted* Melissa.

“Who, me? Um...with you, Prince Albert? V-very well...”

Meanwhile, Melissa seemed confused by Albert’s unusual behavior. As he was her prince, she gave him the most basic of respectful answers, but she was clearly bewildered—or less diplomatically put, the look in her eye said, *The fuck*

is this guy on about?

From Albert's perspective, he wanted to teach Melissa a lesson for peeping on me. Though I was sure there was a mix of taking his anger for Colette out on her, too.

"Things are getting rather interesting, aren't they?" With a finger on her chin, Colette eagerly leaned forward to watch the pair.

There she goes, mocking him again. I snorted, letting the annoyance show on my face—

But truth be told, I was interested, too.

I wanted to see how much Albert had improved now that he was having a practice fight rather than the mental training we had been doing up until then.

And there was one other thing—

Melissa readied her practice sword. Then she sheathed her body and her weapon in incredibly steady magic.

"Wow..."

Albert's eyes opened wide. Colette gasped in awe.

So I was right—this was just my surface-level assessment, but Melissa was pretty *good*.

Having said that, she wasn't undergoing any special combat training. Her stance was amateur, and the distribution of her consciousness was a far cry from a battle mentality.

But the amount of magic energy she had and the technique with which she used it was quite impressive.

"She's very comfortable with expending a lot of magic energy. I bet she used quite a bit of it in her daily life growing up," I said.

Her magic was so strong and so stable that it made me believe she had to have used it quite a lot since she was a little girl.

"Are you saying she did the sort of training we've been doing lately?" Colette asked.

“No, I doubt she trained with combat in mind. It’s not the result of continuous magic use, but of having used a large amount of magic.”

“So that’s why she’s neglected her stance, even though her magic is so high. That tracks.”

Colette was well versed in combat techniques, so she had also noticed that something was amiss about Melissa.

“Well, what do you think, Mylene?”

“About what, Princess?”

“About Albert and Melissa—who will win?” With her arms still folded, she shot a sideways smile, daring me.

She already knew the answer, I’m sure. I thought the whole exercise was stupid, but I replied, “A ninety percent chance of Prince Albert winning, I’d say. While Melissa is superior in magic levels and technique, magic attacks are prohibited in this exercise. Meaning Prince Albert’s mediocre-yet-capable swordsmanship will prevail. It’s not set in stone, but I’d say Melissa’s chances of emerging victorious are next to nothing.”

“An exemplary answer. Now, what if this were a real battle?”

I answered promptly. “There are too many unknown variables, but I still think Prince Albert would win. I believe Melissa is better suited to multi-combat than one-on-one.”

Melissa’s command of her magic was quite impressive. I surmised that her technique had been pounded into her over many long years of physical reflex conditioning. I was still superior to her in magic, but when it came to actually wielding it, Melissa had the upper hand because she’d been using it all her life.

But that was all she had. In a one-on-one battle, everything came down to experience and how you used your body. That was an arena where even a magicless mercenary like my former self could gain notoriety.

There still weren’t many people in this era who realized that, though.

“Let’s begin. Come at me with everything you’ve got,” Albert said.

“As you wish, Your Highness...”

Okay, let's see how things play out in reality.

Even though Albert yielded the first attack to Melissa, she was still cautious. Her great skill in magic use meant that she was also adept at measuring up her opponent's magic technique.

Melissa surely noticed that her magic technique bested Albert's, but the way she refrained from carelessly swinging at him implied that her mind was sharper than his as well.

Then there was Albert. He yielded the first strike to Melissa while tracing lines in the empty air with his thin practice sword modeled after a rapier. By moving continuously, he didn't telegraph his target and kept his muscles warm—it was a perfect defensive tactic. He played the part of a gentleman while luring his opponent into his favored fighting style. He wasn't making it easy for her, and I liked it.

Good. Keep at it, I murmured to myself. This was nothing more than a game, but if this were a real fight, just surviving it would be bliss—ya had to use *all* tools ya had to win. When I saw Albert putting into practice the sort of techniques most noblemen hated, I caught myself feeling uncharacteristically proud.

In spite of everything, I guess I do have a soft spot for Albert as my apprentice.

I wasn't sure why, but I liked watching him diligently apply the lessons I'd taught him.

Okay, what's going to happen now...?

Albert was poised for a counterattack and Melissa was on guard. She seemed to only have a vague sense that he was having a difficult time attacking her, and she lacked the experience and attention allocation to understand what his stance really meant.

"Yah!"

In the end, Melissa lost patience and went on the attack. In an instant, she unleashed a burst of magic energy and made a tremendous lunge. It was impressive that she had made it that far. It was clear she had used up a fair amount of magic.

However—

“Now I see why you are a priestess. You have incredible magic...however!”

“Mmf!”

Albert took the attack with his sword and snapped it away. If this were a contest of blades, he would be far superior. If you took his combat experience into account, he had a crushing advantage.

In a way, *this* was closer to the essence of real battle. Magic levels significantly influenced the outcome of a fight, but the deciding factor lay somewhere else.

Melissa’s attack, imbued with large amounts of magic, gave her wooden practice sword the power of a war hammer. But if you knew an attack was coming, you could easily dodge it, and if you had the right amount of magic, it wouldn’t be difficult to block either.

To time your response to a blow just right, you needed a good *eye*—one conditioned for combat.

Melissa’s stance faltered greatly as she took a breath. She collected magic at her legs so she could jump and right herself again.

In the string of minuscule moments we call a battle, she had the ability to achieve what she wanted in an instant. The way she used magic to move her body was admirable.

“Ah...!”

However, Albert had read her evasive maneuver. Melissa had the advantage in speed, but because he had predicted her move before she made it, he didn’t allow her the time to regain her footing.

As Albert swung at her, she blocked with her practice sword. But—

“Ah! Nngh...!”

Since her footing was unstable, her guard faltered, and she fell on her bottom.

“You put up a worthy fight,” Albert said, declaring his victory.

“I yield... Well done, Prince...Albert.”

In a daze, Melissa took Albert’s hand and stood up. The students watching the match erupted in a frenzied murmur.

I didn’t blame them. The bout had consisted of only a few attacks, but for a competition between two students, it was quite high-level.

Fledglings like them who were only beginning to learn the basics of combat could barely follow the fight with their eyes.

The teacher cut in with some words of praise. “That was splendid, Prince Albert. You had a keen eye there.”

“Thank you, sir,” Albert said, the epitome of calm.

I always thought of Albert as a rookie...but looking at him now, the guy’s kinda badass.

In my eyes, he was still unripe, but he would be a fine swordsman when he grew up. The necessity of basic knowledge aside, I wasn’t sure if a prince needed to be proficient in combat, but let’s not dwell on that.



“Melissa Tullio, you also showed superb magic skill. I commend you on your ability to wield tremendous magic power with such grace.”

On the other hand, a battle could not be called high-level if only its victor were skilled. Melissa also received high praise for demonstrating combat prowess that didn’t fall too far behind Albert’s.

“However, in terms of swordsmanship, Prince Albert is still a couple steps ahead of you. Class—if you were paying attention, you know what I’m talking about. In combat, magic is perceived as your most important weapon, but don’t forget that the sword is just as valuable! Take this match to heart and let it carry you to the next level of your training!”

The teacher concluded his speech by declaring both fighters were skilled, but it was the difference in swordsmanship that had settled it. Then he clapped his hands to tell everyone to resume their matches. He seemed pleased that the students had their eyes locked on Melissa’s and Albert’s duel, as it would be a good teaching moment for them.

From the daily romping around I’d done since I first arrived at this school, I had a general idea of what level kids like this were at. Most third-year students couldn’t pull off a fight like the one Albert and Melissa had just participated in. I could understand why the teacher had wanted the students to pay attention to it.

That being said...I’d still give it a forty. Swordplay and Magic were both important elements in winning a fight, but Albert had demonstrated the most crucial element of all: *Experience* and the *Flexibility* it cultivated.

Our teacher wasn’t wrong, but he needed to add a prerequisite before Magic and Swordsmanship: Fairness.

If you wanted to walk away from a real battle, you needed to know *how to win*.

Albert also had little practical combat experience, but I’d been pounding into him the techniques he needed for a real battle. During my days at the family manor, I’d trained myself until I was piss-tired almost every day—and it wasn’t for show.

I gave a proud snort. Surprisingly, it felt goddamn amazing to have somebody you trained get praise and recognition from others.

“But, Prince Albert, your swordsmanship was excellent. Where did you learn how to fight like that?”

But my good mood couldn't last for long. I froze when I took a sudden arrow to my vitals.

...Keep your goddamn mouth shut, Professor.

“So glad you asked, Professor!”

No way is Albert not gonna answer that.

With a hand to his breast, Albert was unstoppable once he got on his pedestal to give a resounding speech.

“I learned my techniques from the sword master at the palace, of course, but everything else, I learned from my beloved Miss Mylene! I know you praised my skills earlier, sir, but I am but a mere fledgling in the face of her swordplay!”

As Albert sang my praises, I fell into a daze for the briefest of moments. Then the entire class stared at me.

“Ohh... Now, I did know about her unconventional stance and movement style, but am I to understand that I have yet to see her full potential unleashed?”

“Exactly, sir! Her *strength*, her *beauty*, and her *flexibility* in a variety of situations are unique in this kingdom—nay, on *Earth*! Look the world over and you won't find another like her! Your own Prince Albert has fallen madly in love with her. As such, I am working very hard so that I may hope to get a little closer to her, but her footsteps are still far beyond my reach.”

Albert was swimming in a cesspool of his own bliss. If I didn't have to pretend to be a good girl, I'd march over to him and sink my fist into that stupid head of his, but since I was acting like a gracious daughter of the nobility (as hard as that was at the moment), I couldn't do that.

“Yes, I remember her elegant swordsmanship when she saved me from those upperclassman bullies...”

“A lady of both martial and literary arts—that's Miss Mylene!”

A murmur rose from the students like a whirlwind. Taking the future into consideration, I decided that gaining clout and fame wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but at the moment, I didn't want to stand out any more than I had to.

"I see...so people adore her even more than I thought."

Even Melissa was gazing at me with admiration.

Ahh, fuck me. Now that the prince is a little capable, he's needlessly persuasive—makes me sick.

"Kee-hee-hee, I think you're popular, Mylene," Colette said.

Amid the clamor, I cursed in a voice only she could hear, "I do wish they would give it a *bloody* rest."

This would be great publicity if I decided to become a mercenary in the future... But in my past life, shining eyes of adoration had never been in the cards. It made my skin crawl.

I held up my practice sword to banish the feeling.

"Come, Princess Colette, it's time you and I sparred, too."

"Hum? I don't care either way, really."

The best way to shake off bad feelings is to move your body. As I pointed my blade at Colette, she answered with a lionhearted smile.

.....I wouldn't realize I'd made a mistake until much later.

Our fencing class ended that day amid eager cries of jubilation.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Infiltration



“—and there you have it. The seemingly doomed village fought through their bitter struggle, and the victory they attained brought about the founding of a nation—Eltania. That is the origin story of my kingdom.”

It was nighttime. I was teaching Eltanian history to a small crowd of schoolgirls. I usually spent my free time at night in the dorms networking, studying, and teaching girls in the counseling room.

Usually, these lessons were sparked by somebody coming to me with a question, but today, a whole crowd had gathered for the lecture.

“Wow...so the great kingdom of Eltania was once a tiny village.”

“That was so interesting! Thanks, Miss Mylene!”

Then again, this lecture only happened because we’d learned about the major nation states in history class today.

Since this continent was crammed with kingdoms big and small, we didn’t take the time to study each one individually in class. Instead, the school placed great emphasis on teaching us the history of the largest nation states.

And as Eltania was one of the five biggest nations in the continent, the students had gathered to have me teach them about it. To be honest, it wasn’t a subject I was all that fond of.

“Some people attribute the burst of strength that helped Eltania turn the

tides of war to a deity. The name of the god who is said to have bequeathed them with divine power is Eltania. In other words, the kingdom of Eltania derives its name from their god.”

“That’s the god from Eltanism, right?”

“Yes. I see you’re quite knowledgeable.” I gave the proud student a smile.

The reason I hated the story of Eltania’s founding was because it had deep ties to the Eltanian faith. Since the kingdom was named after the god, you couldn’t separate them. If somebody wanted praise for learning the lesson, that knowledge was a bare minimum.

In truth, the war that brought about Eltania’s founding was incredibly devastating. It was so bleak that Eltania *would* have needed a favor from God to win.

But that’s history for you—when myth and fact intertwine in the story of a nation’s founding, there’s no telling what’s true and what’s not.

“Ohh, how intriguing. So the faith already existed by the time the nation was founded.”

“Yes, that’s correct. It’s quite interesting, when you think of Eltania’s history as much longer.”

“It goes to show just how important Eltania the god is to Eltania the kingdom.”

“Yes.”

Besides, if I divorced my feelings from it, Eltania’s history made for an engrossing story. Colette was nodding in a fervor. She’d looked bored at the start of my history lesson, but once I got into the story, she was riveted.

Having said that, this wild imperial princess was not good at sitting still. Having reached her limit, she sneaked up behind me and wrapped her arms around me. It was annoying—the weather was getting way too hot for that.

“Oooh, Miss Mylene, Princess Colette, you two really are close.”

Well, the schoolgirl wasn’t wrong. But I’d heard that close relationships of *that* nature weren’t unusual in the girls’ dorm.

I tried to push Colette away to avoid a misunderstanding, but the gleeful princess only hugged me harder.

Agh, get your damn hands off me...

I could just yank her off, but if I let my fellow students see me being so forceful, the image I'd so carefully constructed would shatter.

"Does it really look that way? You've got good eyes—um, sorry..."

"I'm Sarah."

"Right, *Sarah*. I'll remember that."

As Colette publicly displayed her love for me—at least for now—having someone acknowledge it sent her to the moon. Meanwhile, I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my lips into a grim line. It's not like the misunderstanding would hurt anyone, but I just couldn't afford anyone getting suspicious about our *relationship*.

"*Ahem...* Well, I think it's time we wrap things up for today. Does anybody have any questions regarding Eltania? I'd be happy to answer, if I can."

I forced a change of subject. As I turned professional, Colette reluctantly slinked away from me. But she still kept a close distance, which I couldn't hate her for.

Then one of the girls raised a hand. "I have...just one question."

"Yes, go ahead—?"

But that was when I felt something was amiss.

Since I had spent my evenings holding study sessions to network, I recognized just about all the faces in the girls' dorm.

But I didn't recognize the girl who'd asked the question. *No, wait...I get the feeling I've seen her somewhere before. At the very least, I know she's not in my class. I haven't memorized all the faces of the girls from the other classes, so I can't be certain, but does she even go here?*

"When lecturing about Eltania's religion, there's one element you cannot leave out: *the* Hair of Sulberia. Could you tell us about that?"

Her long blond hair was covering her face, preventing me from getting a good look at her. Once again, I felt that something was deeply amiss.

The Hair of Sulberia—indeed, you couldn’t leave that out of an explanation of Eltania’s religion. According to some sources, a mighty war hero in Eltania’s founding had possessed the Hair of Sulberia.

And I don’t think it needs to be said that I have the Hair of Sulberia. I had avoided talking about this, since it would feel like I was just bragging about myself.

“Yes...in Eltanism, the Hair of Sulberia is revered for having the same coloring—white and vermillion—as a flower of the same name.”

“Oh! I’ve heard of that. Like, whoever has the Hair of Sulberia is called *God’s Gift* because they’re blessed with all sorts of supernatural abilities!”

“You’ve made me a believer, Miss Mylene! With your unmatched beauty, your gift for the blade, and most of all, your powerful magic, you make me believe that God took a special liking to you.”

Just as I’d feared, the girls began to squeal in excitement.

I hated the attention—that’s why I’d kept quiet. Being praised felt shitty, and bringing up the Hair of Sulberia myself made it seem like that’s what I was aiming for—double shitty.

The bitch with the question had butted in at exactly the wrong moment, so there was *no doubt* she was well versed in Eltania lore.

And since she was clearly doing this to give me a hard time, did that mean she was like Melissa? Had I unknowingly done something to put myself on her shit list?

I shot a sideways glance at Melissa, who had been listening to my lecture (and who had sneaked even closer to me). When I did this, she gave me a curious glance back. That meant Melissa had not sent this girl.

“That’s right, Miss Mylene...you are Eltania’s *national treasure*!”

Was that an insult? I guess you could call it that...

But what I sensed from the girl was just the opposite, if anything. It was an

indication that she had very mixed feelings about me. With a swish of her long blond hair, the mysterious girl stood and pointed at Colette.

“How dare you...s-snuggle up to her so unceremoniously! That is utter *heresy!*” she snarled, breathing heavily and pointing an accusing finger at Colette.

The abrupt change in mood sent the students in the counseling room into a hushed frenzy.

Colette answered the declaration of war, deepening her smile. She burned for a challenge; that was just who she was.

It would seem our intruder didn’t hate me—quite the opposite. Just as I was about to mutter an *Oh, fuck me...* under my breath—

“Mmf?!”

“What?!”

—Colette and I both twisted our faces in shock. The fiery girl pointing at Colette lifted her head, her long blond hair parting, to stare straight at Colette. Now her face was on full display. It was well chiseled and youthful, with big, doll-like eyes. You could say she looked more girlish than a girl.

The mystery student who was *more* girlish than a girl was in fact no girl at all.

“Wha...?! Alb—*mmf?*!”

Before Colette could say his name, I covered her mouth.

“W-wah-ha-haha...! My, what an *unfamiliar face!* Since you’re here, I would *love* to take the opportunity to get better acquainted with you!”

“I would be honored, Miss Mylene!”

As he stood there, fists clenched and eyes sparkling, his long blond wig made him look just like a girl.

Except—as you know—he wasn’t a girl.

As far as I knew, there was only one boy our age who could feminize his voice and appearance so flawlessly.

My hand still clamped to Colette’s mouth, I stared into the princess’s eyes,

sending a psychic message—a command, rather.

You know what'll happen if you rat Albert out, right?

Colette nodded in reply, bewildered but understanding. Knowing that not even Colette would get a laugh out of this situation, I let her go.

I plastered a smile on my face so large that it sent shivers down my spine and grabbed *Lulu's* hand.

“Well! We still have some time before lights-out. Why don't we continue this lecture in my room? What do you say, Lulu?”

“Y-yes...!”

Lulu answered with excitement, but there was a crack in his voice that indicated he had instinctively sensed the wrath behind my smile.

“Well then, my apologies, but I'm ending today's lesson here. Good night, ladies.”

I unilaterally cut the Eltania lecture short and dragged the intruder out of the counseling room.



“You little shit...what the hell were you playing at?!”

Back in my room, I shook the long-blond-haired girl (persona that the prince had taken) and interrogated him, my voice filled with unfettered rage.

“W-well, it's like this, Miss Mylene—”

I snapped at Albert's confused stammer, “Does the Eltanian monarchy teach their princes to wear *stupid-ass* wigs on their heads when they've got something important to say?”

Albert slumped, making himself very small as he removed the wig. Before my eyes, he became a boy with short blond hair wearing a female school uniform. He still looked every bit like a girl.

I had a number of colorful things I wanted to say to him, but I just heaved a sigh instead.

Who, I ask—*who* would have thought that the prince of a kingdom would cross-dress and sneak into a girls' dormitory?

...I'd be lying if I said I was entirely comfortable with the idea of wearing girls' clothing myself, but I never thought the guy who was gonna lead an entire kingdom someday would do it.

"Shit, are you for real right now? I mean...*what* made you think this was okay...?"

I'd almost rather he had sneaked into my room and tried to have his way with me in my sleep. I could've just kicked him out of my window and gotten it over with. Now, I wasn't gonna deny the guy his fetishes, but I just wish he'd take his position into consideration before acting on them.

"N-now, now... Let's not yell, Mylene. It's harder to talk to Prince Albert that way. Why don't we go easy on him, at least while we talk this through?"

It had gotten so out of hand that even *Colette* was taking Albert's side. She had probably come to his defense more out of secondhand embarrassment than kindness, but I hadn't realized just how angry I was until she pointed it out.

Turning the screws on somebody when you wanted them to talk was amateur stuff. I'd never get a proper explanation out of him like this—if anything, he'd lie to protect himself.

My emotions reversed. I felt my wave of rage leave my body as I waited patiently for Albert to speak.

"S-so...well...let me explain..."

As I watched him squirm, the rage started to burn inside me again, but I willed myself to stay calm so I wouldn't lose my sense of judgment.

Finally, after I gave him ample time, Albert spoke. "I was just w-worried about you! I was scared that Princess Colette would keep taking you farther and farther away from me!"

"*Huhh?*"

Apparently, Albert had done all that because he was scared of losing me. Now it was my turn to be shocked. Was that any excuse to dress as a girl and

infiltrate the girls' dorm? I guess whenever we're faced with something we can't understand, our brains stall.

He's a dumbass. I already knew he was stupid, but I had no idea he was the supreme lord of dumbassery.

"Ohh...so you're saying you want to fight me for her. You've got guts, I admire that."

But what really hurt my brain was the knowledge that he wasn't the only dumbass of his kind.

Colette was the type who got what she wanted by any means necessary. She was also a hedonist—as long as she was having fun, she was up for anything. Her satisfied eyes were practically saying, *Finally, a worthy opponent.*

Driven to a mad fervor by his archnemesis's words, Albert shuddered.

"I just...I just can't let this one go." He looked up, his eyes filled with determination.

When I saw the *manly* look in his determined eyes, I blurted out, "Come again?"

"There's a reason I can't back off...! Play *all* the cards you have—you taught me that lesson yourself, Miss Mylene!"

Sorry I asked.

"Mmm-hmm!" Colette hummed at the defiant Albert in ecstasy. "So *this* is what mad desperation looks like! I know this sounds weird coming from me, but is everything okay?!"

However, I didn't think it was funny. I asked her politely, with an edge in my voice, "To what are you referring, Princess—Eltania's future or our young prince's brain?"

"Both!" Colette answered with vigor.

I wrinkled my brow, then cursed under my breath, "Couldn't agree more..."

It'd been a while since my brain hurt like this. Though in a way, you could say Albert was just being loyal to my teachings. Out of everyone in the academy,

Albert was the only male student who could play the cross-dressing card flawlessly. Case in point—he was able to infiltrate my room like this without drawing any suspicion from anybody.

But this was just beyond dumbassery.

“Be that as it may! I admire your spirit! I respect the way you’ll do whatever it takes to keep your enemy from getting what’s rightfully yours!”

That didn’t just apply to Albert. Colette was equally guilty.

“Argh...” I clutched my head and let out a big sigh.

Honestly, I was tired. I was so tired. But it looked like I’d have to suck it up and beat some grit into the guy. I wanted to do something about Colette, too, but this problem took precedence.

So for now—

“A word of advice, Albert.”

“Y-yes?!”

I stared daggers into his eyes and grabbed his head. “Tomorrow, I’m gonna fuck you up so bad, you’re gonna *wish* I’d killed you right now.”

“Awww?!?! But aren’t you going to praise me for acting tough?!”

—I had to deal with Albert first.

I guess the pip-squeak was finally starting to grow a spine. But we’d be screwed if I didn’t instill the very basic sense of ethics in him.

I mean, if you were leading a nation, playing every card you had in your hand was a highly commendable stance to take. But you had to back it up with a sense of dignity so powerful that nobody else could fuck with you—like that witch of an imperial princess who’d sacked Eltania with a perfectly timed surprise attack.

Then again, I guess it would be cruel to want him to take it *that* far...

Having said that, Albert did have his virtues, of course. If only he hadn’t been duped by that *evil bitch in the other timeline*, he would have been a popular king, beloved by his subjects.

But in this timeline, he needed to be more than that. And that's why I had to toughen him up. At the very least, I needed to make sure my hometown was safe.

"B-but if it means you'll give me special attention, Miss Mylene, I'll gladly take any punishment you give me..."

Um, now you just sound like a masochist.

I was fine with people enjoying cross-dressing as a hobby, but using it to sneak into the girls' dorm was wrong. Especially since he was royalty—he needed to consider his social status.

"Well...have fun tomorrow, I guess."

"I will!"

But first, I *really* needed him to learn how to recognize sarcasm.

I don't think he's stupid, but whenever I'm around, this guy loses all his brainpower.

They say love is blind...but pondering over the whole thing was starting to feel like a fool's errand. I don't think what this guy felt was *love*, exactly.

"Shit... Well, whatever. If a hall monitor sees you, you're toast. Put on your wig and piss off."

"As you wish, my lady! See you tomorrow!"

With his wig back on, Albert looked just like a girl again. A closer look revealed a hint of makeup; I hadn't noticed that until he was at the door.

Giving a deep bow, he exited without hesitation. And so the boy who looked just like a girl left the girls' dorm just as boldly as he had infiltrated it. To be honest...I was a little curious as to where he had made his transformation. For that matter, where had he even procured the girl's uniform?

In this life, some mysteries were best left unresolved. So I decided to drop it.

A few silent moments after the door closed, Colette looked at me. "Hummm."

"What?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that was an awfully kind gesture for you. If you ask

me, giving Albert special attention could only be a reward, not a punishment—”

It was an innocent observation, but there was an unconvinced look in her eye and a scoffing snort in her nose. It seemed like there was more to her complaint than *You let him off too easy for sneaking into the girls’ dorm.*

It looked more like she was envious of Albert for getting *pleasure* out of his punishment.

As Colette pouted, I smirked and retaliated. “Are you jealous, Princess?”

Her face twitched at the sudden change in my tone and smile. “Er...um...sorry, I was naive.”

As long as you get it. With a triumphant snort, I started to get ready for bed. *C’mon, just let it be lights-out already. I wanna get ready for bed before a hall monitor comes. Shit, why does everyone in my life have to get such stupid ideas in their heads? Now that’s two nights of missed sleep for me.*

“I’m turning in, okay? Get dressed for bed and turn out the light.”

“Understood. Good night, Mylene.”

I pulled the covers over me as Colette’s voice hit my back. And as I lay there, my lips twitched. *This sort of thing never happened in my mercenary days...*





CHAPTER EIGHT

Festival

“I-I’m dyin-ng... I’m oh-so-very dead...”

It was the end of lunch, just before our afternoon instruction. And Albert was slumped over his desk like a corpse, moaning. It was a ghastly sight. Unable even to cross his arms, he was pressing his cheek directly to his desk. It would be a compliment to say he looked like a zombie.

“Ha-ha-ha! What a price to pay for a lone tryst. You got a raw deal, Prince Albert!”

The cause of his exhaustion was, of course, that night. It was *payback* for infiltrating the girls’ dorm. In addition to our after-school training sessions, we habitually stole our free moments at lunch for a little light exercise, but ever since that fateful night, I’d put Albert on a special regimen that included early-morning training sessions.

Adding more physical training on top of his continuous magic-donning was like adding sprinting to marathon training. Albert’s hard-core regimen had him literally fighting for his life every day.

“W-well, I don’t care... Since I get to spend more time with Miss Mylene now, it’s a small price to pay!”

Thanks to my efforts, Albert’s spine had experienced a sudden growth spurt in the past few days. He was always a stubborn guy—he had the temperament for

it. But seeing him have the balls to return Colette's sass with a quip of his own despite being on death's door? Well, that was a happy accident.

And things were going in a slightly strange direction, but it's a problem I was lucky to have. Eagerly biting off more than he could chew with my training had made him show remarkable improvement. I was genuinely impressed.

Though I questioned whether it was entirely necessary to polish the combat skills of a prince who would never fight at the front lines in battle, I had to admit he was quick on the uptake. And I was enjoying him thoroughly for that.

Which was why sometimes I pushed him just a little too far. In my past life, there had been a few guys who asked me to teach them my fighting style, but they were all spineless weaklings. *Beast stance* alone required a strong core, so I started by pounding the basics into them, but they'd always quit halfway, thinking I wasn't going to teach them my moves. But I guess it's pointless to talk shit about them now.

Anyway. Since I'd had those shitty experiences in the past, it was inevitable that I'd feel great about training someone like Albert, who never complained and eagerly devoured everything I taught.

"Prince Albert...is Mylene abusing you...?" Melissa asked dubiously.

Since it looked like abuse from a third party, I guess that meant the guys who'd begged me to train them in my past life also saw it that way.

Melissa had stopped keeping so far from me, but she still wouldn't speak to me directly—probably still didn't trust me enough.

Not liking her antagonistic demeanor, Albert refuted her claim with a firm gaze. "Please, don't misunderstand. I asked Miss Mylene to do it; she's setting aside her precious time to train me."

I felt pleased despite my embarrassment because I knew the feeling.

"Now, now... I wasn't offended, Your Highness," I said.

"I suppose... I didn't word that very nicely. I'm sorry..."

Besides, I got the sense that Melissa no longer loathed me with all her heart. The assumption she'd been working under—that I was the enemy—was fading.

So if I called her out, she would apologize. She would even grace me with a few direct words.

“I’d love to have a conversation with you about it sometime, if you wouldn’t mind,” I said.

“But I...can’t... Not yet.”

There was one final line she couldn’t cross—that hadn’t changed. That line was probably the *something* about her that I wanted to know. I just had a hunch.

“Well, I won’t force you,” I said. “If you change your mind, my door is always open.”

“.....Mm-hmm.”

Melissa sounded genuine when she said the words “not yet.” She really gave me the runaround. Every time I got close to her, she’d flee, so I had no choice but to wait for her to approach me. It really was exactly like taming a timid rabbit.

Even though we still weren’t at the finish line yet, I was starting to feel a little emotional.

“Okay, class, please take your seats.”

As I sat there, reminiscing over how much progress I’d made with Melissa, our homeroom teacher entered the classroom. We were having math this afternoon. Since being a noble basically meant being an accountant, math was one of the most important courses at this academy.

Having said that, I also found accounting class to be one of the most useful aspects of this school.

“All right, before we get into our lesson for today, I have an announcement.”

Usually, our teacher would watch us quickly take our seats, nod, and begin instructing. That’s how it always worked. But something was different today. Our teacher’s announcement caused a stir among the students.

“I’m sure some of you already aware of this, but one month from today, the Zelfore Academy of Magic will hold its *Genius Festival* as part of our

mathematics curriculum. To that end, we're going to start planning for that festival today."

As the good little rich kids quieted down, our teacher detailed everything to us with a demeanor of extreme poise... But there was a look of confidence in the eyes that suggested he thought we would love it.

The Genius Festival. It was on our schedule for the year, so I knew the name, but I had no idea what it actually was. I guess our teacher was about to tell us that now. I waited patiently with my fellow classmates to hear his explanation.

"The Genius Festival is a long-held custom of our fine academy. In it, we learn firsthand how to operate businesses in preparation for your futures as feudal lords and business owners. We'll discuss as a class what sort of business we want to have, then draw up a plan and operate it. The day of the festival, each class will open their model business and serve their fellow students. Then at the end of the day, you'll all be scored based off sales, number of customers, and other factors, and the winner will receive an award. Conceptualization and planning, effort and results—*this* is what the Genius Festival is all about!"

The Genius Festival was an event where the students ran mock businesses as a class, then visited one another's businesses as patrons.

Ooh...what an intriguing challenge.

It served to teach us how money worked and what sorts of businesses would be successful. The event was gamified in the way that it instilled in us a sense of solidarity and encouraged us to vie for an award. It was for fun, yet still taught us how to run a realistic business.

Now, since I'd come to this rich-kid academy by choice because I'd wanted to learn, this didn't apply to me, but many of my peers were sick of the mundane routine and constant learning of school. I'm sure the festival was developed, in part, for them to let off some steam.

Here I am, a jaded old man, and I'm getting excited over the idea. Imagine how the kids feel—

"Whoa! That's so cool!"

"Ooh, I'd love to try my hand at running a real shop!"

“Quiet, class! *Ahem...* This festival is part of your mathematics course. Don’t slack off!”

—well, of course they’re excited.

The teacher tried to calm the class without much effort. Getting the students excited was probably all part of the plan, and the teacher looked pleased over how happy the kids were.

“For today’s math lesson, we’re going to decide what business we’re going to open for the Genius Festival. Let’s all put our heads together and find a winning idea!”

Our boring math class suddenly became a party-planning jam session. No way were things going to stay quiet for long.

“How about a clothing shop?! I know some great fabrics!”

“But wouldn’t a jewelry shop be better? We could hire a master craftsman to make us the finest products to sell!”

The classroom burst into a frenzy like a lit furnace. Our instructor watched silently and wrote the flying suggestions onto the blackboard.

I was impressed. It took talent to tune out the noise, pick out the most relevant information, and write it down.

“Ha-ha-ha! Imagine us, experiencing running a shop for real—what a fun idea!”

“Oh, that’s so true. I think operating our own business would be a valuable experience for us.”

Colette and Albert also sighed in awe (though their words were drowned out by the crowd and could only be heard by myself and a few others sitting nearby).

Royals like them would never have a chance to conceptualize and run their own businesses in the future, so they would surely find the festival appealing and entertaining.

“Isn’t this exciting, Miss Mylene?”

But, well—the ideas everyone was throwing out were quite *basic* for the nobility.

Not that there was anything wrong with that, but if you asked me, clothing shops and jewelry shops were no good. I couldn't say so with confidence since I'd never run a store myself, but I doubted that luxury goods would sell well at this Genius Festival.

And the reason why? Because all the customers would be us rich kids.

Not many of us had any money of our own. It didn't matter how good the merchandise was. If we couldn't afford it, we wouldn't buy it.

We may have been the offspring of the wealthy, but that didn't mean we could spend their money as we pleased. For that matter, not every kid in the nobility was that well off either. Some of us were royalty and some of us came from families on the brink of bankruptcy. Zelfore Academy of Magic was that kind of environment.

Then add to that the festival atmosphere. Everyone was going to want to sample everything. And if there were several shops you want to go to, it would be hard to believe you'd spend it all on just one place.

I put a hand over my mouth and muttered under my breath, *I ain't a merchant, but now I get it... Thinking about this stuff's actually fun.*

The debate had already shifted toward finding the *best merchandise to sell*, but the way I saw it, there was only one way to *win* this festival—

"Miss Mylene!"

"Mylene!"

"Eh?"

Oops. Got lost in thought there.

My hand jumped at Albert's and Colette's voices, exposing the dazed look on my face. "S-something the matter?" But I somehow managed to regain my composure and hide behind a smile.

Albert smiled awkwardly and Colette snorted in frustration. They must have been calling my name a lot before I noticed. What a mess.

“Good grief—this isn’t like you, Mylene. You were really lost in your thoughts there.”

“If you don’t mind sharing, I would love to hear your idea, Miss Mylene!”

They probably called out to me because they noticed I was lost in thought. The next thing I knew, all eyes were focused on the two royals. The entire class was staring at me, waiting with bated breath.

Uh-oh...I’m stuck.

I thought it would be weird for an old guy like me to get excited about some festival for kids, so I was gonna keep quiet... But when you were pressed by two royals for an answer, refusing to speak was actually the more disrespectful choice.

It was in times like these that favoring my inconspicuous good-girl facade always bit me in the ass.

“But my idea is nothing special,” I politely declined. “I wouldn’t want to disappoint you all.”

Colette eagerly leaned forward. “I don’t mind! Any plan of yours, Mylene, is something I must hear!”

She meant that she wouldn’t take no for an answer. She wouldn’t be satisfied until her curiosity was sated. That was just how she ticked.

Albert was also bobbing his head in an eager nod. It looked like curiosity had gotten the better of his praise-singing fealty to me. Wait, scratch that—more like he wanted to make me the center of attention. Though this was just child’s play. It wasn’t worthy of any praise.

“All right... Then, with respect, I’ll offer my idea.”

Well, guess I couldn’t avoid it. Besides, I was kinda interested to see how well my analysis would be received. I took a long pause to make what I was about to say sound more important, then I began to speak.

The way your guy sees it—

“The way I see it, if we wish to receive high marks in the Genius Festival—”

To win, we needed to not compete for scraps of the same pie.

This festival may have been a gathering of wealthy students, but kids were still kids. Their wallets weren't bottomless. That's why if our class tried to sell the *finest products* just like all the other classes, we would wind up fighting with them over our peers' meager spending money.

Therefore, something we could sell for cheap had the advantage. But if we made our own products to save money, they would come across as *cheap*. So how would we combat that?

"My idea is that we sell *experiences*, not things."

"Ooh! Sell experiences rather than things? What sort of shop would that be, specifically?" Colette sounded like she was testing me, but the corners of her mouth were turned upward in curiosity of the unknown.

In other words, a person with a lot of influence was signaling her interest in my idea to the rest of the class. That made my job of selling it much easier.

"Our shop will be—a place that offers experiences to our clients that can only be found at the Genius Festival... Well, I suppose there's no use dragging it out any longer—my proposal for our submission to the Genius Festival is a *café*!"

"A...café? What's that?"

"A shop that sells tea and light refreshments, Princess Colette."

"Oh, so you mean a teahouse. Yes, I suppose eateries were a blind spot for us...but isn't that a bit crude?"

Colette surprised me by responding with blatant disappointment, though I didn't blame her. Saying "Let's do a café!" after all that bravado was probably a bit of a letdown.

"But just about everyone here enjoys a daily teatime already, don't they?" Colette argued. "Many of us have our cooks leave tea and snacks for us on their days off, too. I honestly don't see how running a teahouse would provide anybody with a unique experience."

I giggled. "Ohh, Princess Colette. It most certainly *will* be."

Of course it would be a unique experience. Everyone who went to this school

was a rich kid. Even after they moved out of their mansions and came to the dorms, tea was just a part of their mundane daily routine.

Additionally, the cooks at the academy who prepared the tea and desserts were first-rate—and that’s no exaggeration. Making spoiled rich kids with refined palates moan with delight was no ordinary feat.

And that was exactly why the whole sales model had its limits. These kids ate good food and saw expensive things every day. Unless you offered them a superior product or a novel experience, you wouldn’t whet their appetites.

What I said earlier about things coming across as *cheap* is everything. If your customer base is rich kids who are used to seeing the best entertainment and eating the best food, your best chance at winning is to offer them *something relatively good that they can only experience here*. That was why I’d concluded that selling *things* at the Genius Festival was not the way to go.

Now, based off that logic, a café was a dumb idea even by dumb-idea standards. If we offered refreshments to rich kids who were used to eating the finest of foods, the odds would be against us.

Which was exactly why we really had to sell the *experience*.

“What I am suggesting is no ordinary eating establishment. No, I’m proposing a nouveau establishment where our servers dress in cute or handsome uniforms and fraternize with the customers. We shall sell the *VIP treatment!*”

That is the element that turns an ordinary *place to drink tea* into a *café*.

“The VIP treatment...?!”

“Yes. It’s a bit uncouth, but there’s nothing at all unfavorable about being pampered by beautiful boys and girls. Our guests will surely find it a valuable experience to be flirted with by waiters and waitresses in modern-style clothing.”

There was a note of pride in my voice as I talked them through the idea—but of course, I hadn’t come up with a silly idea like this on my own.

There was a reason I’d led with the caveat that this café was a bit uncouth. It was the sort of establishment that had gotten popular right at the onset of

Eltania's moral collapse.

It didn't get more VIP than scantily clad ladies cozying up to customers, and I remembered those kinds of businesses being quite popular back in the day. Adan had taken me to one of those cafés just once. At the time, I hadn't understood why he needed to go out of his way to ogle women when he had a wife at home, but I was humbly impressed by that café's business model.

After all, its food and tea tasted sketchy as shit, yet it was packed every day. Maybe that particular establishment we went to happened to be one of the bad ones, but that didn't stop it from being consistently popular.

There was another element of the café that stood out to me: Not a single soul came there to sip tea. Including my drooling friend, everyone there came to see the waitresses in *costume*.

You could say the customers were paying to see a show. Only, instead of buying tickets at the door, they were purchasing mid-tier tea at inflated prices.

In time, the café was subdivided into costumes and schmoozing. Just before the civil war broke out, there were things called maid cafés, which featured girls dressed in maid uniforms (with skirts that were way too short) who treated their customers like masters—but I digress.

"What I'm saying is, in our café, tea and refreshments play second fiddle. We will give our customers a unique experience only to be found here—*that* will be our café's true appeal."

Naturally, that sort of business would only be successful if your wait staff were above a certain threshold of good looks, but luckily, this school was a gathering of rich kids who were the product of generations of hotties hooking up. We had nothing to worry about in that department.

And horny heads of houses who selected only maids with pretty faces—well, they weren't rare, but people who are blessed in life have an attractive confidence in their eyes. *They* call it elegance—but being served by people with that vibe would surely provide yet another flavor of experience for our guests.

"...So that's what you meant by selling an experience." With an enlightened sigh, Colette sank into thought.

Okay, I've played my card. Now let's see if I can break through the final wall of defense.

There was just one potential flaw in my idea: Could spoiled rich kids work a service job?

Even though my peers were only half-baked as aristocrats, most of them had fully formed egos. Whether or not they could be in a position of service could pose a problem, but there was just one easy way to break through that barrier —

“I see...so it's an eatery on the surface, but it's actually closer to theater! Yes, that would certainly provide a special, once-in-a-lifetime experience!”

—an endorsement from on high.

The nobility prized hierarchy. And the princess of Colorne—one of the strongest empires on the continent—had said it sounded like fun. There was no way the other students wouldn't agree with her.

All relationships among the students here were equal as a rule, but any son or daughter of the nobility would kill to get connections with the princess of Colorne. Anyone with a brain would never get on her bad side.

The only person in this room who might consider dissenting against Colette would be Albert, but—

“That's my Miss Mylene...! Only you would think of placing value not on the food and drink itself, but in the way it's served! I am in *awe*!”

Unless I said something totally off base, there was no way Albert would reject a suggestion of mine. Taking the future into consideration, I didn't want him to become a yes-man...but he appreciated the true essence of my café and seemed to be thinking for himself, so I let it slide.

“This way, we won't need to worry about our budget for tea and refreshments, and we won't need to hire a chef either. We'll have to put extra effort into our costumes, but we don't need to make that many of them anyway, so I doubt they'll break our budget. Our café will easily get all the funding it needs, unlike clothing and jewelry shops.”

All that remained was to push the true objective of the Genius Festival on them. A victory signified superiority. I was sure lots of kids were in it to win it.

“Wow, she really thought of everything...!”

“What a smart lady...”

Thanks to the hype from Colette and Albert, nobody in the class voiced any objections to my idea. Even though I’d written it off as a flight of fancy, it felt damn good having everything go according to my design.

“Well then, do you all agree to my suggestion?” I asked for approval in a tone that was polite and gracious yet firm and unyielding—it was clear I wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“Of course!”

“I love it!”

I shot a sweet smile at our homeroom teacher, who closed his dropped jaw and cleared his throat.

“W-well then, it’s decided. The Phoenix Class’s entry will be a café... This is the first time I’ve had a group of students choose their entry so smoothly.”

This was an academy filled with strong-willed rich kids. I was sure they usually took their time squabbling over their entry. It was a good feeling knowing that I had skillfully orchestrated it all.

“Hmm...now, what shall we do with the extra time? I wouldn’t want to do a study hall, that feels too lazy—”

“Then why don’t we assign roles?” I asked, smiling at the flustered teacher looking at the clock.

“Ah yes, that’s a good idea. Why don’t we all discuss that?”

All that remained was for me to knock out the competition one by one to get a good role assignment, and we would be golden.

“May I speak? I actually have some cooking experience. So might I humbly nominate myself for the role of dessert maker?”

My target was none other than dessert maker.

The most ubiquitous confectionary for teatime was bannocks. It was a simple quick bread that came together just by mixing the ingredients together and baking it. I could make a big batch of them, serve them with jam, and there you go—perfect teatime treats. I could make my own jam, but since it kept well, I could always just buy it. So with a wee bit of work up front, I could sit on my ass the rest of the day.

Most of these rich kids had probably never set foot in a kitchen. They'd never served guests either, but cooking was one of the basic services provided by house servants. Aside from your odd foodie, most of these guys wouldn't know how to prepare food. They would certainly not want to do a job they knew absolutely nothing about.

And thus, the sweet and easy job was mine for the taking—or so I thought.

“Mylene...? What *are* you suggesting? Isn't the whole point of this café—its entire appeal—the beautiful servers? Then I don't see anyone more suitable to be our leading lady than you.”

I had just one miscalculation. It was Colette's influence that I had made use of previously.

“Wha...?!”

Her sneak attack paralyzed me.

By the time I was able to form the thought *What the hell is she saying?! it was already too late*. Colette's opinions, once spoken, were as good as declarations in this classroom.

“Anybody can make a few desserts. Assigning our best asset who is gifted in every way to a throwaway role is *moronic*. And most of all...I just want to see you in a cute costume!”

Moreover, the problem here was Colette—the de facto class leader—and her divergent feelings. If a chef heard what she'd just said, they would be enraged. Cooking was a worthy craft and a worthy profession. But Colette had no interest in that whatsoever. To her, food was nothing more than something

somebody else made for you to eat.

“B-but...!”

I flicked my eyes around the room, looking for salvation, but everyone was nodding in agreement with Colette.

You spoiled little shits!

“Yes, if beauty is on the menu, we certainly can’t leave out Mylene.”

“We’re lucky to have her star in our innovative shop. I could certainly see Miss Mylene filling the role.”

“It was her idea, after all. Miss Mylene *should* be the star.”

It made me grind my teeth, but thanks to Colette’s impassioned declaration earlier, the servers were already dubbed the *stars* of our show. To make matters worse, this was a direct nomination. There was no way I could turn it down.

.....I’ve got one last hope!

“P-Prince Albert...!”

Surely he’ll understand my psychic message!

Albert knows the real me. He’ll understand why I don’t want to touch that job with a ten-foot pole!

I shot him a fierce stare. *I can’t keep pretending forever. Object the nomination! Object it!*

“Mm...! Miss Mylene—er, well... I agree that Miss Mylene would make our perfect leading lady...!”

I knew he was gonna betray me, but still!

After displaying a wide array of expressions, Albert agreed with Colette, signifying that the decision was final.

This can’t be happening... Just because I’m used to it, doesn’t mean I like dressing like a girl. And now I have to wear a café costume on top of that?

“Nng...nnngg...!”

It's not too late. I can order modest costumes. I'm the only one who knows how far they're supposed to go. Instead of going with the outfits that were successful in the future timeline, I can just go with a toned-down design.

But if I did that, our business might not succeed.

After all that posturing and hyping, if my plan fails, I'll be so ashamed, I won't be able to show my face in public again.

"Very well... If you insist, then I certainly can't say no."

Depending on how ya look at it, this is nothing to cry over. I'm just playing all the cards in my deck so I can succeed—that's all.

"However...I would be too scared playing the role by myself. Princess Colette, Prince Albert, would you consider being servants with me?"

If I'm going down, I'm taking you fuckers with me.

Ordinarily, asking royalty to be servants was unheard of, but this was only theater, after all. It was perfectly reasonable to indulge a friend's request and play along with her.



“Yes! Indeed, it is a role I must play!”

“M-Miss Mylene, I would be honored to help you...!”

Colette was—Colette. She had high self-esteem, so this wouldn’t hurt her at all, but there was another advantage to using her. By granting her wish, the score was settled between us. I owed her nothing now.

But for Albert, who’d betrayed me at the last minute, there would be no salvation. *He* had a one-way ticket to hell.

He couldn’t possibly know my intentions. Otherwise, he wouldn’t still be grinning (albeit with a cold sweat on his brow).

Beneath my sweet, ladylike smile, I hid a conniving snarl. Even I always *repaid my debts* with dignity.

Get excited, Albert... Get excited.

“Wh-what’s on your mind, Miss Mylene?”

“Why, nothing, Prince Albert. I humbly thank you for your assistance. I felt so anxious, doing this all alone...”

Hearing the out-of-character words coming from my mouth, Albert furrowed his brows. But he surely hadn’t surmised the intent behind them.

You’re not getting away from me, you little bitch...

Determined to keep my fangs concealed until I had him cornered, I kept my gracious-girl mask on nice and snug.



CHAPTER NINE

The Future

One afternoon, while our class was in the full swing of getting ready for the Genius Festival, Colette gave a tired sigh and said, “Now I see...so that’s why you volunteered to be the cook.”

“Exactly, Princess. And I was so looking forward to it...”

With the opening of our café approaching, we had discussed what we were going to do about the refreshments, which resulted in a bunch of randos from our class being chosen as cooks.

We were currently on our way back from visiting the school chef after taking our class cooks to get a crash course on how to make the bannocks I was planning on making. Our classmates had already dispersed from the cafeteria, and we were down to the usual trio plus one, heading to the garden to train.

What Colette was scoffing at just now was just how easy it was to bake bannocks. They were the sort of thing even a dummy could make as long as you didn’t mess up the ingredients. What’s more, they didn’t need to be served fresh out of the oven. Now that Colette knew I had been trying to get off easy, she cast a judgmental glare in my direction.

“Now, now, I think making clever use of manpower is a talent itself... I think it’s admirable, Miss Mylene.”

“Well, thanks...”

Personally, I thought it was a rather clever plan...but now that it was foiled, I'd settle for second best.

I'd assumed I was done with living a life of servitude, but it looked like I'd have to train the muscles in my brain a lot more if I expected to achieve my goals in life this time around.

"Argh..."

Anyway, there was no use in lamenting what was already done. To live life on my terms this time around, I would need to increase the size of my deck—that was the takeaway here.

We arrived at the garden and set our bags down on the mostly empty bench. I did a few light swings with my practice sword to limber up my mind and body. Albert and Colette were also doing their own personal warm-ups in preparation for their sparring match against me.

It was a familiar scene.

But there was a new addition lately.

"....."

It was Melissa, who was sitting on the bench. She sat her tiny bottom onto the bench beside my belongings and rested her hands politely atop her lap. Sitting in a way that wouldn't let her retreat suddenly was proof that she didn't feel the need to flee. She was there to observe. She looked like a relaxed cat now, sitting cross-legged with all signs of hypervigilance gone.

Though her gaze still seemed to be directed only at me—

"Whoa...!"

And sometimes she would moan in awe as I swung my sword. Her relaxed expression and voice were *almost* persuasive enough.

.....It's clear her match with Albert gave her a lot to think about. Either that or it's made her indirectly interested in me, since I taught the boy who beat her—I'm really not sure.

The whole thing made me feel self-conscious, so I ignored her and asked my students, "Are you both ready?"

Melissa used to run away if she ever caught me looking back at her, so I always avoided her gaze. But now it was almost the opposite. I swung my blade, trying to ward off the thoughts that were cluttering my mind like tangled threads.

“Yes, Miss Mylene! I look forward to another great lesson!”

“Today’s the day I’m gonna beat you, Mylene!”

For Albert and Colette, it was a textbook-perfect *normal* training session.



“Huff...huff...”

“Th-thank you for the lesson...”

As Colette and Albert gasped for air, their shoulders heaving, I smiled and calmly replied, “And thank *you*. It was very educational.”

Today’s training session had once again ended with neither of them landing a single blow on me. And Colette’s and Albert’s reactions to this were polar opposites: one was happy, the other was bitter.

As Colette supported her weight on her sword, she heaved a sigh and said, “Educational... Funny you should say that... I doubt that you could learn anything from us, given the clear gap in our abilities.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that at all.”

Behind Colette’s labored mutterings was a bitter sentiment: *There’s nothing you could possibly learn from us.*

But I really meant what I’d said to Colette—it wasn’t a sweet lie to console her.

“When you spar against a pair of opponents with a clear strategy in mind, there’s a lot you can learn. The areas of my body you both targeted must have been where you thought I would be most vulnerable. You gave me a great opportunity to be introspective.”

The pair were fast learners, but I was still far superior to them in skill. And yet

sometimes our sparring matches would help me diagnose faults in myself I hadn't noticed before.

"Hmm...I suppose you aren't just saying that out of pity... All right! When you put it that way, that cheers me up a little."

Colette, who caught her breath faster than Albert, jumped back into her battle stance with a cheerful shout. Even though she felt her own limitations, she didn't despair for long. She was naturally gifted to begin with, but she was also the hardworking type. Her potential was terrifying.

"Phew...! Well, you have it easier than me, Princess Colette. I may be able to control my magic now, but I still can't get in a good sword swing."

Albert took a little longer to recover, but he sounded like he was enjoying himself. And that enjoyment came from the feeling of accomplishment at getting closer to his defined goals. In his own way, he was also the type who could improve with hard work.

"But, Prince Albert, you really have gotten better," I insisted. "Though I think I was a little too intense today..."

"Yes, up until now, he could barely keep pace with me."

"Ooh, you mean it? Hee-hee... Gee, thanks."

Dammit, I envied these kids... They couldn't help what they didn't have, so they tried to succeed some other way. To somebody like me, who'd lived my life giving up on everyone and everything, it was a rather idealistic way of thinking.

As somebody who now had both magic and life experience, it made me think. Well...I guess it's *because* of my past life that I was able to keep training without getting tired of it.

"Seriously, you both have made great strides in your training," I said.

It was plenty obvious how eager they both were to keep going, but I really had gone a little too hard on them today. There wouldn't be any point in continuing the session. When I suggested we end early, Colette and Albert both looked startled.

I get the feeling this has happened before...

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Er, no, Mylene... It’s just, you look so gentle and relaxed right now. Lovable, perhaps—”

“Please, don’t go there. I told you before,” I sighed.

And as I suspected, Colette started to get mushy on me. You might call her obsessed—like she was ready to seduce me the moment I showed weakness. Then again...I’d be lying if I said it felt bad to have an admirer.

But Melissa was watching. Disregarding how much the girl actually knew, I’d still rather keep *that sort of thing* private.

As I headed back to the bench to collect my things, right on cue, Melissa looked up at me without even so much as blinking.

“They really trust her... And the way she looks at them—she’s completely unlike that bitch.”

She mumbled something under her breath, but her low volume and my distance from the bench made me unable to hear it.

I hope she’s not under some strange misapprehension. Ugh, this is gonna get messy...

But just as I was about to heave a sigh, Melissa jumped up from the bench eagerly and called my name. “Mylene Petule.”

“Huh?” Her sudden move left me speechless. And I wasn’t the only one. Both Albert and Colette were tensely holding their breaths.

This was the first time in the past month that Melissa had addressed *me* directly.

With her head hanging, but her eyes looking up beseechingly at me, she said, “I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you... I have something to tell you. Would you come off campus with me?”

She was gazing directly into my eyes—another rarity.

I don’t know what the deciding factor was...but she finally changed her mind

about me.

“Of course...I’d love to.”

When I smiled at Melissa, she changed nothing about her expression and heaved a tiny sigh of relief. I was missing a smile, but I sensed peace in her. Even though we barely spoke, I had learned a lot about her in the past month.

“Hum? We’re going somewhere? Then I suppose we should gather our things quickly.”

“If possible...I’d like Princess Colette and Prince Albert to...refrain...from joining us.”

Colette had assumed we would go together, just like we always did. But Melissa rejected the idea.

So that means I get to talk one-on-one with somebody who’s been terrified of me...

I clenched my fist, excited that I’d finally gotten my chance. I sent Colette an apologetic glance, meaning to tell her she should sit this one out, but before I could say anything, she nodded softly at me.

“Understood... I’ll get permission for you and Melissa to go off campus. Come, Prince Albert, we’re going back.”

“If we must, we must. Well, Miss Mylene, I shall return your practice sword for you. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“I appreciate your consideration. Well, have a lovely evening, you two.”

After the pair were out of sight, I turned back to face Melissa. There was still a faint glimmer of hesitation in her eyes, but with it, there lay a firm sense of resolve.

“All right, then—where are we going? Is it something so sensitive we wouldn’t want anyone overhearing it?”

If we stayed here, we wouldn’t make any progress. And if we didn’t get back to the dorms by dinnertime, we’d starve.

“Yes... I have something to tell you that no one else can overhear. Follow me.”

Follow me, eh? It was an amusing turn of phrase, from somebody who'd spent the past month doing nothing but trail me.

I nodded in reply and politely followed Melissa as she walked.



Melissa and I left campus and strolled through the town. Some time had passed. Just as I was starting to feel uncomfortable from all that walking in silence and keeping pace with her tiny stride, Melissa suddenly halted and took a sideways glance at me.

“Let’s stop here. We can have a private conversation safely at this location.”

Then she pointed—to the very teahouse where Albert and I had wandered to when we were gathering intel in town. It was there that we had inspected the drugs.

Not many people would know that he and I had used this teahouse that day. Unless Melissa was onto us? The question briefly popped into my head, but I dismissed it. The establishment was a sad little inconspicuous teahouse on the edge of town. If she wanted a place where we could talk in private, it was high on the list of candidates.

“Something wrong?” Melissa asked.

“Oh, no. I was just thinking.”

She gave me a curious look back.

Now that I think about it, I was really on guard that day. There’s no way I wouldn’t have noticed Melissa following me. Yeah, Melissa started following me recently. That has to be it.

“Welcome,” the miserable-looking proprietor greeted us dully as we entered the teahouse. He then returned his eyes to his book without showing us to a table.

Melissa’s eyes shifted anxiously from the unexpected welcome. I took this as my cue to escort her to the table farthest from the entrance.

“Um...have you been here before?”

“It’s a long story. Why don’t you have a seat here, Melissa?”

She walked toward me as if she were on a tightrope. Then she scurried the rest of the way to her seat, lowered her brows, and assumed a solemn expression.

It was too little too late to try and look cool, but if I said anything, that would only delay things, so I shut up.

“I’ll take one Earl Grey—no, make that two, please.”

“Sure thing.”

We paid our cover charge in the form of two gross cups of tea. We were only here to talk, so it didn’t matter what we ordered here. Not even batting an eye at my careless way of ordering the first thing on the menu twice, the proprietor gave us the shortest answer possible before wandering off.

Perhaps surprised by the brazen way I’d just ordered for us, Melissa looked at me with wide eyes. But then—

“Thanks...you’re a lifesaver.” She pursed her lips and bowed her head, realizing she would have had a hard time deciding what to order as well.

“Don’t mention it.”

To a couple well-bred young ladies who attended a prep school for the nobility, this teahouse was quite intense. Just ask the dilapidated building, the rickety chairs and tables, and the surly proprietor.

“Two Earl Greys. There.”

As we waited in silence for our order, the proprietor (who was probably the only employee here) arrived with two teacups. They were plain vessels, only serving the very basic function of holding tea, and they were filled with a liquid whose color certainly resembled tea.

After she made sure the proprietor was gone, Melissa took a sip. “.....No words.”

To top it all off, the tea’s flavor was adjacent to *gross*—it was bound to dumbfound her. Even common folk would never set foot in here again after sampling that beverage. For a sheltered rich girl, it was just too shocking for

words. Melissa just sat there, a complex, catlike expression coming to her face.

Wait...what kind of face even is that? I'm kinda curious, but I've got more important things to tend to—

“So. Why the sudden change of heart? Don't get me wrong, I'm happy that you've decided to have a chat with me.”

I wanted to know what had made Melissa decide to talk to me.

After a moment's thought, she looked back up at me. “After observing you for a while...I deemed you were someone I could trust. Prince Albert and Princess Colette are good judges of character. Them trusting you was part of it.”

Part of it. That meant there was another reason. I waited quietly for her to finish.

“And the other reason was—you. The warm way you looked at them. Nobody gets that look in their eye unless they truly care about somebody. That was what clinched it for me.”

Hearing those sappy words made my cheeks burn. My impulse was to deny it, but I hesitated to do that since this was what had made Melissa finally decide to talk to me.

“D-did it, now...?”

It took all my willpower not to scoff as I said that, so I clenched my fist instead. If I asked her to elaborate, I'd probably burn up from embarrassment.

Now that I had fully slipped into the listening role, Melissa opened her mouth to say something, then swallowed her words. She repeated this a few times.

Eventually, she finally committed to saying it. She lowered her brows sharply and looked into my eyes. “I am...the Priestess of Eltania. I can hear the word of Lord Eltania. Did you know that?”

“Yes, Prince Albert told me so. And?”

When I heard her say that, I thought, *We're finally getting somewhere!* but I maintained my cool facade.

The Lord Eltania. In my past life, I hadn't given a rat's ass about the deity, but

in this life, it was impossible to think that Eltania wasn't somehow related. And I didn't think that words from the Priestess affiliated with the deity would be without meaning.

"Then that will save us some time. All right, jumping ahead—what we do is close to divination. We can sense the will of Lord Eltania, who is far, far away from us. It's very abstract, but if we interpret His will properly, our prophecies are always correct."

Divination...eh. The word "sketchy" popped into my head, but I held my tongue. *Divination is a load of bullshit anyway, so there's no harm in hearing her out. It would be dumber for me to interrupt her after coming all this way. I can always laugh in her face after I've let her finish.*

"We can receive the word of the Lord Eltania by randomly drawing cards with pictures on them. I've brought some with me, if you'd like to see."

Thankfully oblivious to my urge to rain on her parade, Melissa pulled a deck of cards out of her bag and handed them to me.

They're...very elaborate. I couldn't see any difference between each card. It would definitely take a master craftsman to make cards so consistent in size and shape.

Apparently, it was important to select them as randomly as possible—though I guess that tracked, since the cards you drew could determine the fate of your nation.

I cut the deck a few times, then I drew the card on the top.

"What's this...a river?"

The drawing on the card I'd just drawn resembled a flowing body of water.

"It can also be interpreted as *flowing water*."

I had been more specific in calling it a river, but I guess it wasn't wrong to use your gut reaction to interpret the card.

I drew another card—

"Next is—money."

“Literally, yes. But it could also mean *gold*.”

I had pulled a card with an illustration of a coin on it. As I flipped through the deck, I noticed the cards had a variety of objects and concepts drawn on them.

Okay...now I think I see how this works.

“Choosing cards at random and divining the Lord Eltania’s will from them is our calling. Basically, choosing the cards is our job, and reading them requires a specialist.”

“.....I see?”

So it’s a game. Like, if I paired the water card I drew earlier with a rain card, that could mean a flood. And if I drew an unlucky card—like the moon or something—after a money card, that could predict a crash in currency value.

And drawing those cards was the job of Priestesses like Melissa. But considering the grand name and legendary status, it seemed like nothing more than petty fortune telling to me—

“All right... I’m now going to receive *His Word*. I’ll need your help...”

“Very well. What do you need me to do?”

“Shuffle the cards, then divide them into however many piles you’d like,” Melissa said matter-of-factly. “Think as little as possible... And treat them with care.”

Now I get it... If you get the results you were expecting, you can’t exactly say you “knew it” all along. Still in a state of half doubt, I shuffled the deck as instructed.

“You’re good at that,” Melissa said.

“I was bored a lot back at home.”

It was probably also because I was no stranger to gambling in my past life, but she didn’t need to know that. Melissa said nothing more to me. After shuffling the cards, I divided them into five piles.

“All right...watch me.”

The air around Melissa grew icy. All traces of the timid rabbit in her eyes were

extinguished and replaced with the serenity of a priestess. Her delicate fingers leisurely and gracefully fell onto the stack of cards.

Then she drew the first one.

“Ahh—!” I gasped.

I didn’t realize that some of the cards were so obvious.

“Is that...a skull?”

“Yes. A human skull. Since it’s so explicitly inauspicious, the Skull card usually is an omen of a catastrophic calamity.”

Melissa set the Skull card in the center of the table, then she drew from a different pile.

“The Sword card.”

“So that means...weapon? Or could it represent war?”

“You’re smart. I was right, you’re definitely—never mind. I’ll tell you later.”

The second card she drew was the Sword, which I deduced to mean weapon or war. What had made me interpret it so quickly was the *catastrophic calamity* omen from earlier. It had guided my mind to the history I’d experienced in the other timeline.

A catastrophic war.

That was surely pointing to Colorne’s great invasion that had brought the former Eltania to ruin.

My heart jumped in my chest. *No...don’t freak out yet. Omens of great wars are a staple of inauspicious prophecies.*

But if the next card she draws is one of the three I’m thinking of...

Either the Lion...or the Moon...or—

“Ahh...”

Deep down, I already knew what she would draw. I tried to keep calm, but my heart still beat wildly.

“That’s right. *This* is why I’ve been following you.”

—or the sulberia flower.

Suddenly, I was utterly convinced of Melissa's supernatural ability.

On the card she drew was the very flower that the Lord Eltania loved. Without her telling me, I knew what it meant. The sulberia flower meant *Mylene*.

The Hair of Sulberia would bring about a war of catastrophic proportions. I thought I was the only one who knew about that future.

Shit...her power is real. I might've not believed her if there wasn't war in the cards—

I pressed a hand to my mouth. Melissa gave me a curious look.

"Do you...have an idea what this means?"

"I wish I didn't. I only half believed it, too... *Fuck!*"

Melissa gasped. "So...is *that* the real *you*?"

"Hm? Ohh—shit, yeah, might's well drop the act. Yeah...this is the real me."

It took Melissa's question to make me notice I'd let my good-girl mask slip.

"I see...it's a bit of a shock, but for some reason, you seem more...natural?...that way."

"Oh, I have a hell of a time keeping up the rich-girl facade. Have to keep up appearances, ya know."

It was a failure on my part to let my mask slip, but if I could be my true self, I was much more comfortable that way.

"So, what about your usual persona?"

"It's a fake. I have to be the bare-minimum proper lady to avoid suspicion."

"I get that... Looking back now, you did seem oddly crass whenever you had your training sessions with the prince and princess."

Though Melissa looked surprised, luckily, from the way she spoke, it sounded like she accepted it. Then again, I felt a bit guilty that I had come across as vulgar then. Not many people peeked in on our training sessions, but we sometimes had a couple of onlookers in the peanut gallery. I needed to keep

myself in check.

But right now, that didn't matter at all.

It was just fortune-telling—or so I'd thought. But now, I was starting to wonder if the party magicians and hustlers on the street were capable of the same ability.

Then again, if you thought logically about it, Melissa didn't use the same techniques as them. More to the point, her prophecies lined up perfectly with the future—one she couldn't be cognizant of. And for a brief moment, it seemed like she *had* left her body, too.

"As I thought...you're not *her*."

"You said the same thing before a couple times. What do you mean by that?"

Right. We still had that question left unanswered.

When I heard Melissa's prophecy, the emotion that struck my heart was more than panic and shock. I'd felt something else—baffled. The whole thing was just unfathomable.

Melissa's divination had read *the other future*, even though Mylene was *me* now. In other words, the message was clear: *Sulberia is the harbinger of destruction*.

At the very least, as long as Albert was brought up properly, we could avoid civil war. And as for the direct cause of Eltania's demise—Colorne—at present, I didn't see any sign of my relationship with Colette souring.

But the Hair of Sulberia—Mylene—was a different person now. I thought that meant the Hair of Sulberia would no longer bring about Eltania's demise. So it was strange that the prophecy hadn't changed.

Even if the first part of the prophecy had remained the same, if the next card had been a card that denoted Gods of the Moon—like the Moon or Snake card—that would have made sense.

But since the prophecy was unchanged...did that mean I was still going trigger Eltania's demise? It was also possible that the Lord Eltania, who'd given the prophecy Himself, noticed something had changed.

“*She*—the Mylene Petule I first met—was a horrible person. If anything irked her, she would scream at everyone within earshot to get her way. But it was more than that she simply didn’t follow the rules of the social contract. The way she carried on, it wouldn’t be a stretch to say she thought that *she* was a god who should make the rules. I had more than enough evidence to foresee she would grow up to be a horrible person.”

Just as I started to sink into a sea of thought, Melissa’s scathing critique of Mylene brought me back to reality.

“But *you’re* not like that. You know how to put on a nice facade out of basic courtesy to your fellow human beings, and you have a solid work ethic that drives you to train hard every day. Plus, you have Prince Albert’s and Princess Colette’s respect. I doubt with every fiber in my being that *she* could have achieved that.”

“Shit, ya don’t pull your punches, do you... Though you went a little too easy on Albert.”

I snorted in disdain. In a way, Albert’s position hadn’t changed from before.

“The prince...he used to be pious. But he isn’t anymore. He puts his faith not in Lord Eltania, but in you.”

But it seemed she had noticed the change in him. I thought “puts his faith in” was putting it a little too softly, but I guess it was only proper to show restraint when talking about the prince of your kingdom.

“Besides, you’re quite cunning. You know how to put on a mask, and I could tell you were trying to slack off at the Genius Festival.”

“Damn, you noticed?”

“I may not look it, but I love to cook. If you bake a bunch of bannocks in advance, you can sit back and relax the day of, right?” Melissa gave a double thumbs-up.

Ya know...I thought she was a ditz, but she’s actually rather observant. I wasn’t sure she would have noticed if she didn’t happen to be into baking. Still, I thought my sudden change of attitude in class had resulted only in a little surprise from my classmates, yet she was able to read a little more into it than

that.

Shit. She's shrewder than I thought.

"There's one other thing."

As I slumped forward on the table and let my eyes wander in annoyance, Melissa's voice grabbed my attention.

"A certain event brought about a change in His Word... But I couldn't believe it."

Like a rock flying at the calm surface of a lake, Melissa brought the conversation back on topic. Her porcelain-white fingers fell silently onto the cards like snow.

"Sulberia will bring war to the world"—that prophecy received a second part one day. I couldn't believe it in the moment, but no matter how many times I read the cards, it came out the same."

She spoke slowly, her hands gliding like the peaceful waters of a lake as she flipped the cards.

What the hell is she talking about? I kept my skepticism to myself as I watched her work. And the card she revealed to me was—

"A...scale?"

It was a balanced scale. But that was just a roundabout way of saying it. It couldn't possibly be the literal meaning. The words that popped into my head were "equality" or "balance."

"Harmony. With that word, the prophecy takes on the opposite meaning. In other words, you are going to *prevent* the world's destruction."

"Shit, the *world*? Okay, ridiculously large scope aside, why's that your interpretation? It could also mean something like *the Hair of Sulberia flattens the world like a pancake.*"

For some reason, I rejected her interpretation. Sure, I *had* taken steps here and there to change the fate of the world, since it *would* suck if war broke out, but still.

“You just don’t get it, do you? My people have a long history of interpreting His Word correctly. If your reading was correct, then the Lord Eltania would be depicted by the Wasteland card.”

Melissa covered her mouth in triumphant scorn. Her demeanor pissed me off, but I decided not to give her shit for it. Emboldened by her little victory, she gave a smug little cough and continued. “A balanced scale carries a positive meaning. So this is how the words should be interpreted: *War is upon us, but the Hair of Sulberia will bring harmony to the globe*. In other words, you will be the key to saving the world from demise.”

But thankfully, her analysis was worth listening to.

Come to think of it...I don’t actually know what happened in the former timeline after I died.

If I used the word of Gods of the Moon as a reference, they probably offered Mylene unto their Sovereign God and He descended to the Earth from hell or whatever.

In that case, the world’s demise seemed pretty fucking possible. Just Pearlman—one of their cronies—was powerful enough of a mage that even a group of your biggest generals combined couldn’t beat him. If it came to all-out war, even a fully actualized future Colette would have bad odds.

And if the god these assholes worshiped wanted a world of chaos, the demise of the world wasn’t a far cry from that.

“It’s just a hard story to swallow,” I said. Whether it was still plausible or not was another matter entirely.

“I agree with you. I couldn’t believe *that stupid bitch* would be the key to saving the world.”

“Mee-yow... I agree with ya, though.”

“That’s why I observed you, so I could make sure. I needed to find out what kind of person you were. And I believe you’re trustworthy. Besides...you’re kind of a meddler. Right after you joined the academy, you did nothing but get into fights... But I found out later that most of the kids you beat up were bullies.”

“Bah!”

She gave me too much credit. I’d only done the bare minimum to protect myself, along with all the poor saps near me. In the end, I had put the fires out, but I hated being misunderstood.

“So...? Why’re ya bothering to tell me that?”

An indescribable discomfort crawled on my skin, so I averted my eyes and threw my hands up in the air.

Seemingly unperturbed, Melissa nodded. “Truth be told, there’s so much more I’d like to ask you...but I won’t request anything from you now except this: if you ever see any signs that connect to the prophecy I read at this table, please tell me.”

“That’s nice, but ya can’t do shit about it.”

Reading prophecies was noble and all, but the real issue was that this was serious shit. Not the sort of thing a little rabbit who couldn’t even beat Albert in a fight should stick her neck into.

I snorted condescendingly, but Melissa held her gaze and said, “You may be right. But I love the Kingdom of Eltania, and if I could help preserve the peace the Lord Eltania loves so much, it would be a beautiful thing. If there’s anything I can do help, I want to do it.”

The look in her eyes wasn’t something you’d see from a cowardly brat. This was just a hunch, but Melissa didn’t exactly seem all that talented. *That’s* why I assumed she was only saying that to get me to trust her...but I got the sense that maybe she had something different in mind.

She believed in Eltania and wanted to save Eltania—it seemed like this mosquito-bite-chested girl actually believed that with all her heart.

And that belief...was probably linked to Melissa’s final moments in the alternate timeline.

After a long pause, I replied, “But I find it hard to believe that *Eltania* actually likes peace.”

But to that extent, even a poor sap who loved Eltania died a pointless death

that sparked a war. I found it utterly impossible to believe that this Lord Eltania was all that great.

I cursed under my breath, haunted by my ghastly past.

Seeing this, Melissa shook her head sadly and answered, “No. You’re wrong. I think—” Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she banished her insecurities and looked right at me. “*I know that is why you are here now.*”

I was tempted to cut her down with a sarcastic quip...but I was speechless.

That was why I had been brought back to this moment in time as the one with the Hair of Sulberia. No matter how hard I pondered my situation, I still couldn’t understand the reason or the implications behind it.

But could you blame me? I was shoved into the body of a bitch who was hated by just about all her subjects in the alternative timeline. It was some sick joke from God—that was my only explanation.

My other theory was that it had something to do with the gift a certain imperial princess gave a certain stray dog.

“Shit...”

But pondering that any further wouldn’t bring me the answer I wanted now.

Okay, so I was right all along. From my point of view, the Lord Eltania is a piece of shit.

Finding myself annoyed, I thrust my good-girl mask back on and said, “Have we quite finished our conversation? I believe Princess Colette has secured our permission to be off campus, but we still shouldn’t stay out too late. Perhaps we should head back soon.”

“Hm...okay. I guess we’ll call it a day for now.”

Melissa didn’t press me any further.

“The Hair of Sulberia will save the world from destruction”... Is that really why I’m here? I’m just a common mercenary. A guy like me wouldn’t be given such an important role in the first place. But those are some pretty fucking bold words to hear after I’ve been through hell.

If it was really true, I wouldn't feel better until I landed a punch in that god's face.

"Excuse me, sir, could we please have the check?"

"Sure. Two Earl Greys comes to this."



We paid the bill—which was expensive for two cups of gross tea—and put the teahouse behind us. He didn't ask us how we liked the tea, and we didn't tell him either.

But the dark brown liquid left in our cups on the table remained calm, without a single ripple.

A decorative horizontal line with ornate scrollwork at both ends and a small floral ornament in the center.

Interlude

The fresh field swayed gently in the breeze, its green grasses glistening in the sunlight as a lone carriage drove through it. The carriage gently rocked along the road, which had been worn down by the other vehicles that frequented it.

“Mmm, what a lovely view. The plains truly are beautiful, the way they sparkle like ocean waves. The cool breeze also feels truly refreshing!”

But a voice that was a little out of place in such an idyllic scene echoed sharply over the fields. It came from a handsome man who was leaning on the carriage window to admire the view. Though his manner of speech was a bit pretentious, his words came from a place of genuine enjoyment. In a jovial tone, the young man showered everything he saw with affection.

“Yes, nature sure is great. I don’t have an eye for beauty, but I always feel humbled when I’m in the wild. The vast plains, the looming mountains, the bottomless ravines—this work of art forged slowly over time is oh, so beautiful. Do you not agree, Rolf, old chum?”

It was endearing, so long as the rapid-fire repetition of word vomit didn’t make the listener sick.

The young man spread his arms wide in a grand gesture as he spoke to the person sitting across from him in the carriage, a bald man with deep wrinkles in his brow. His name must have been Rolf.

When that question was abruptly thrown at him, Rolf forced his lips into a twisted sort of smile. “Er, well, I can’t say—”

“Is that so, old chum?” The young man cut him off. “Pity. Well, hobbies and preferences do vary, as they say. This infinite combination of personalities is yet another manifestation of chaos. Ah! That reminds me, thank you for letting me drag you along. It must have been a burden, taking it on so suddenly.”

The young man’s words may have been directed at Rolf, and they may have not. Even if Rolf had ignored him, the conversation wouldn’t have gone much differently. But Rolf responded as though the young man had been speaking to him, since it would be rude for him not to.

“You ordered it, Grandmaster. I don’t consider it a burden at all.”

“*Mmm!* So devout! If you ask me, it wouldn’t hurt to lighten up a little, but I don’t mind people like you, old chum. After all, you’re the exact opposite of me—having people like you around helps me sense all sorts of changes.”

It was unclear how sincere the young man was being, but Rolf bowed deeply in response to the praise and answered, “Er...I’m honored, Grandmaster Victor.”

Yes, dear reader—they were members of Gods of the Moon, Victor Ludland and his novice Rolf Balzer. And they were on their way to Zelfore to assassinate Mylene.

There was a clear hierarchy between the two of them, which produced their asymmetrical conversation. Were their roles reversed, there would not have been a word of conversation during the entire carriage ride.

“Come now, don’t be so formal! I love flexibility in all things, and I especially love an environment where unforeseen changes take place. I used to be just the opposite, but life can be oddly enigmatic, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah...”

It was a lackluster answer, but Victor didn’t seem to mind. He was aware that the conversation had no substance.

Carefree, friendly, proud, and handsome, Victor was—at the very least—not

somebody you would expect to find in a cult.

“Aha, a checkpoint. That’s Zelfore for you. Since they have that prep school for the nobility from all over the continent, security is tight. Surely no matter what a couple of suspicious fellows like us say, they’ll give us the regulations-this, standards-that spiel and bar us entry. How utterly sickening.”

Even though he wasn’t anything like Pearlman, Victor was still a member of Gods of the Moon through and through.

For all his grumbling about being sickened, his face was twisted with look of terrifying glee, and his eyes were murky with evil.

The carriage proceeded to the checkpoint gate. But naturally, there were guards blocking it with spears. The driver tugged on the reins and the well-trained horses came to an obedient halt. The guard exchanged a couple of words with the driver, then approached the carriage window.

“Excuse me, may I see your passports?”

He was just doing his job. There was nothing hesitant about his speech or his movements.

After giving him a good looking-over, Victor shot him a friendly smile. “You’re doing a fine job, sir. However, I’m afraid we don’t have passports.”

“What? Well...then I can’t let you through.”

It was a very normal exchange. The guard kept his voice calm as he responded to Victor’s arrogant remark, which had come across as a prank.

Ahh, so devout, Victor smiled.

“Oh dear, I thought you would say that. However...I believe you’ll remember if I show you this—”

A smile still on his face, Victor extended his hand. When the soldier looked at it, his breath caught.

In this open palm—was nothing.

“Hm...? But there isn’t anything there,” the guard blurted out.

“Oh, no, no, no, take a closer look,” Victor coaxed, smiling at the guard as if

he were a child.

And then—a light flickered on the palm of Victor’s hand.

“Agh!”

In a split second, the guard squeezed his eyes shut in response to the violent burst of light. Barely a moment later, he found himself unable to move.

He had not been physically damaged, yet his paralysis was so inexplicable, it was difficult to discern what was wrong with him.

For now, he was stunned, his vacant eyes open wide.

“What was that light?”

Just then, another guard who had seen the glow approached them. Wary of the burst of light and his frozen comrade, the guard gripped his spear and thrust its tip at the carriage window.

Then it happened.

“A-a-a-a-ah!!!”

“Agh...! What’re you—*grah!*”

The stupefied guard let out an eerie shriek and attacked his comrade for some reason. He sprung at his comrade from behind, his lance piercing through the man’s light armor. The guard expired in a state of astonishment.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

“A-a-a-a-ah! *Gra-a-a-ah!!!*”

More watchmen ran over at the sound of the commotion, but with another eerie shriek—a howl, rather—the berserk guard attacked his other comrades.

“Stop it! What are you—?!”

But these were guards whose life’s work was fighting. Training was part of their daily routine. They blocked the wild spear swing of their maddened compatriot, but—

“H-he’s strong as an ox— *Nngah!*”

“N-no human’s this strong...! *Garf?!!*”

Unable to land an attack against the abnormally strong berserker, the guards had their chests skewered and their heads crushed one after the other.

Mayhem descended on the checkpoint. Some soldiers tried to stop their mad comrade, others ran in terror from his inhuman strength, and silent corpses mixed among them until the area was fully submerged in chaos.

Meanwhile, the carriage leisurely passed through the gate.

“Ah-ha-*hah*! What beautiful disorder! Sudden tragedy brings a smile to the face better than any comedy routine!”

Victor clapped his hands and laughed as the clamor faded in the distance behind him. He stayed like that for a while until his waves of giggles finally subsided, then cleared his throat again.

“See? He did remember—his *instincts*, that is.”

He clapped his hands twice to signify the end of his speech, much in the same the way a narrator would signal the end of a book.

“That spell never ceases to terrify me.” There was sweat on Rolf’s brow but a smile on his face.

“Oh, tut, ’tis not that grand a spell! It’s not easy to cast, and it’s vulnerable to defensive magic. Just consider it a by-product of my leisure time.”

When the servant of few emotions gave his heartfelt praise, Victor modestly rebuffed him, though a satisfied smile did come to his face.

“One of the guards got stabbed by his maddened comrade, one got his head crushed, and one abandoned his post and fled wildly for his life—for a last-minute improv, I’d say it was a rather good performance, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, that massacre was mayhem at its finest.”

“We-he-*hell*! I took you for a square, but you understand! It was kismet, joining your little troupe.”

He seemed pleased to have found a kindred spirit who appreciated his *hobby*.

The smile still on his face, Victor glanced out the window. “If you need to know one thing about me, it’s this: I love beautiful things. Each and every

human being you and your kind want to destroy has their own beautiful story to tell. I became a playwright because I wanted to get closer to that feeling, but it didn't work out. After all, a play is a mere formulaic convention, where everything is laid out for you."

Victor was dwelling on the past. Though he was speaking to his underling, his eyes had wandered off to a distant realm.

But then, his stormy eyes filled with light.

"But real people with lives are wonderful things indeed! There's no telling what they'll do during their dying moments. What will they say next? What kind of expression will they make when they die? The excitement is *insatiable*. Which way will the dice fall? Not even I, the one who rolled them, knows the answer. *That*, my friend, is the sort of chaos that makes for a beautiful story."

Reminiscing over the scene he had just helped create, Victor gave a satisfied click of his tongue. But that, too, had lasted only fleeting moment. With a loving smile on his lips, Victor gazed off into the distance—

"Oh, I can hardly wait... *God's Bitch* is supposed to be a beauty, isn't she? A tragedy with the best actress to play its leading role. I'm sure it will be beautiful."

—sending his heart out to the girl whose life he was to claim.

"Having said that, I'm only going to perform in the opening act this time. But considering it will be the opening act for the greatest show of all—the *end* of the world—it is indeed an honor. *Kee-hee-hee*, oh, I don't mind at all. For a world of chaos—your people's philosophy has my utmost sympathy."

And thus, the playwright ventured forth toward his ideal stage.

The carriage made for Zelfore.



CHAPTER TEN

Preparations

“And here is your order, miss. Thank you, and do come again.”

The Genius Festival was fast approaching. I had taken Albert, Colette, and Melissa (who had become a normal part of our group now) with me out to town.

Don’t get it twisted; we weren’t ditching class. Everyone at school was deep in preparation for the Genius Festival, so we were on a shortened class schedule. Instruction had ended at lunch, and we were here picking up the uniforms we’d ordered for our café.

What you just read was the clerk bidding us farewell and begging us to come back. We had ordered ten custom-made uniforms—the bill surely ran high. I could understand their eagerness to secure us as repeat customers.

And, y’know, I probably would patronize them again if I get the chance. Perhaps even next year—nope, cool it. Too soon.

Anyway, we safely made our purchase and left the clothing store behind us.

“I’m so glad we got the goods without any complications! Looks like everything is in order, too... Now I’m suddenly very excited about the festival!” said Albert.

“Hmm, yes, indeed! I truly cannot wait to see Mylene in this uniform!” said Colette.

As we started walking back, the two royals were in high spirits. But unlike them, I was sagging my shoulders as I dragged the shopping bag along. And it wasn't because the clothes were heavy.

"God dammit all... I didn't sign up for this... Do I really have to wear this shitty uniform...?"

The finished uniforms were beyond my wildest nightmares—they were bloody awful.

Don't get me wrong, they were well made. The color scheme was bright and unique, and the design was both modestly feminine and sensational. They showed skin, but not enough to get us expelled.

The merchandise itself was fine. We'd gotten our money's worth—the uniforms were even more refined than their future timeline counterparts.

But that was just the problem. They were even better made than I had imagined.

"Ha-ha-*hah*! Go big or go home, as they say!"

Only now did I realize that I'd made a fatal mistake: I forgot Colette existed.

When we'd ordered the uniforms, Colette had stayed behind to talk to the shopkeeper. At the time, I thought she looked excited; I never would have dreamed that she was making all sorts of additions to our order.

And the clothes we just picked up were the product of her alterations.

I dread what's to come... My body is feminine. I thought I was okay with dressing like a girl by now, but why does the idea of showing so much skin make me feel so embarrassed?

When I'd lived as a man, my job often required scant clothing, but showing skin never bothered me *then*...

"N-now, now, Miss Mylene, chin up! You won't be the only person wearing this uniform!"

"The outfits don't look all that embarrassing to me...," Melissa added. "I'll be wearing one, too, you know?"

“Well, sure, but...everyone has their *tastes*.”

Having said that, it had been careless of me to not stop Colette’s shenanigans. So I wasn’t gonna spend the rest of the day shitting on something I couldn’t change.

And Melissa was right. The uniform design itself wasn’t all that bad if you looked at it on its own. That was true even by future-timeline standards.

As long as I could get over my personal hangups by the festival, I’d be okay.

“I feel so shitty...”

(Which was easier said than done, of course.)

I just had to pray that everything would sort itself out in time. Then again, a version of myself that wasn’t bothered at all by the uniform was concerning in its own way...

Well, whatever. Obsessing over it wasn’t going to change anything. So it was better to turn off my brain.

“Hmm, the exchange took much less time than I’d anticipated. Want to take a little break before we head back to class? We can apologize later.”

“Good idea.”

I needed to snap out of my funk and try to be as cheerful as possible. So I agreed to Colette’s suggestion to take a break at a teahouse.

“Are you sure we should be doing this when everyone else is working so hard?” Melissa asked. We were still technically *in class* right now. Yet, while our classmates were back on campus hard at work, we were having tea.

“We’re here for *café research*, Melissa. If anyone gives you a hard time, just give them that vague excuse.”

In life, ya had to give your fair share of vague excuses to keep yourself from getting beaten down too hard. In fact, we already had our menu planned and we’d already spent most of our budget. We weren’t gonna learn anything new by stopping for tea, but life’s much easier when you bullshit your way through it.

We boldly sat at a table in the front of the teahouse and gave our order.

“Four iced teas, please.”

“Right away, miss.”

It was a hot day. Cold drinks would be a perfect remedy.

“*Research* is a bit of a stretch—but then again, this place *is* rather innovative. Zelfore has all sorts of unique spots.”

“Indeed, it is. I was a bit startled by the concept of chilled tea at first, but on a hot day like this, it’s to die for.”

This teahouse was unique for the era in its own way. And the two royals were gushing over the focus of their “research.”

But just as they said, this teahouse was quite innovative. For one, they didn’t boast a wide variety of tea types, but they also had a variety of things to eat, from small snacks to filling meals. In just a few years from now, the concept of a teahouse where you could also get a bite to eat wouldn’t be all that rare, but those sorts of places were unusual in present-day Eltania. And from the way Colette was talking, they probably weren’t all that common in Colorne either.

Being a center of trade, Zelfore was a step ahead of everyone else. *What was I up to around this time as Envil...? I seem to recall Mylene and I weren’t that far apart in age. Which probably meant I was—*

“Here you go, four iced teas.”

“Ooh, excellent.”

Just as I was pondering what the other me was doing right now, the waiter brought our order. Our four glasses were filled with ice. The way they were lightly opaque from the condensation truly had a delightfully chilling effect.

Suppressing the urge to gulp it all down at once, I slowly sipped my drink. “Ahh...so good.”

I shuddered in ecstasy at the cooling sensation of the icy drink gliding down my throat.

“It’s weak in flavor and fragrance, but it really does hit the spot. Imagine

chilling drinks...and chilling *tea* of all things. It's genius, really."

Colette was right. The concept of serving drinks chilled was rare even in the future I came from. The tea itself tasted cheap, but just the act of cooling it made it utterly delicious. Wait, maybe it was delicious *because* it had a weak flavor?

"Zelfore sure is an interesting place," I murmured as I watched the people walk restlessly on the street outside.

I may have come from the future, but the world in which I lived had been quite small—there were still so many things I didn't know about. Y'know, it might not actually be a bad thing to look around and see what else was out there.

"Having fun?" Albert giggled as I gazed idly at Zelfore's streets.

"Hm? Oh...yeah, guess so."

"Wow, an honest reaction? That's not like you, Mylene," Colette teased.

"The hell's *that* supposed to mean? What kind of person do you take me for?" I glared back at her.

All I did was respond like a normal person. Who the hell does she think I am?

"A cynic." "A fake," Colette and Melissa answered in prompt unison.

"Okay, you little shits..."

Colette aside, Melissa had gotten awfully frank with me ever since we'd gotten closer.

"Bloody hell..."

"For all your grumbling, you *are* enjoying yourself, aren't you?"

"Hm? Yeah...guess so. Since I'm usually so restrained and polite at school, it feels very...liberating?...to not have to put on airs."

"You *could* just be like that all the time," Melissa said.

"You think so? Personally, I prefer seeing only snippets of her true self now and then—it makes me feel special, I guess... But on that note, I see you've taken to not hiding your true self in front of Melissa," said Colette.

“Well, I kinda messed up and let it slip out. It feels stupid putting on airs now.”

“I was startled at first, but I think that’s for the best.”

Come to think of it, I never told my friends that Melissa knows the real me. Not like it’s something I need to go out of my way to announce. But still, the fact that I can be myself around her shows a level of trust... Wait, that’s going too far...more like kinship. I can’t deny that.

“Mmm. I think I feel a little jealous... Argh, what is this feeling!”

I smirked at Colette as she growled and threw her arms in the air. *I’m just showing her what I always show you. Being jealous is a bit extreme.*

The next thing I knew, my iced tea was gone, and my ice slid down to the bottom of my glass with a melodic tinkle that brought a faint moment of peace to the hustle and bustle of the city.

It was Melissa who broke the little moment of tranquility.

“Mylene...” She hunched her shoulders and said, “I owe you an apology.”

“Huhh?” I grunted dubiously.

“I let my prejudice get the better of me, and I treated you horribly. I wrote you off as my enemy...and I wanted to apologize for that.”

“Ah. So *that’s* all.”

I’d been wondering what she was going to say, but apologizing for her behavior up until now made sense. Then again, it felt a little irrelevant now.

“I don’t really give a shit.”

“I know...but—”

It wasn’t her behavior itself that bothered me. It wasn’t *me* she hated. She’d just taken me for somebody I wasn’t. I got much shittier treatment than that in my past life.

“I’m telling ya, *I* don’t care, so it’s a waste of time for you to worry about it. Unlike those vague *prophecies* you love so much, I mean what I bloody say.”

So the matter was closed. I waved my hand dismissively at Melissa, who just

sat there with her jaw hanging open. But then—

“Hee-hee, you’re such an enigma,” she teased, snorting daintily.

Albert and Colette followed suit and laughed. In that moment, it felt like time flowed slowly and peacefully.

And for some weird reason, I didn’t hate it—

“Oops, we shouldn’t loiter. Let’s head back,” I suggested.

My friends agreed. And as I jumped to my feet with more force than necessary, I heard them giggle quietly behind me.

Shit...I just said something really cheesy, didn't I?



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blossoming Women

“Put that vase over here! Hey, that cross is off-balance.”

Time flies like an arrow—or so the saying goes—but it was true. After a dizzying whirlwind of hard work, it was finally the day of the Genius Festival.

It was early in the morning, and here in the Phoenix Class, the final preparations were underway for the opening of our café. Albert, Colette, and I usually spent this time training, so it wasn't a problem for us, but most of our fellow classmates would still be in dreamland at this hour. Some rubbed their eyes sleepily, and others wandered around like zombies, but the classroom was still in a restless fervor.

As for me, I was barking orders left and right. This was just the thing for the zombies—the closer we got to opening time, the more their cheeks filled with life. As my peers became more lucid, the long-awaited Genius Festival was starting to feel more real to them.

“Mylene, don't you think it's about time we changed into our uniforms?”

“Yes, you're quite right, Colette. Melissa...also, Hermia, Romilda, would you all please join us?”

“Yes, my lady!”

“As you wish, Miss Mylene.”

Aside from Melissa, we'd chosen two other girls to be servers. Hermia was a

class beauty with curves in all the right places. Romilda was slender, but she had a rose-kissed, healthy glow to her skin.

Combined with the innocent Melissa and the queenly Colette, they satisfied everyone's tastes.

"All right, Prince Albert, the gentlemen are in your hands."

"Of course, Miss Mylene."

Albert was in charge of the boys. We parted ways into our separate dressing rooms. Once inside, we were given our uniforms. This would be my second time wearing it. I'd put it on the first time in the shop to see if it needed alterations. Now I needed to put it on again so I could work as a server.

I had avoided wearing it all this time with the excuse that I didn't want to risk getting it dirty, but now it was game time. I had to suck it up and wear the damn thing.

"These uniforms are just so cute!" Rolinda carefully held up her uniform to avoid wrinkling it. "Remind me, Miss Mylene, was this your idea?"

"Yes, mostly... Having said that, Princess Colette contributed to the final uniform you see here. As such, you might as well consider it her idea."

It might have come across as modesty, but I meant every word. Since I knew I'd be forced to wear the damn thing myself, I had only vaguely asked the shopkeeper to make colorful maid uniforms.

"Oh, so it was Princess Colette. I can see that. They are a bit provocative but very beautiful."

And that's how we wound up with these provocative—well, let's just call them what they were: skin-exposing costumes. Having said that, they were still tame enough for our classmates to be okay with wearing them...but I still dreaded putting one on.

It was too late to complain, though. I changed into the uniform. It came with other accessories, but I wanted to delay putting those on as long as possible.

"I see you've all changed!" Colette said. "Then let's head back to the classroom and show everyone just how beautiful we are."

Romilda and Hermia nodded eagerly in reply. As you'd expect, they both had a lot of confidence in their looks. And in truth, all five of us were charming in our own way. If you're going on outward appearances alone, I was included in that statement.

I really need to stop shitting on this whole thing. This is starting to feel out of character.

As we left the dressing room and headed for our classroom, we turned the heads of every student in the hall we passed. Getting all that attention made me feel even worse—

“Well, hello, ladies and gentlemen. *Do* visit the Phoenix Class, won't you?”

—but I told myself to ignore it and sent the enraptured students some light flirtation.

Hey, I had all eyes on me. How could I pass up a good PR opportunity?

I'm sure we sparked a lot of curiosity. What would these beautiful girls in modern, skimpy costumes do? I figured Albert and his posse were attracting their fair share of attention from the female students, too.

“Shrewd as ever, eh, Mylene?” Colette teased.

“Hey, when you're dressed like this, it's *more* embarrassing to stay uncomfortable. One must play *all* the cards in one's deck, my dear.”

“You sly fox.”

I hid my urge to curse under a smile and waved elegantly as I walked down the hall.

Okay, we're almost ready now... No, wait. I still have one very important personal matter to tend to.

I returned to the classroom to find Albert and his team had already returned. They were standing in the center of the classroom, surrounded by a crowd of eager students much like actors who had just stepped off the stage.

Albert and the other boys were given riding uniforms—a variation on tailcoat suits. Only they were much tighter-fitting, with the eye-catching areas emphasized and bright-colored lining that brought a flashy sense of style to the

party.

And just as I'd hoped, this youthful spin on formal wear was a real hit with the ladies.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say everyone had stopped working. Ideally, I'd let them admire the boys for a bit longer, but the truth was that we didn't have time to sit on our asses.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've returned," I announced loudly, to draw the eyes on the class on me.

"Welcome back, Miss Mylene...?!"

...Well, I had faith that we ladies would draw even more attention than Albert and the boys. And as I'd anticipated, the eyes of all our classmates fell onto us, fresh from the fitting room.

The once rowdy classroom fell silent. Little gasps of awe escaped the covered mouths of the girls, while the boys went stock still from shock.

"H-how beautiful...! You're an angel—no—a goddess?"

Albert had a particularly overblown reaction—legs were shaking like a newborn deer's. Not that I blamed him. I had to admit, Colette's design really was something.

The bodice was quite low-cut, and it came with a separate pin-on collar. Since it was an aproned dress, the short hems left our thighs exposed, too. It was a daring design indeed.

The skirt was gathered into a frilly fluff, providing a cute contrast to the sexy bodice. It was a harmony that did not clash.

Most girls at Zelfore didn't expose their legs, but the short socks provided ample exposure of the very-important bare legs and thighs.

But the outfit was still tasteful. With a cute, girlish red as its base, the color scheme brought everything together. And the focal point on the head—a bow tied like rabbit ears—brought the overall effect into the *cute* category.

All of these elements made the apron-dress a cute-yet-alluring uniform of feminine beauty.

Which was exactly why I couldn't imagine a more uncomfortable dress for someone like *me* to wear, but I still thought Colette and Melissa looked adorable in it. Especially Colette. She was so—nope, not gonna go there.

My appearance must have sucker punched Albert in *that way*.

The fact was, everyone in the class, regardless of gender, was mesmerized by us. It seemed like we were off to a great start.

"I didn't dream you would look so wonderful...! Ohh, how should I even express this feeling in my heart...!"

"Thank you, Your Highness. You also look very handsome."

I took Albert's hand as he wobbled toward me so he wouldn't fall, and another sigh filled the classroom.

Honestly, Albert did look very nice. The tight-fitting suit emphasized his already-slender frame, making his glasslike, girlish body sparkle.

Ah, man...that almost makes me sorry I have to do this.

"You're already bewitching as it is, Miss Mylene. I can't believe a uniform could bring out your charms even further! Was this Princess Colette's idea?"

"Yes. The original concept was mine, but it's no exaggeration to say it wouldn't have been elevated to such heights without Princess Colette's guidance."

"Yes...I can see that. She must have prioritized bringing out your charms most of all in her design, Miss Mylene. At this very moment, I respect Princess Colette with my whole heart."

"Humph... And I respect you for acknowledging that, Prince Albert. I can't deny that you understand Mylene's charms quite well," said Colette.

When I saw the two royals shake hands firmly, it gave me such a good feeling inside. Thanks to my decision to make them training partners, they were growing into a duo with each passing day. At some point, they might actually prove a threat to me—now that was a chilling thought.

You know, I wouldn't be in this mess in the first place if not for Colette and Albert. Now I feel pissed off again.

No...let it go. It's time to go to the final phase of your plan.

Albert had gotten me into this mess...and it was time to get revenge.

"All right, let us make the *final preparations*—oh! My foot!" I purposely tripped over my foot and fell toward Albert. Colette startled and reached out to stop me from falling, but she was too late by a hair.

But falling on the ground was never my endgame. I copied Colette's look of surprise as I fell toward Albert. Then I grabbed his suit—and ripped it.

"Agh?! M-Miss Mylene?!"

"O-oh, I'm so sorry, Prince Albert! I must be exhausted. I just—fell..." I apologized pathetically as Albert held me in his arms. He didn't look at all suspicious; my gentle demeanor probably fooled him. I wasn't exactly happy about deceiving a kind, trusting rich kid like him—

But this was revenge.

He had it coming.

"Fortunately, I'm not hurt. Don't worry about me, Miss Mylene. I'm just relieved you didn't fall and hurt yourself."

I figured Albert would say that, I thought as I slowly pulled away from him. "Luckily, neither of us is hurt," Albert said, "so you shouldn't feel bad about it."

"But my suit is in a terrible state...I'm so sorry, but I don't think I shall be able to serve guests looking like this. I feel so wretched. I promised I would help you, Miss Mylene."

However, his lovely suit was brutally destroyed. A dismal silence fell upon the classroom. Albert looked very good in that suit. He was laughing it off and putting a positive spin on it, but surely everyone was disappointed that we had lost our most beautiful boy in the class from the front line of battle.

Albert looked disappointed, too. I had asked him to be a draw for our customers. He surely felt guilty that he couldn't fulfill his duty anymore.

But that's exactly what I wanted. Everything was going according to plan.

"In that case, you needn't worry."

Yes, I'd planned this whole thing from the start. Tripping over my own feet at just the right moment, falling toward Albert, ripping his suit—everything was intentional.

That was why I'd had his suit made to be easily ripped.

"I had a spare costume made for such an occurrence. Won't you please, *please* change into it, Your Highness? I'd feel oh-so-anxious without you..."

"Well! You never cease to amaze, Miss Mylene! To have foreseen such a predicament like this—oh, your Albert is most impressed!"

Now then, about that spare uniform.

Yeah, I'm going to hell...but I'm dragging you with me, bitch.

I vowed that day that I would have my revenge...I never forgot!

I handed Albert the spare uniform, and he skipped off to the dressing room to change into it. As I watched him leave with a smile on my face, Colette looked at me as if I had a monster perched on my shoulder.

"When...*when* did you set that plan in motion?"

Apparently, she had caught onto what kind of uniform I'd handed him. That's my Colette. She understood retribution. She knew how to strike the most devastating attack at the worst moment possible. Compared to toppling a nation, this was small potatoes, but I had my own unique take on vengeance.

"What are you talking about?" Melissa tilted her head in confusion.

"Um...you'll find out soon enough. Don't get on Mylene's bad side. I'd better take that lesson to heart, too."

"But I don't think of her as an enemy," Melissa insisted. "Seriously, what is it?"

I had given up on getting my revenge on Colette, but if this had put her in check, all the better.

A smile crept onto my face. Melissa looked at me with suspicion.

We're pretty far from the boys' dressing room. We shouldn't be able to hear him all the way out here, but—

“Wh-what *is* this thing?!”

I could just barely hear Albert screaming that.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Café

“Oh—oh... Oh... Y-you’re *terrible*, Miss Mylene...”

“But you look lovely, Your Highness. All I did was hand you the uniform that would suit you best.”

A while later.

Albert returned to the classroom, sobbing and trying to make himself as small as possible. Whether or not he could successfully hide from any of his classmates was yet to be seen.

“She’s right...you look good. Scary good,” Melissa murmured at the sight of him.

At the sight of Albert dressed in the same frilly apron dress as she and I, that is.

“P-please don’t stare at me-e-e... Th-this isn’t how a prince is supposed to loo-ook...”

“But if you present yourself with poise, you’ll be indistinguishable from a girl. Then all of our guests would just go, *Huh, who’s the new girl?* when they see you. Wouldn’t that be much easier?”

My revenge was to have Albert *assist* me.

But not as a male server. No. He would be doing the same *job* as me.

That's why I had made Albert's uniform easy to rip. It was also why the spare maid's uniform happened to be in Albert's size.

After he'd dragged me down to hell like that, there was no way I'd let him off easy. Don't let people fuck with you—that's my motto.

"W-well...you know, he really does look good...," one of the boys said.

"I feel kinda funny...," another murmured.

"Oh...oh—oh—ohhh! Miss Myle-e-ene!"

Some guys were on the brink of personal breakthroughs, but, well, they'd figure out who they were eventually one way or another. Honestly, they should have been thanking me for giving them the opportunity to learn how to enjoy new things.

"Let it go, Prince Albert," Colette said. "Consider it a prank that lasts only for today. And if you don't want it to happen again, keep your actions in check."

"But didn't all this happen in the first place because of something *you* said, Princess Colette?! It's like you don't even care about me-e-e..."

"My goodness, what a horrifying turn of events. I'd better keep on my toes..."

As Colette nodded wisely, Albert shot her a vengeful glare.

If she weren't a princess, I might have done something to Colette as well—but when Albert hated wearing the same uniform that Colette was so eager and happy to wear, it would mean the opposite. As long as Colette wasn't showing any aversion to the uniform, I had to consider this round Colette: 1, me: 0.

"Let's end the chitchat here. We're opening soon."

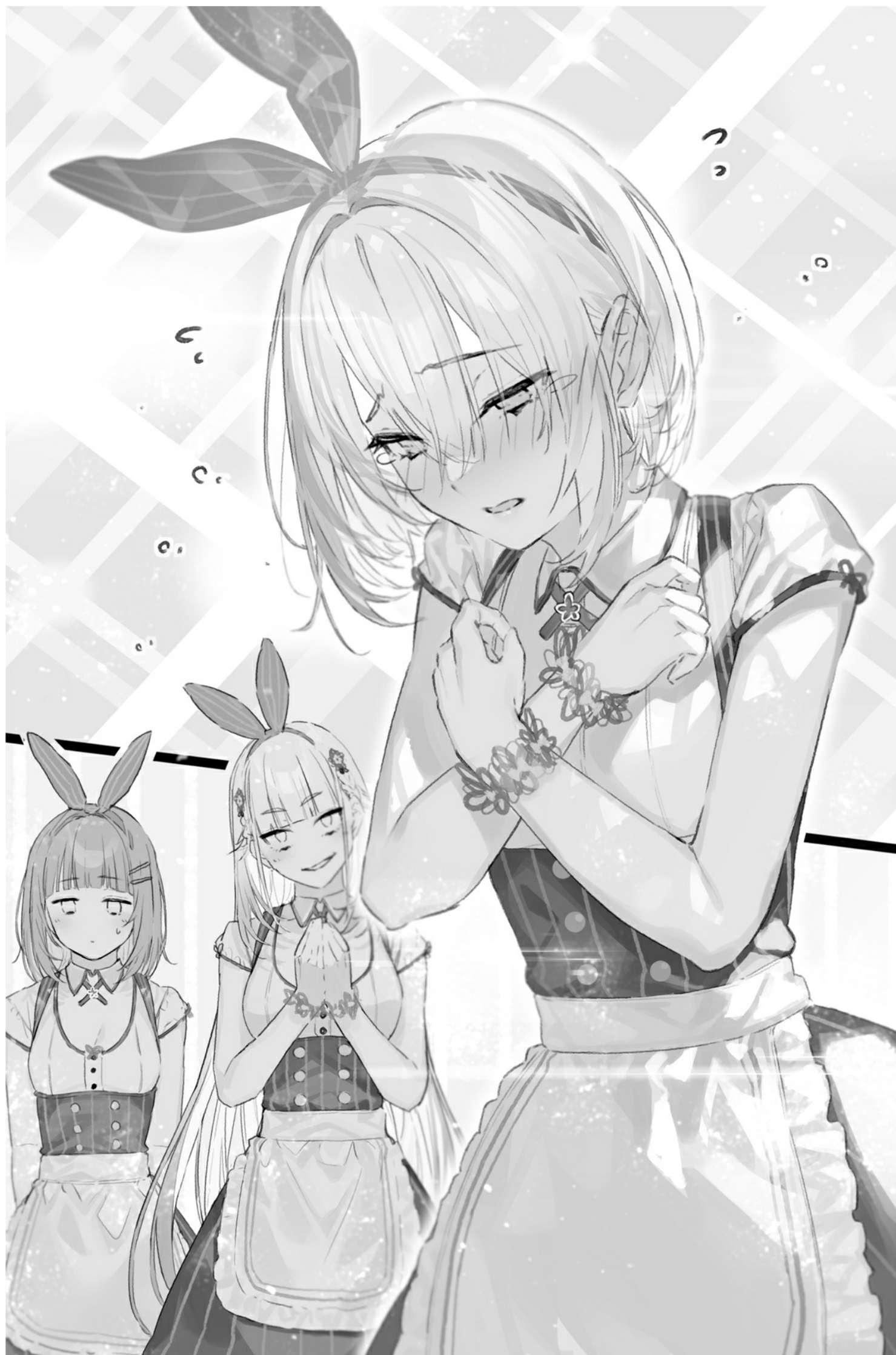
"Oh, goodness, look at the time! Come, Prince Albert, pull yourself together."

"Oh—oh...but Cole-e-ette..."

Albert was still a sniveling mess. I understood. I knew exactly what it was like to suddenly have to dress as a lady. I could empathize—but that didn't mean he had my sympathy.

"Princess Colette is right, Your Highness. You look incredible. If you carry yourself well, nobody will even notice it's you. And a prince in drag could be a

mysterious beautiful girl, to add another novel flavor that only can be tasted at the Genius Festival... It all depends on how you act, Prince Albert.”



In times like these, acting embarrassed would only make you feel more embarrassed. And Albert had already cross-dressed twice before now. So I wasn't gonna let him give me shit for it.

"I'm going to open the café, everyone! There's already a line of customers outside!"

An announcement from a fellow classmate struck the final blow to the hesitant prince.

Ironically, our little preshow in the hallway was giving us good returns. He'd already come this far. If we didn't get results, everything would have been for nothing.

"Well, without further ado—the Phoenix Class's Café Aurora is open for business!"

And with a bombastic announcing of the name, the door to our classroom was opened—to reveal an impressive number of students lined up outside. The queue was so long it made me wonder if every student not currently on duty at their own business was there.

Okay, time to get the energy up. I exchanged looks with Melissa, Colette, and the other girls, then I shot a glare at Albert. Melissa and Colette nodded in reply. Albert's face twitched slightly with hesitation.

"Welcome to our café!"

(But his voice still layered perfectly with the chorus.)

With as much charm as we could muster, we spread our arms wide in welcome. After a hushed murmur of confusion, the room filled with an ecstatic sigh.

"Table for how many, sir?"

"Er, um...f-four...please..."

I didn't blame the guys for gawking, but our business model was low-profit-high-turnover—though let it be noted that compared to most normal cafés, we would still be considered rather high-profit—which meant churning through customers was crucial. We needed to keep the atmosphere in here lively, not

reverent, so I urged the dazed schoolboys to their table as quickly as possible.

“We have one item on our menu today. Please select the jam you’d like, sir.”

“Um, o-okay, I’ll have strawberry...”

“Same for us...”

Our menu consisted of one item: tea and bannocks, the only variation was which of the three jams you chose to go with your bannock. Our customer service system was simplified as much as possible, and our tea and pastries were on the baking level of your basic rich girl.

Then we sold the items at more than twice their market value—though I doubted anyone would care.

“Did you see that...? I’ve never seen Mylene smile like that before...!”

“Yes, I always took her for an intimidating beauty. I didn’t know she could smile that way...”

And that was because we more than made up for it with our customer service.

I used to be a man—I understood exactly how those boys felt. Personality gaps were always a surefire way to get a man to swoon. Their dazed smiles said it all: they were in a dreamworld.

“Blueberry and marmalade—will that suffice?”

“Y-yes!”

“Three blueberries here. Coming right up.”

“Th-thanks!”

The other girls were just as popular. Baby-faced Melissa, queenly Colette—she provided yet another layer of value, giving the boys the rare opportunity to fraternize with royalty.

And speaking of royalty—

“Th-that will be three strawberry jams. Coming right up...”

Albert was also doing *quite well*. I wish he wouldn’t scurry away right after he

took the orders—

“Do you recognize that girl?”

“I don’t think so. But...she sure was pretty.”

“Yes, so modest...”

—but his shy demeanor struck the boys right in the feels.

Enjoy your dream while it lasts, boys. It will surely be a bittersweet memory later.

That was just how perfect Albert was in drag. Unless somebody told you he was a boy—actually, scratch that, *even if* somebody told you he was a boy, you’d still think he was a girl.

Okay, everyone else seems to be making good sales, too. I’d better focus on my own tasks now.

“Here you go, gentlemen. Four Aurora Tea Sets with strawberry jam.”

I distributed the mediocre tea, bannocks, and jam. And there was a collective gasp of awe from the boys at the table.

...If I may be so humble, I know I’ve got a pretty face. All it takes is a little charming smile in a frilly dress and most boys will melt just like them. Now the only thing I have to do is keep it up and serve the other guests. As long as I can turn my brain off, this is an easy gig.

“Thank you for visiting us, *gentlemen*... Next guests, please step this way!”

As soon as I dismissed the table, I brought in more guests. Since we were in constant motion, I felt rather frazzled. But that just meant we were very profitable. Business was thriving, and it felt pretty damn good.

“Oh, God...I love her usual valiant demeanor, *but*...”

“Bubbly Mylene is just as *nice*...”

Besides...how should I put it...? Tying with people also felt surprisingly good. It felt good *because* I thought of it as a game, of course, but for a mercenary like me who’d been used and abused for a cheap price, I felt a twisted sort of joy at bending rich kids to my will with a single flirtatious smile.

Having said that, a part of me still couldn't get over my hang-ups over acting like this, so I didn't think I was cut out for it long-term.

With a little shake of my head, I shifted my focus back to work. Our stream of customers was unending, and before we knew it, the time had come to change shifts.

"Mylene, we're changing shifts. Let's all regroup."

"All right, understood." As I smiled sweetly at Colette, I heard another chorus of scattered sighs from the room. But Romilda and Hermia were also quite the beauties. Their lack of family fame or royal status lost them some points, but they were more than enough to drive the boys crazy.

"Aww! Miss Mylene, do you *have* to leave?!" a girl sighed.

"Princess Colette, can't you stay?!" another girl echoed.

The real dark horses were me and Colette, along with Melissa and Albert. Even though we mostly served the boys, we also got our fair share of love from the girls.

With a soft giggle, Colette said, "It's sweet of you to miss us, but we want to explore the Genius Festival, too. We'll come back to serve again later, so be sure to visit then."

"Oh—! Y-yes, Princess...!"

"We'll come as many times as we have to!"

Then again...this is Colette we were talking about. It made perfect sense. She was feminine, yet she had a unique chivalry about her, too. That was likely the result of the superior education someone of her status was brought up on. She would become an imperial war princess in the future; those qualities would only continue to be sharpened as she grew up.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, we shall take our leave. Do come again, if you wish."

"Oh, we'll definitely be back!"

"I'm coming as many times as I can!"

And in an odd turn of events, I was just as popular.

At the very least, I liked to *think* I carried myself with grace while I was on campus. Still feeling a little confused by that, I slipped behind the curtain that served as a partition.

“All right Romilda, Hermia, we’ll see you later for your second shift.”

“Tee-hee-hee, you’re a tough act to follow, Miss Mylene.”

“But we’ll do our best. Have a great time at the Genius Festival.”

I bid farewell to my coworkers and picked up my school uniform. I wouldn’t be caught dead wandering around campus in the maid outfit. I at least wanted to be in my normal school uniform on my time off.

“Mm—you’re changing?” Colette grunted.

“Yes. I wish to be comfortable when I’m not on the clock.”

“But you look so cute,” Melissa argued.

“Still, I’d rather get this off of me,” I said curtly.

Albert, meanwhile, was unusually quiet—

“E-excuse me-e... What shall I do? I can’t go into the boys’ dressing room looking like this...”

—but it seemed he understood firsthand how I was feeling.

“If you want to change, you’ll have to do it behind the curtain in the classroom.”

“Oh—oh...yes, I suppose I shall have to...”

No way in hell could he go into the boys’ dressing room in a maid uniform. In a way, I guess Albert had it harder than I did.

Then again, he deserved it.

“Well, we’re going off to change, then. We’ll return to the classroom later, so let’s all regroup here when we do.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

If he made it through this ordeal, he’d think twice before betraying me.

I'm not sure why I found the whole thing amusing. Probably because Albert was so quick on the uptake. Feeling a little charmed by the sulking prince, I left the classroom behind me.



We got dressed and rendezvoused with Albert, then walked out to tour the campus Genius Festival as a group of four.

According to the little pamphlets we were given, there was a wide variety of shops to visit. And none of the places really wowed me (which made sense, seeing as how they were intended for rich kids), but if I thought of it as scouting out the competition, I couldn't help but be amused by it.

"Oh, Miss Mylene...you're just too cruel. When did you ever set that plan in motion?"

"From the very beginning, of course. When you whisked the ladder out from beneath me, I had a nasty fall, you know."

Albert, seemingly unconvinced, was bitterly twiddling his fingers. Hey, you reaped what you sowed. He should consider himself lucky if he understood even a fraction of my suffering.

"Hell hath no fury like a woman with a plan." Melissa gave me a contemptuous stare, but I didn't care anymore. I don't care how old you are, the exhilaration of an evil scheme well played can't be beat.

"Truer words have never been spoken, my dear," I answered. "If you cross me, my terror shall be *relentless*."

"See, Melissa? Told you that you shouldn't get on her bad side."

"And you were so right, Princess. If possible, I'd like to become stronger allies."

"The feeling is mutual," I replied.

(I also didn't care that there was a hint of sarcasm in their tones.)

Having said that, I was sincere when I said I wanted to become stronger allies. Melissa's powers as a priestess were the real deal. I mean, I'd seen them in

action with my own eyes. I wasn't in the mood to let her prophecies rope me into anything annoying, but they might serve me well someday.

Then again, that's only if the Lord Eltania was flexible. Take Colette's kidnapping, for example. If we'd known where they'd abducted her, the rescue would have gone much more smoothly. Everything had worked out in the end, but if we had gotten there too late, the world would have lurched that much closer to the Lord Eltania's *prophecy*.

"So, where do you want to go first?"

"Well, I'm not all that interested in shopping, so I'd like to just look around and see what everyone's class is doing."

"Okay then, why don't we start with the second-year class? They're going to put on a play, and I think it's almost curtain time."

.....And if the worst had happened with Colette, we wouldn't be smiling like this right now. That kind of pissed me off a little.

Now I considered Melissa a part of our group. I didn't want to have to involve her, but if shit went down, I'd have to tell her everything and get her to help us.

Then again, we hadn't heard a peep from our little friends since the kidnapping. If this all turned out to be a needless worry of mine, I couldn't be happier.

At the very least, I hoped they would behave themselves until I graduated. That way, I was confident I could manage them all by myself.

"Yes, the play does sound rather intriguing. Shall we go see?"

"Hum. Checking out the caliber of the only other class besides us who's putting on a show? Great idea!"

If they could just be good little cultists and stay out of my way until then, that would be great.

As I watched Colette take the lead, I snorted softly.

We're safe now. Let's enjoy it while it lasts.



In short, the play was terrible.

And of course it was. They'd only had a day to rehearse it and put it together, so it was short by necessity, the script didn't have a chance to come together, and as for the acting... Well, it was amateurish and not even worth watching.

However—

“Ah! Hah! Hah! That was terrible!” Colette cackled. “Especially that shriek at the end. I should get a prize for not bursting out laughing then and there!”

“The plot was horrendous, too,” Albert agreed. “I can't believe they actually had God appear and resolve everything just like that...”

“I didn't really get it, to be honest,” Melissa said.

As we took a light lunch in the cafeteria, it was surprisingly fun to rip on the horrible play we had just wasted our money on. When I was watching it, I just wanted it to be over as soon as possible, but I could talk about it with my friends like this all day and not get tired of it.

“Mm—look at the time. We've been chatting longer than I thought,” Colette remarked.

“Oh—*oh*... I guess I shall have to wear that wretched uniform again...,” Albert wailed.

But time flies when you're having fun. Before we knew it, the time for our second shift at the café was fast approaching. I considered the possibility that time had passed so quickly because something I dreaded was up ahead, but that would be the wrong conclusion. It was because I was enjoying spending time with my friends.

I giggled softly and said, “It's just for today, Prince Albert. If you turn off your brain, you just might have a little fun with it.”

That's right. Today would never come again. So he and I might as well give up and be dumbasses. Gone were the days where you couldn't show your face in polite society after you make a drunken ass of yourself at a party! At least we got to dress semi-decently.

“Er, um, w...well, yes, I suppose you're right, Miss Mylene.”

“True, you won’t get many chances to cross-dress when you go back to the castle.”

“Melissa?! Please, lower your voice if you’re going to say things like that...!”

For all Albert’s indignation over Melissa’s quip, his flamboyant reaction was actually the one drawing all the attention.

The onlookers wouldn’t dream that mysterious beautiful girl could possibly be the prince, but from the way he was acting right now, it was only a matter of time before a couple of them figured it out.

Well, I guess he learned his lesson. I’ll throw him a bone.

“Melissa, do you have—”

—a minute? is how I was going to finish the sentence.

But then it happened.

A loud, boulder-splitting crash boomed through the air, followed immediately by a deep rumble of lightning that shook our very cores.

“Wha—what’s that?!”

“What was that noise?!”

The students in the cafeteria shot to their feet and looked up at the ceiling in search of the mysterious noise and rumbling.

I know that sound... It was an explosion. More accurately, the sound of an explosion smashing something.

“Mylene...”

“Shh! Hold still just a minute.”

The first person to notice the anomaly was Colette. It was no ordinary rumbling. It was an attack. Someone had intentionally destroyed something. The battle training she’d received as the princess of a military empire had instantly clued her into what was happening.

As panic started to settle in around us, we held our breaths and waited for the next noise. And after a while...we heard the sound of a bell.

It was our emergency alarm bell. That meant the school authorities had also caught on to the abnormality of the sound.

“What’s going on...?! Oh, Miss Mylene, do you have any idea...?”

“Not yet. Except...I believe the school is under some kind of attack.”

That was the anomaly we were facing: Somebody was attacking an academy filled with sons and daughters of the nobility.

Yet another explosion rang out. The cafeteria was now in a full-on pandemonium.

“What?! No...!”

“Eep! Wh-what’s happening? Where are the guards?!”

With the second blast, it was clear that this was no accident or coincidence. Even the other students knew it now. It was crystal clear that they were in an extraordinary situation, and they were freaking out.

“Is it *them*...?” Colette growled.

“I can’t be certain. However, I’m afraid we must do something about it.”

I had refuted Colette’s theory on the grounds that we had insufficient information, but she had a 90 percent chance of being right.

I still thought this was all happening too soon. Colette’s mysterious kidnapping was a big part of this assumption, but these were the guys who weren’t ready to take that plunge because it was *too soon*. If they attacked this famous prep school filled with the children of the world’s leaders, there would be no nation they wouldn’t make an enemy of.

The tactics just didn’t match...which meant this was either the work of some other group, or maybe our Bastards of the Moon weren’t as monolithic as we thought.

Either way, I didn’t like the idea that Gods of the Moon weren’t the only fuckers crazy enough to pull a stunt like this.

“Who’s *them*...?” Melissa asked.

“Once we’re out of this mess...I’ll tell you,” I said.

Now that Melissa was entangled in our mess, there was no point in keeping her in the dark. But I didn't have time to give her the whole spiel right now.

"I'm going to go find out what's happened. Princess Colette, Prince Albert, could I have you both please keep everyone calm?"

I wasn't too fond of the idea of sitting on my ass while more people got hurt. I had to find our enemy one way or another—and crush them.

To ensure I succeeded, I needed Albert and Colette to keep everyone in the cafeteria calm so—

"Screw that. I'm coming with you."

"Me too, Miss Mylene. Now is the time to put my hard training to work!"

I thought they might insist on tagging along...

Motherfucker.

"Um, listen, you two..."

"Don't say it's because we're royalty," Colette snapped. "By that logic, shouldn't we stay by your side, where we would be the most protected?"

Albert nodded eagerly in agreement.

Shit...these damn kids. Why do they always have to be in lockstep when it's inconvenient for me?

But they did have a point. Colette and Albert were much stronger than any of the other small-fry students around us. They wouldn't get in my way, either. If we were up against two Pearlman-level opponents, that'd be another story, but either way, it didn't look like I could beat our enemy alone.

"Understood. We don't have time to argue—come."

In the end, I caved and let them join me. It would suck if a third explosion blasted us all away while we were bickering.

"I...I'm coming, too!"

"No, Melissa, you stay here. We don't have the bandwidth to bring along somebody who can't fight—I hope you understand."

“Mmf!”

I just couldn't drag someone into a battle if they lacked sufficient combat ability. Melissa had nowhere else to turn and was backed into a corner, so she pursed her lips and grunted, unable to argue.

“All right, Princess. Before we depart, give a reassuring word to our fellow students.”

“Hum? Oh, of course—attention, brothers and sisters!” With the pomp of a military general, Colette shot her arms out. Her sonorous cry carried a dignified air, filling the crucible of pandemonium with silence in the blink of an eye.

“You are surely in disarray over the sudden events! Fear not—we shall go summon the professors in your stead! Please, wait faithfully for just a little while!”

Colette's declaration filled the cafeteria with clamor once again. But it hushed quickly, until the chaotic hall was once again peaceful.

It was no exaggeration to say that her ability to control a situation like that came down to pure charisma. With a satisfied snort, she turned her shining eyes toward me.

“Nobody works a crowd like you, Princess Colette.”

“He-*heh*! Damn straight!”

She would have been perfect, if not for her impudence, but that just gave me something to look forward to ten years from now.

That being said, the students in the cafeteria were now safe. Nobody would unthinkingly cause a ruckus.

We needed to act quickly.

Once we were out of the cafeteria, my eyes fell on the empty hallway. Usually, people would be walking through it at this time...so it felt eerie.

“It would seem nobody's ambling about aimlessly,” Colette observed.

“They're smart,” I answered. “Good on them for realizing their lives are in danger.”

If anyone were in imminent peril, we would hear at least one person screaming. But since there wasn't, that proved nobody was wandering around thoughtlessly.



These rich kids are smarter than I took them for—what a happy mistake. Okay, let's stick with the plan and find out what's going on.

I took a breath and said, "Okay...let's go. Keep your guard up."

"Yes, Miss Mylene."

"All right."

With a word of caution to my companions, I began to walk.

Okay...who do ya think we're gonna find out there?

I cursed under my breath, spitting out the anger welling up inside me.

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with ornate scrollwork at both ends and a small floral-like ornament in the center.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Theatre

We had been searching for our enemy for a little while now. As we visited the classrooms, we told the professors to instruct the students to stay quiet.

Feeling like a fish out of water playing babysitter, I made my way to the second floor with my companions and lowered my voice to mutter, “Huh...we have another one.”

I was looking at a slip of paper imbued with magic—a charm.

“I sense fire magic... Is this the source of that explosion?”

It was a magic tool—by imbuing a charm with magic energy as you wrote it, you could use it as a medium to cast a spell. And this baby happened to be imbued with fire magic.

“Yeah, ninety percent chance this is our culprit.”

In other words, whoever caused that last explosion had done so via a similar method. Upon closer inspection, I discovered that the charm was set to cause an explosion when something passed in front of it. And these things were stuck all along the stairs connecting each of the floors of the school.

Most people would set up these charms to prevent their enemy from escaping... That’s one conclusion you could draw.

“Why did they leave some areas uncharmed?” I mused. “I don’t get our enemy’s angle.”

I found it eternally baffling. When we searched the second floor, there was just one flight of stairs that was free of charms. It was almost as if our foe was saying, “Please walk this way.”

“Let’s check the stairs that aren’t a trap one more time,” I said.

“Aren’t we going to disarm them?” Albert asked.

There was something I wanted to test. So we would leave these stairs alone and check over the uncharmed staircase one more time. This idea didn’t seem to sit well with Albert.

“I ain’t an expert on charms. It’ll take too long to disarm them. Besides—”

“Besides what?” Colette asked.

We would never have enough time to go back and disarm all the traps from one end to the other. It would make much more sense to have an expert defuse them later—someone was surely on their way already.

I turned to answer Colette, “I doubt anyone is dumb enough to fall for these obvious traps. Nobody would even try to come close to them when the school is on lockdown like this. Right?”

“Hmm. Point taken. However, some students might get hysterical and tear down the halls.”

“If that was gonna happen, we’d already be in a sea of explosions right now. Just a hunch, but I don’t think our friend had any intentions of stirring up shit *here*.”

The charms were placed so obviously even a normie could spot them. They were almost like...a DO NOT ENTER sign.

Nobody was dumb enough to break a rule just to be contrarian when their life was on the line.

Which connected squarely to the sneaking suspicion I had—

“Somebody is guiding us to something. We have to figure out where to go, and what it is we’ll find.”

We were dealing with a roundabout treasure hunt. If the attackers wanted to

kill the students or faculty, there was a number of easier ways to go about it.

Our enemy was treating this like a game. I felt a discrepancy from Pearlman's supremely level-headed *modus operandi*.

Shit, did this mean there was *another* pesky cult besides Gods of the Moon?

I'd never run out of questions... But we had to go on our little *treasure hunt* and see what's at the end of the trail before we do anything else.

"Let's go."

I dodged the garish DO NOT ENTER sign and headed for the living staircase.

Okay, then...what the hell's waiting for us up there?



"Ya know, I kinda figured this would happen, but still..."

When I arrived at what was probably the end of the trail, I let out a frustrated sigh. We had avoided the closed-off paths and come exactly the way our mysterious friend wanted us to, and we'd arrived at—an auditorium.

It was a building with the highest occupant capacity on campus. And I was sure this place wasn't chosen by accident.

"Does this mean they wanted to lure everyone from the academy here all along?" Colette asked.

I nodded. What were they planning on doing when everyone at the school was evacuated to this one area? Slaughtering us all? Taking us hostage?

Either way, it sucked for us.

"So, what's the plan?" Colette asked. "Just waiting here for our enemy to find us is going to be anything but good for us—that much is clear. The only reason we're along right is because we were faster to react—"

"We've come this far, we can't just let it be," I argued. "If we scratch our asses much longer, everyone else at the academy is gonna show up."

It was idiotic charging headfirst into what we knew was a trap, but if we didn't do something about it, somebody else would eventually fall for it. It didn't sit

right with me, just ignoring it.

But if I were our enemy—

I turned my palm upward and generated an orb of magic. It was nothing special. Just light energy with destructive properties.

—if I were our enemy, I'd place the motion-sensing charms in the hallway for show, put a touch-activated charm at the end that acted as the trigger. If I wanted to kill all the people at the academy in one fell swoop, that was the way to do it.

Truth be told, I still didn't have a read on our mastermind, but I doubted they wanted to reward the people who politely obeyed the rules with a big party in the auditorium.

But if their plan was a mass slaughter, it would be strange for them to assume that *nobody* would meddle with the plan before it was carried out.

I just didn't think they'd let their heartfelt scenario get foiled by three kids after such a magnificent buildup... Then again, you'd kinda *have* to be fucked in the head to attack a prep school for the nobility.

Anyway, our mastermind's brain was wired differently. It was pointless racking mine trying to understand it.

"Let's go," I said quietly. They nodded back at me.

We'll work out the pesky details later. For now, we'll get to the bottom of this by force if we have to!

"Graaah!"

I threw my magic ball of destructive energy. It hurled toward the heavy iron door and blew it right down.

"How...did that happen?" Colette mused.

"They must've not put any protective spells on it," I snorted back.

One thing was clear: The door was not fortified.

My theory was wrong, and I'd gotten my hopes dashed.

But that meant our mastermind probably wasn't after your garden-variety

bloodbath.

“Shit...”

None of this makes any fucking sense.

I carelessly marched forward, letting my anger carry me.

“Miss Mylene?!” Albert let out a frazzled gasp. My brazen actions were unthinkable after all the caution we were using all this time. But nothing *had* happened to us all this time. So it was hard to believe there would be any sudden death traps hidden in the auditorium.

And sure enough, I safely entered the auditorium without consequence.

“Ahh, I see! So this is the winning beauty of which I’ve heard tell—*this is God’s Bitch!*”

As I stepped into the hall, a dramatic voice boomed. It was the crisp voice of a male—and I’m not a music guy, so take this with a grain of salt—*tenor*, slightly high in pitch.

With an ample dash of annoyance, I glared up at the podium to where the owner of the voice stood. He was a tall man, cloaked in a hooded robe.

Oh, I could never forget that look... That’s the robe the Gods of the Moon bastards wear.

“The plan was to deliver my speech to a full audience, but alas, you seem to be rather well versed in this sort of thing, *God’s Bitch*. Or would you rather I call you Mylene Petule?”

“I don’t give a shit what you call me.”

He knew my name. That confirmed it. His methods weren’t anything like Pearlman’s, but this bastard was with Gods of the Moon—and he was probably high-level, too. His invulnerable stance and the quiet aura of magic emanating from him betrayed his rigorous experience in chaotic combat.

“There’s one thing I still don’t get—why the hell did you do all of this? If ya wanted to catch me or to catch the students or faculty, wouldn’t there be a more effective way of going about it?”

“Ha-*hah*! So *that’s* your retort! Aha, I see... What a fun character you are. I can tell you’re well versed in combat scenes.”

I didn’t get what was so funny, but the man clutched a hand to his chest as if he couldn’t contain his laughter.

None of this was worth even the smallest of chuckles.

“You exceed my expectations! Your face, sculpted to perfection by an otherworldly being, contrasts *strikingly* with the manly glint in your eye—you’re *beautiful*. I have never met another entity as gorgeous as you.”

“Uh...thanks, I guess.”

“As a sign of respect for your beauty, I shall answer your question!”

Then again, this guy seemed to love a grand speech. Just like Pearlman. Cultists sure were enamored with the sound of their own voices. You could almost say talking was their job.

“That being said, there really wasn’t any *grand* meaning behind my actions. I was tasked with the mission of carrying your corpse back to my comrades—that’s why I came to this fine academy—but when I noticed you children were holding some sort of amusing event, I thought I would treat you sweet sons and daughters of the nobility to a little performance of my own!”

Even the part where nothing he said made any damn sense was the same as my encounter with Pearlman.

I could vomit. But at least he’s playing nice—that’s what I appreciate most of all.

“Well, thanks, but no thanks. This ain’t a garbage dump.”

“Oh, don’t be so cold. I used to have a little name for myself as a gifted playwright, you know? Ah, that reminds me, I forgot to introduce myself, didn’t I?” he cackled through his nose.

His face still in a twisted sneer, the man removed his hood...and out from the darkness popped the face of a rather handsome man.

“My name is Victor—Victor Ludland. Former playwright, actor, and current grandmaster at Gods of the Moon.” The man called Victor gave me his personal

history.

“Pad out that resume, much?”

“Ha-*hah*! Well, I am a man of many curiosities.”

His name wasn’t ringing any bells, but one thing was definitely made clear from our little exchange: the guy was flippant as fuck.

“Victor...?”

But then things took a bit of an unexpected turn. Albert sounded shocked. Like he couldn’t believe what was happening.

“You *know* this guy?”

“Yes... As he says, he was a famous playwright. However...”

Despite Albert’s hesitant muttering, it was at least clear that this guy wasn’t blowing smoke. But that wasn’t the important takeaway here. I couldn’t care less that some psycho used to be a playwright.

“He was imprisoned...for committing mass murder on stage during a play. He has a bigger name as a homicidal maniac than as a playwright.”

“Your words wound me a little, but I am honored that the prince of Eltania knows of me.”

A homicidal maniac—now that was certainly a step up from a teacher.

And if he was incarcerated, I guess that meant he escaped somehow. Did Gods of the Moon play a hand in that? No, it’s too soon to jump to conclusions.

“Aha. I see. I thought this was a rather roundabout way of executing a master plan—was that the *playwright* in you coming out?”

“Exactly, my dear! I see you have an eye for the arts as well. Isn’t education a beautiful thing in a lady?”

“Peh! Sorry, but I don’t know shit about art. I don’t even understand a single word of your drivel.”

This Victor guy looked downright giddy. But I didn’t want him thinking he’d found a comrade.

Still...he was a different flavor from the other Gods of the Moon bastards. In him, I didn't sense any of the contempt or malice his friends felt for me. Then again, that didn't really matter. The guy had basically announced, *I've come to fucking kill you.* As far as I'm concerned, there was only one way I could respond: *Send him where he needs to go.*

Whether that was prison or Hades was up to him.

"Shit...well, whatever. It's me you want, right? Let's just get this over with."

I charged up my magic, my powers stirring up a wild breeze around me.

I don't wanna drag this out any longer than necessary. Let's just end it. I wish I had a weapon...but I couldn't help it. I never dreamed the cultists would pick the day we're playing shop to come and kill me.

"Ooh! So valiant. You are a Valkyrie personified—it would seem my read on you was correct."

"Ya sure you don't wanna borrow any powers from your shitty god? I ain't pulling any punches."

I clenched my fists and fell into my stance, ready to spring at any second.

"Oh my, my, how impatient we are! Well...no matter. I don't like to let a scene drag—it can become rather absurd that way."

With an awkward chuckle, Victor raised his arm. I thought he was winding up for a magic attack—but he wasn't. Instead, he loudly snapped his finger.

It's not a spell. It's a signal.

A man entered from the wings of the podium. He was bald and muscular.

So, he brought some friends... From the look of it, baldie is quite the fighter, too.

As I measured up my opponents, I caught something fly in out the corner of my eye. I didn't believe it for a second.

"Mmf...! Mylene!"

The Gods of the Moon's new arrival had a girl with him. She was petite, and her soft, fluffy locks swayed as he shook her.

“Melissa...?! What the hell are *you* doing here?!”

“We found her wandering the halls in search of your group. Then I recalled the intel that she was friendly with you, so I added her to the cast of our little performance.”

Melissa Tullio, the Priestess of Eltania who it had taken me so long to win over, was now in enemy hands.

“You bastard...taking hostages is foul play!” Colette cried out in anger.

But Victor carelessly spread his arms wide and said, “Now, now, don’t jump to conclusions, my dear. Such a trash scenario, riddled with plot holes—do you honestly think *I* would write something *that* lowbrow?”

Victor fixed me with a challenging look, sending all eyes on me. Instead of answering him, I cursed under my breath.

“I thought not. It was a happy accident, really, but this young lady here is no idiot—she is incredibly rational. In other words, she’s realized that her being my hostage would not ensure the safety of her friends after her death. To wit, she has no value as a hostage in this scenario.”

.....Victor was right.

If he took Melissa hostage, and I did everything he said to save her, there was no guarantee Albert and Colette would be saved. That’s why I would leave Melissa for dead if I had to, so I could destroy this pansy and save Colette and Albert.

“See? That’s why I’ve chosen her not as a prop, but as one of the characters in our little play.”

Victor beckoned to the muscular man, who dragged Melissa before him. As she stood in front of him, Victor extended his hand. If I was right, there was a ball of Thunder magic in his palm.

Melissa’s eyes shot open in terror.

“Don’t—that’s fucked up!”

.....If it came down to it, I would sacrifice one life to save another. He wasn’t wrong there. But that didn’t mean I was so stoic that I could just abandon my

friend when she was right in front of me.

I filled my arms with magic and sprung at Victor on the podium.

“Ah—ah—ahhh?!”

But I was too late. With a violet burst of light from Victor’s hand, Melissa screamed—and crumpled to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

“*Motherfucker...*,” I cursed under my breath, raining my fists down on Victor.

“Whoa there?!”

But with a little jump, Victor pushed Melissa away and leaped backward. With nowhere to go, my fists smashed into the wooden floor of the stage.

Not skipping a beat, I let a roundhouse kick fly. But Victor backflipped away from that, too.

“Okay, now you’re *dead*, you pretentious prick!”

My anger on full display, I followed my glare with a violent body slam. In battle, nothing good came from anger. That was because magic amplified what was in your heart. Anger was like a raging tornado: powerful but completely useless if you couldn’t control it.

But *that* was why the deepest recesses of my heart were calm. I’d rage once now, and I’d have plenty of time to grieve later. Unless I killed this bastard, my anger would be meaningless.

“Ooh, I’m shaking,” Victor teased. “However, I think you jumped to conclusions there. Are you okay with that? Surely your fury is proof of the kinship you felt toward her.”

But Victor’s taunting prompted me to look at Melissa by his feet. Her eyes were closed, but her chest was moving distinctly up and down—

She’s alive!

On instinct, I crouched down and picked her up.

“I took you for a cynic, but you’re actually quite compassionate, aren’t you?”

His baiting words fell on deaf ears. But I kept my gaze fast on my enemy as I checked to make sure Melissa was okay. She was probably hit by Thunder

magic. I couldn't tell how much damage she'd taken, but she was breathing for now, so I didn't think it was life-threatening.

But...why had he let her live? Victor called himself a grandmaster. If he had the same level of powers as Pearlman, he could have easily killed Melissa in an instant if he wanted to.

"I'm liking you more and more, Mylene. My comrades say you sicken them, but—and maybe this is the playwright in me speaking—I rather like a heroic character like you... And I suppose that's why *this* sort of tactic works on you."

"Huh...? What the hell are ya saying—?!"

That's why I should have noticed sooner. I should have caught onto why he'd let Melissa live and sent her back to me.

"Ah—*AHHHH!*"

A girl's earsplitting scream rang in my ear.

"Mylene!"

"Miss Mylene!"

Colette's and Albert's voices layered on top of it.

In that moment, the pair was surely connected by intuition. I followed their gazes, sharp as spears, to find not our enemy, but Melissa, in my arms.

She was screaming, slashing down at me with nails imbued with magic.

"Mmf—?!"

I released her and yanked my head away. With fingers that had transformed into magic blades, Melissa swiped through the empty space just beside my head.

A trickle of red flowed on my cheek.

I was careless. If I'd noticed her only a second later, I would have a face I could never show in public again.

Without even regrouping her stance, Melissa crashed to the floor, her arms still flailing. But seemingly unfazed, she started writhing like a flame in a lamp.

“Whooo! Whooo!”

Rising to her feet, Melissa spewed air through her bared teeth. Her face was filled with a violent rage, like an animal. Actually, I take it back—her seemingly complete lack of sense made “beast” a more apt word to describe her.

“What did you do to her...?!”

“Ha-*hah*! Do you like it?! I’ve drawn out her latent instincts and unleashed her powers *beyond* their full potential with my *Brain Reeling*! Maybe you could have left her for dead, but can you punch her in the face?!”

It was hard to believe, but Victor had Melissa under some kind of manipulation spell. It was magic I’d never seen or heard of.

“Ah-ah-ah!”

“Shit!”

But here we were—Melissa was coming at me in a murderous rage. What he said was happening right before my very eyes, so I had to accept it.

Melissa slashed her claws wildly about, relying on brute force just like an animal would. His boast about unleashing her powers beyond their full potential wasn’t bullshit. Her movements were faster and her magic far more powerful than I’d ever seen it in practice.

But in exchange, her movements had grown incredibly simplistic. She was all reflex, charging only toward her enemy. Dodging her was easier than breathing in and out.

“Gree...?!”

But all of this was only true *if nobody else got in the way—!*

A sudden pain rushed through my leg. I felt like I’d been stabbed with a poisoned needle. A burning pain spread quickly from the entry wound.

I’d felt this before. It was damage from Thunder magic.

“You asshole...!”

“That’s what you get for forgetting about *me*. To be completely ignored certainly does sting. Though I suppose I understand why you would want to

focus on her right now. What tremendous magic energy. I guess that's to be expected from the Priestess of Eltania."

Of course this asshole wouldn't neglect me while I was entertaining Melissa and begging to be attacked. Meanwhile, Melissa kept flailing mindlessly at me while Victor shot thunder needles.

"Mylene!"

"Let us handle Melissa while you—"

It would be easiest if I could let them handle her, but—

"You think I'll allow that?"

—we had another foe to worry about.

The muscular man blocked Albert and Colette's way. He was a sort of errand boy for Victor in function, but from his stance and the look in his eye, he projected competence.

This situation is so bad it's funny— Mother! Fucker!

"Shit! Snap out of it—*grrng!*"

Melissa's brute force strikes had so much momentum behind them that I couldn't block them. Her blows were easy to dodge, but doing that would open me up to a shower of attacks from Victor.

"Mmf!"

"Shit! He's heavy...! Albert, don't be a hero!"

And I couldn't rely on my backup either.

Not like I was counting on them swooping in to save me, but Albert and Colette were quite a force when paired together. Still, I'd miscalculated believing they would put up a good fight.

The muscular man brushed away the sword, causing Colette to sway out of her defensive stance. The sheer volume of magic would be difficult for Albert to block. To stop Victor's flunky, Colette would have to take his attacks while Albert went on the offensive—that was the exact opposite of their usual dynamic.

We've gotta break the stalemate...

"Don't take this personally!"

And to do that, I needed Melissa to go nighty night.

With a little restraint, I sank my fist into her jaw. That was the smoothest way to rattle someone's brain and knock them unconscious.

However—

"Dammit, why won't you just black out?!"

"Ha-*hah*! It won't work! She's in a forced state of consciousness—she won't lose it that easily!" Victor cried out in maniacal glee as he shot more thunder needles at me.

To add insult to injury, this motherfucker wouldn't stop riding my ass.

He could easily kill me with one attack if he wanted to. Yet he was holding back. And that was because—

"If you want to stop her, killing her is your best bet! Or you could blast off her legs if you wish! Either way, she won't feel the pain!"

—this psycho wanted me to personally take Melissa's life. That was the *story*—or in his words, the *comedy*—that he wanted to tell.

This birthed a strong urge in me to prevent that from happening—which might have been what he was going for. In that case, I had to hand it to the guy.

"Oof...!"

But those *needles* of his just kept flying in a relentless taunt. He probably meant to make a laughingstock out of me for a while.

Damn, this dude is no fun. I can't think of any way to land an attack.

If this kept up much longer, the needle-inflicted damage would be no laughing matter. One wrong move and it was curtains.

There has to be some way out of this... Do I have no choice but to use my last resort?

"Myle-e-ene!"

I clenched my eyes in pain as an angry shout rang through the auditorium. I shifted just enough of my consciousness to hear the rest of what Colette had to say.

“We’ll manage somehow, I promise! So *trust me* and hang in there! Curse your way through it if you have to!”

Through the loud clamor of sword hitting sword, I heard her cry out to endure it. Like that was so easy. I knew she and Albert were barely holding their own as it was.

But “Trust me,” eh? Not a bad seduction line, if I do say so myself.

“Shit...I’m a sophisticated lady with a lotta charms—don’t make me wait long!”

“That joke wasn’t half bad! Keep it up!”

In my past life, I’d done a lot of mercenary gigs with a group, but looking back, I hadn’t really trusted anyone I worked with. In the bitter end, the only person you could rely on was yourself. That was how I’d survived to my own *bitter end*. But this was my second life. It might be fun to try something new.

I twirled away from Melissa’s swinging nails and used my momentum to repel the volley of thunder needles. Not even a magic shield could stop my hands from tingling from the force of my magic orbs and Victor’s needle attacks.

This all would have been easier if I had a sword. But while I was filled with regret, a smile was creeping onto my face.

That was because doing what I thought I hated—waiting—was actually not as bad as I thought.

“Aha, so that’s your move! Oh, I was right about you, Mylene, you never bore me! And that’s it. Your *chaos* is true theater!”

“Oh, shut up. Nobody likes your shitty threepenny drama!”

That’s right. Don’t snap. Don’t panic. When you’re in battle, light quipping is ideal.

Now that I had firsthand experience dealing with Melissa’s movements, I turned my attention to Victor’s attacks. I focused on making one action at a

time—not a millimeter wasted—as I seamlessly weaved my evasive maneuvers into a steady flow.

But unexpectedly—

“Beautiful...! It’s like you’re dancing! What a polished performance of extreme intricacy!”

—it turned into a dance. The pretentious asshole’s unwelcome applause pissed me off...but I could use it.

“More—give me *more*! Ahh, I’m getting a vision...a vision for a new kind of performance! Yes, a synthesis of acting and music!”

A bolt of thunder clapped between each step I took in a dramatic counterpoint. In his excitement, Victor had turned his thunder needles into thunder hammers, spreading a cacophonous roar through the proscenium.

It was the absolute worst call and response ever. His words and actions were in direct opposition. If this were a play, he’d be throwing rocks at the actors.

But my heightened sense of focus helped me feel his flow of magic on my skin. Struck by it, my body moved.

Aha...I think I got the hang of this.

A seamless dance with no form. It had something in common with a beast’s method of fighting. Up until now, I’d moved in a way that would help me kill with the highest efficacy—but if I emphasized *evasiveness*, I could use this type of movement for defense. It was a new discovery.

Having said that, it would all be over if Victor threw a tantrum. I’m sure he had the firepower to blow this entire auditorium away with a spell if he put his mind to it. So before he could...

I shot Colette and Albert a sideways glance.

Colette was drawing the beefy man’s attacks while Albert danced with Wind magic, boldly diving in for the attack. Ideally, they would defeat baldie before Victor lost his temper. Then I could leave Melissa in their hands, and the odds would suddenly turn in our favor.

But Victor might deliver the final blow before we could make that happen.

“Grandmaster...! I can’t hold them back any longer—you need to end this now!”

“Oh, quiet, you... I’m just getting to the good part! Don’t interfere—I’m on the verge of discovering a completely new artform here!”

.....But that didn’t happen.

While he was a bit out of place in Gods of the Moon, Victor was still a certified weirdo—psycho, I should say. I guess *that* was what bastards like him had in common.

I think I see the light at the end of the tunnel...

I’ll play along with him for a while.

“Gah!”

“Oh, no you don’t, Mylene! Not like *that*—think *beautiful* and *elegant*!”

Still, dodging the man’s precise, lightning-fast attacks was no easy task. And at times, his tricks were punctuated with thunder hammers of increasing intensity.

But I can take it. As long as I know I have a chance of coming out on the other side.

Wasted force—I knew just how futile it was. And *that* was why I just needed to wait. The tiny roots I’d planted would soon bear fruit.

“Ngh! G-Grandmaster Victorrrr!”

“Agh, just shut up. You’re a proud member of Gods of the Moon—endure it! Unforeseen developments in battle are all a part of glorious *chaos*, are they not?”

Colette and Albert were backing Baldie into a corner. I could hear the panic in his voice. I knew my students had gotten stronger, but they had exceeded my expectations. Still, Victor was focusing all his fury on me. He didn’t seem to give a rat’s ass about his comrade.

“Whoa, you sure you’re okay just leaving your *brother* to die?”

“Ha-*hah*! I was never that devout to begin with! I merely wish to observe beauty at its apex. And compared to my time spent with you, my dear,

everything else is pond scum!”

“You bastard! How dare you side with *God’s Bitch*...?! And you call yourself a grandmasterrr...?!

I guess the brotherhood between this cult grandmaster and novice had fallen apart. The big guy spat curses at Victor, but the latter couldn’t seem to care less.

From the look of things, Victor had only joined Gods of the Moon because they shared the same goal. (Then again, the fact that they shared the same goal at all proved just how batshit crazy he was.)

“Damn! It! You’re a *prince*! You conniving little shit...hiding behind a stupid *girl*!”

“Fine words from a coward who takes innocent girls hostage!” Albert said.

“Besides, Albert and I will be rulers someday. It’s our duty to fight smarter, not harder,” added Colette.

“Use *every* card in your deck. That’s what Miss Mylene taught us!”

As the muscular man struggled to keep up, Albert and Colette calmly clapped back. The clash of their swords got fiercer and fiercer until—

“Curse you, Eltania! Curse you, Victor! Go to *hell*, all of youuu!”

The moment finally came.

Unfortunately, I could only hear the sounds and voices.

A loud gust of wind accompanied his shrieking death rattle.

“Miss Mylene!”

“Our fight is over! We’ll take Melissa!”

“Thanks...!”

Without even a moment’s pause to celebrate their victory, Albert and Colette flew past me on either side and landed before Melissa. They were covered in battle scars, and their shoulders were wildly undulating with fatigue.

It must have been quite the fight. I would’ve loved to toast to their heroism—

pity this nation had such strict underage drinking laws.

But before we could celebrate with a good drink, we still had a messy job to finish—that was the rule.

I turned my gaze on Victor. He was looking down at us from the podium, a scalding smile burned on his face.

“Astounding—what a beautiful story. Almost brings a tear to my eye.” There were actual tears in Victor’s eyes as he clapped in applause.

This guy seemed to think everything that had just happened was part of one of his plays.

And the same went for everything to come—

His calm and composed demeanor was a product of his confidence. He had yet to unleash his full powers on us. Meaning, everything that had happened so far was just the opening act.

“O, *Zuri Dien*! Lend me your power!!! Together, let us write the perfect ending to this story...!”

He would ruin everything in act two with the power of his god. *That* was his true aim.

Victor threw a medal inscribed with a picture of a birdman into the air, and lightning spilled out of his body. When the storm subsided, he seemed largely unaltered. He slowly opened his eyes.

Appearance-wise, the only thing different about him was that his hair was now standing on end... But even Pearlman, who had gained bright-red eyes from his transformation, looked like a doe compared to him.

“And now, the second act. An abrupt death—the height of beauty and realism.”

Victor elegantly extended his hand. And as I faced the overwhelming wave of magic energy before me, I wiped the blood off my cheek with my finger.

“That your game, too? Borrowing powers from that shitty *god* of yours. Ya didn’t seem to give Him much of an offering in exchange.”

“Ahh, you speak of *Pearlman*, I assume? Well, that comes down to compatibility for the *synthesis*. I seem to be highly compatible with my god, Zuri Dien. He’s a good guy—if I ask, He gives me all this power.”

Aha...so, the chummier you are with your deity, the more power you get to borrow. Pearlman must be rolling in his grave. He crushed his eyes with his bare hands while this asshole just asked nicely and got even more power than him.

“Oh really.”

But I didn’t care about any of that. I’d just asked out of idle curiosity, and Victor had happened to tell me. Didn’t really care one way or the other.

“Well...aren’t we a little bland, my dear? You’re resigned to your doom.....is what I’d like to say, but you aren’t that kind of person.”

“You know me well.”

“Ohh? So, are you sizing up your odds of winning?”

“Nah, that’s not how I roll. I just need...”

“You just need—what?” Victor’s voice was eerily calm, probably because he had attained the powers of a deity.

I was well aware of the difference in power between us. But I hadn’t given up yet.

I didn’t give a shit *who* I was up against. It was actually quite simple. I had an itch—an itch that wouldn’t be satisfied until I punched his fucking face in. No matter what else happened, I would sink my fist into his cheek and wipe that pretentious smirk off his face.

That was nonnegotiable.

Though I’m getting ahead of myself here—

“You deserve no mercy after the shit you’ve done...! No matter what happens, I’m gonna beat the shit out of you until I feel better! *That’s* all I need!”

The half-baked way he’d taken a hostage, the conniving way he’d made Melissa fight for his amusement, the way he kept pecking away at me like a chicken during our fight—Victor was gonna pay for being so bloody annoying!

His pretentious mug, his overdramatic lines, his boring-ass *script*! I'd punch his head through the ceiling so hard it burned.

"I'm completely and utterly *pissed off* right now!"

I'd snapped.

I don't care who the hell you are—I'll smash those lips of your so hard they never work again!

Letting my wrath take form, I clenched my fists, squeezing all my magic energy into them.

My mana materialized into white blades, the tips burning with red flame.

Its color was almost like—

"Sulberia-colored magic! Whoa, now, don't tell me you're performing an invocation in the eleventh hour?! Sublime to the very end!"

—a sulberia flower incarnate.

It was answering the call of my wrath—but it was more than that. I felt a tremendous power surging up inside of me...like *somebody's* power was flowing into me.

I opened and closed my fists, half-doubting the power myself.

Victor was screaming something in excitement. *Did he say "invocation"? I don't really get what's going on...but I think I can ride this wave to victory.*

"Are ya ready to die, you pretentious prick?"

"Ha-hah! Oh, yes! Let us bring this performance to its beautiful climax together!" Victor spread his arms wide, his voice shrill with elation.

I just stared at him quietly with eyes of ice.



A decorative horizontal line with ornate scrollwork at both ends and a small floral ornament in the center.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mythos

Our magic energies burst from our bodies and tangled explosively, producing a grating sound like iron files being scraped together.

The powers of our gods invoked, Victor and I just stood there, staring at each other.

“Aren’t ya gonna attack me?” I snapped, out of patience.

Victor smirked and answered, “Hey, I’m exercising caution. If I let my guard down, it might all be over in the blink of an eye.”

Aha... Unlike Pearlman, who had charged at me out of nowhere, this guy seemed quite composed. In perfect contrast to his aggressively spiky hair, he looked calmer than he was even before the fight started—what effect even made that possible?

Well, one thing was clear regardless—he wouldn’t go down easily.

If only he had lost his mind and charged wildly at me, then he would have been much simpler to counterattack. The fact that he wasn’t proved he was on a higher level than Pearlman.

I could probably learn a lot more about him if I just stayed put and studied him a while longer. However— “And what about you, my dear? If this a war of attrition, you’re at a clear disadvantage. And I think running out the clock until somebody wins by default would be a rather anticlimactic ending, don’t you?”

It seemed my magic wouldn't last forever. Even so, I felt like the power in me now was more or less infinite, compared to normal.

Victor claimed that running out the clock would be boring, yet his stance implied he hadn't taken it off the table. If anybody was going to make the first move, it had to be me.

Well, whatever. I'm suddenly filled with mysterious powers. Guess I'll figure them out as I go.

I created a ball of magic in my palm. It was the size of a fist, but it felt as hot as a small sun. I threw it carelessly. *Okay. Show me what you've got.*

As the packet of destructive energy hurled toward Victor—

"Shit..."

—I felt a faint pain in my shoulder and shifted my gaze. I'd been cut. It was a shallow wound, but a wound all the same. I felt a light tingling surge through my body. There was no mistaking it—that was Victor's power.

I turned around, sensing a presence behind me. It was Victor, slowly recovering from springing there like an animal earlier. He was just turning around to face me as I looked at him.

Dang, he's fast... It's impossible to follow him with my eyes. More accurately, he ran as fast as the speed of light—so quick I couldn't even sense his onset of movement.

"Ha-hah! Are you kidding me? All that bravado for a mere *scratch!*"

He seemed just as surprised by it as I was. A sneer formed on his shocked face, his teeth bared. Or should I say, his fangs. It was subtle, but evidently it wasn't just his hair that had changed.

But that was trivial. This guy's magic powers were far beyond that of any human. He was a monster inside—make that a devil—so it didn't matter what he looked like on the outside.

My soul grew even colder as I clenched my fists.

Okay, it's crystal clear that he's too fast to see. So I've gotta find another way to fight him.

I fainted an attack—Victor’s gaze shifted slightly. Simultaneously, I turned my face to the side. A lock of my hair was sliced off, falling to the ground.

By tracking my eyes and tapping into his magic perception, he could sense my attacks before I made them. This was par for the course when fighting a wielder of Thunder magic.

“Now, now, now, why must you make this so difficult for me? Who the hell *are* you, my dear?”

Most people didn’t know the real answer to that question, of course. Cold beads of sweat dripped from Victor’s brow as he questioned me. Though it wasn’t like I was under any obligation to respond to him.

I had something more important on my mind: I still hadn’t sunk my fist into his face yet like I promised.

I lightly kicked off the ground.

“C’mon, throw me a bone!” Victor teased, hurling Thunder magic at me.

It was a familiar sensation; he was moving at lightning speed again. But I sensed his presence farther away this time. Maybe he had sensed my powers were stronger now.

His body glowed light magenta, and he vanished with a clapping sound.

But I could tell where he was headed from his gaze and flow of magic energy. Not the exact coordinates, but I knew the general direction—which was more than enough.

“Go to hell, shithead!”

I shot my pent-up magic energy out of my fist like a bullet. As long as I knew the direction he was going, a projectile attack made little difference if it was close or long-range.

“What the—?!” Victor stammered in confusion, crossing his arms and filling them with magic.

My magic bullet of light hit him with a violent flash as it burst open.

Okay...that would probably blow most people into the sky. You’d expect them

to lose a limb or two from that force, but— “Oh, you’re good...!”

Victor was hurt, but not maimed.

His magic powers were beyond the norm—this was to be expected. I would have been more surprised if he *had* taken significant damage with that defensive stance.

Having said that, I doubted I could keep this up forever. I had so much power I couldn’t even believe it myself, but my output was also phenomenal—I needed to end this battle as soon as possible.

As Victor appeared from an explosion of flame, I raised a finger. He gave me a dubious look, confused by my signal.

“Oh...! Kee-hee, oh my, how intriguing...!”

But as I slowly turned my hand over and moved my finger, he quickly gave a ferocious smile.

C’mere. Neither of us wants to pussyfoot this fight.

You want a spectacle? Then let’s make this as entertaining as possible.

He replenished his Thunder magic.

Somehow I have to—

“Mylene...Mylene...Mylene! Ohh, my dear, you are truly a star!”

Just as I thought. Victor wants a big climax.

With a crack of thunder Victor rematerialized, his fist flying before my eyes. I crouched down and moved my arms up to block his fist. At the same time, I pulled my free arm backward at the hip like I was getting ready to shoot an arrow.

“Ryahh!”

“Gaff!”

I launched my fist into his exposed abdomen. The shock of the impact shook the scenery.

I think he feels pain... Even though he’s similar to Pearlman, there are a lot of

differences.

If I'm right, he may have an iron will hiding beneath that pretentious facade. He ought to be rolling around on the floor in pain by now.

Victor surged with magic. I side-jumped, sensing danger, and a wall of lightning shot at me, stopping just an inch away from my eyes.

"Hack-hack! Peh! You've got great reflexes, my dear...!" Victor coughed up blood, a twisted smile in his eyes.

Yeah, this guy's fucking insane. It must be hell just to stay standing, yet he managed a magic counterattack.

I could easily hit him right now, but he would probably make fun of my hair.

Looks like that lit a fire in his belly... The smile vanished from Victor's face.

I think playtime is over now.

Victor's body filled with purple lightning. I sharpened my focus, following his gaze—to the right!

"Oof?! Gragh!" I gasped in pain.

With a snap, a blast of lightning had hit me from the opposite direction. It felt like burning needles were coursing through my entire body. I almost blacked out for a moment, but my rage kept me on my feet.

You motherfucking sneak. You fainted...!

"Kee-hee! Guess your sharp reflexes backfired."

Here's a radical theory—no matter how fast your opponent is, at the end of the day, a one-on-one fight is nothing more than a battle of wits.

And if I was right, we were in bitch-slapping territory. I couldn't let this asshole win.

"Hmph—are you immortal?!" Victor gasped in shock as I rushed him, punching through my pain.

I didn't blame him for being shocked. What I was doing wasn't good for him.

From what I could tell, Victor could not activate his teleportation in rapid

succession. That was never the way that fighting style was built.

A Thunder attack at lightning speed was lethal. Nobody was supposed to dodge or survive it, so you never even had to consider a *second* attack.

The light cutting attacks he'd used on me at first could be fired in a small radius to a certain extent. But if you unleashed a big finishing blow, you would use up all your charge.

And he could recharge his powers in a short amount of time. However—

“Stop beating around the bush, you! You're being redundant!”

—if I could survive, the gap in his defenses just after his attack would be too great for me to ignore.

Victor's eyes opened wide in horror. They were surely locked onto my fist, which was zooming straight for him. My fist pounded into his cheek, distorting his chiseled jaw. A wave rippled through his cheek, sending his teeth flying. In that compact span of time, I watched the effects of my attack as my fist eagerly followed through.

“Oof—*graffaw*?!”

Victor's body flew comically fast. He smashed against the auditorium wall, cracking it. Most guys wouldn't have survived that— “Mmf—pew...nngh! Not yet...I'm not ready for it to end...!”

But of course he got back up.

Still, I finally got to smash his face in—what a relief.

Now I just needed to end the fight.

I glared silently at him. Victor opened his eyes wide and smiled again.

“Ahh...how beautiful!”

His arms flopped as he raised them. He shook his body, filling it with magic. He was like a balloon about to burst. The magic filled him beyond capacity, shooting ominous red streaks of lightning through his veins.

And after overloaded himself with magic, Victor burst out of sight.

“*Hahhh!!!*”

A split second later, he reappeared right in front of me. With an ecstatic scream, he launched his fist at me, riding on the momentum.

He's insanely fast...I can't dodge him!

But my arm flew! As his fist connected sharply with my cheek, I echoed his punch with my own. We both swayed from the impact of the jabs. I took a big step backward, and Victor followed suit.

"Fucking *die!!!*"

"Nngh—ahh!"

I recovered a split second faster and landed my gut punch before he could.

Victor folded in two. I raised my leg high to kick his head as it fell forward.

But my shoe cut through thin air. Victor rematerialized far away in my periphery. He had teleported.

But I knew that hadn't set him up for a fresh attack. Victor had charged his body with magic beyond capacity a moment ago.

In other words, he still had a charge!

The very next instant, he grabbed my raised leg. I let the momentum lift me off the ground. Then he slammed me onto the ground as if I were a tree branch in a storm.

"Gah—ah!"

I barely managed to shield my head, but the impact against my back crushed my lungs, knocking the wind out of me.

But my pain lasted only a moment before he lifted me off the ground again.

I can't take another hit like that!

Just then, he grabbed at my other leg. But this time, I had a chance to land my kick!

"Groof..."

With a warbled grunt, his hold on my leg loosened. As I fell from Victor's grasp in slow motion, my hand managed to find the ground, and I sprang to a

standing position.

“Hack—hack...!”

My collapsed lungs writhed, desperately trying to fill themselves with air. While suffocating in hellish agony, I still turned to attack Victor.

“Myle—!”

Meanwhile, he couldn’t even get a single breath in. He couldn’t even call my name without running out of air.

I wobbled dizzily toward him, then toppled toward him head-on in a punch up his nose.

“Boof—agh!”

I’d wanted to punctuate my blow with a cutting quip, but my poor lungs were still struggling just to get in air.

Another exertion would surely kill me. So I gave up on attacking and put all my focus into catching my breath.

Victor collapsed, drawing an arc of blood in the air as he fell. I thought that hit had killed him for sure, but he was still trying to stand.

“Hahhh! Nng-Hahhh!” I gasped for air.

But neither of us would last much longer.

Knowing the fight was almost over, I took a deep breath in.

“Mylene...Mylene! You are perfection...! I’m so glad that you exist...and beyond thankful that I got to meet you!”

“Pshaw! And who exactly are ya thanking? Those shitty gods you all worship?”

“Who knows?! Not even I can answer that! I thank you—or the god who made you—I don’t care anymore!”

Victor raised both his arms, imbuing them with purple lightning.

Uh-oh...we’re in deeper shit than I thought.

“Albert! Colette! Take Melissa and run behind me!” I yelled, keeping my eyes

on Victor.

It was a race against time, and every second counted. I filled my body with magic, knowing full well how reckless it was.

“Don’t be crazy!” Colette yelled.

“W-we’ll manage, Princess Colette!” Albert stammered back.

“Agh—god dammit, trust me!”

It was good of them to do as I said without asking questions. Now it was my job to return the favor by delivering.

Victor’s magic had amassed to a point where it could easily blow up the entire school.

If his bolt of lightning flew at sonic speed, I wouldn’t be able to dodge it. And if I blocked it, even if I survived, nothing else around me would.

I couldn’t dodge it. I couldn’t block it. So what was left?

Smash through his attack head-on—that was the only way.

I breathed sharply. In and out.

“Enough stalling, Mylene! I’m ready to go!”

“Bring it!”

By some miracle, my friends were doing exactly as I said. I could hear Melissa struggling and moaning behind me.

So I owed it to them to do my part.

My enemy stood like a warrior across an ocean, his bottled lightning like a sheathed sword.

And though I was unarmed, I gripped an imaginary sword. Until—

“Ah—! A sword...of light?!”

“Ohh, Lady Mylene, how *majestic* you are!”

A sword of magic energy had materialized in my hands.

The magic light condensed and hardened into the shape of a sword. It felt just

as sharp and just as solid as a true blade. And soon, it glowed a reddish-white hue. It shined brighter with each pulse of magic I fed it— “Let’s end this,” I spat.

“Oh...you never cease to amaze...!” Victor’s face twisted with ecstasy.

This guy was an enigma to the bitter end.

This unscrupulous bastard had possessed Melissa, yet he’d thrown plenty of chances to kill me, and he didn’t seem all that enthused about the Gods of the Moon’s mission.

But the god he worshiped seemed to like him more than Pearlman’s god had liked him. And for a pretentious prick, he sure packed a punch.

And the cherry on top—he finished the whole fight by giving me to the count of three to catch up. He was just batshit insane.

But it would all be over soon.

Shivering with elation, Victor finished his spell and screamed poetically, “And now, the *grand finale*! Let us close the curtain on this most *beautiful* of moments!”

As for me? I’d had enough of his shitty threepenny drama.

I was more than happy to help him close the curtain on it.

“Curtains for your threepenny drama—”

My sword shined even brighter. I squeezed my fists firmly around its hilt.

“And curtains for you! *Zhi Guan Lei!*”

A cataclysmic burst of lightning shot from it.

What shouldn’t have even been perceivable by the naked eye, I had contained in my sword.

The moment it materialized, my sword had already begun to shake.

Like a swallow taking flight, my attack burst forth, shattering the auditorium floor beneath it— “This ends now!!!”

My burst of light hurled into the massive ball of thunder that was poised to absorb everyone and everything on campus.

Its slashing power, imbued with crimson light, clashed against the destructive power of Victor's magic in a fraction of an instant. And then— The lightning burst split in two.

The two beams of light shot upward from the impact, sailing high.

And after a beat, a tremendous boom of a death rattle reverberated through the auditorium.

The beams of light were flying at supersonic speed—they would likely explode high in the sky.

But our fight wasn't over yet.

Victor had failed to neutralize my sword of light, and I hurled it toward him.

"Kkr—Gnahhhh!!!"

The blade struck him violently. Light burst from his wound, then in the next instant, my sword vanished.

"Ah—hahh..."

Only Victor remained, standing still, his arms spread wide to take in the attack.

After a moment of silence, he crumpled to his knees and fell forward.

It was over.

"Phewww...!" I flopped onto my butt in exhaustion.

After a long sigh, I suddenly felt very heavy, like something supporting me had slipped away.

Shit... Now, *that* was an exhausting fight...

"Miss Mylene...!"

"Mylene!"

But things weren't gonna calm down for a while yet. I braced myself to prevent Colette's embrace from knocking me onto my back, and I turned to Albert (who was trying desperately not to cry) and gave him a thumbs-up.

This broke the floodgates. Albert flew at me just like Colette had.

Dammit...they'll never stop being annoying, will they? Still...they trusted my crazy idea. Guess I'll cut them some slack this time.

Or so I thought.

“Wait, you two, what happened to Melissa?!”

I suddenly remembered Melissa, who was likely still under Victor's control. If she came at me now in my battered state, I wouldn't be able to hold my own!

At least the rest of my team was still in decent shape.

“Oh, don't worry,” Colette said. “She collapsed right when Victor did.”

“At the very least, I doubt she will lash out at us,” Albert added.

“Ya sure? Well, in that case...we're in trouble. Bring her here.”

Just because she stopped moving doesn't mean we're out of the woods yet.

I gestured to Albert to bring Melissa to me. I got a good look at her, and noticed she was still breathing, though faintly. At a glance, it seemed like she was asleep. I pulled back her eyelids and looked at her eyeballs...and I didn't find any peculiarities you'd see in somebody who'd lost their mind.

Then again, I only knew how to evaluate whether or not she was a threat on the battlefield. We'd need to have a specialist examine her later to know for sure—but at least for now, we knew she wasn't in danger of dying.

I slowly laid Melissa on her side and took another deep breath in and out.

It's finally over...wait, scratch that, it might not be over yet.

I put my hands on my knees and yanked myself off the ground. “Harrumph!”

“Easy, Grandpa,” Colette teased. “You're gorgeous; can't you be a little more about maintaining your image?”

“Shaddup, that ship's sailed.”

I honestly didn't care about Colette's nitpicking right now. I walked over to Victor and kicked him onto his back. His hair was no longer standing on end. I sensed no magic from him either.

“Kee-hee—hee... I never dreamed the closing act would turn out this way...

What a plot twist...”

After all of that, Victor was still alive. Shit, why did all my enemies have to be so hardy?

“Any last words, asshole?”

“No. It was a *stellar* performance... The impossible made reality... It was oh-so-beautiful...”

His body went limp as he smiled peacefully, with the look of a man who was leaving this world with no regrets behind.

“Agh—well, whatever. I’m sick of talking to you. Have fun being strangled by the guards.”

“I suppose I’ll be sentenced to death—an ending with its own appealing flavor.”

Shit...this guy just won’t let me sit back and enjoy my victory, will he!

Still, he hadn’t seemed all that eager to off himself either. Guess I’d have plenty of questions to ask him later in hell.

But first—I snatched the medal hanging off Victor’s neck—at the very least, it’s obvious that this guy’s part of the cult. Before Victor unleashed his god’s powers, he was clearly getting power from this baby. I can’t be entirely sure why, but I feel much safer confiscating this thing from him.

“Ooh... You’ve got a keen eye, my dear...”

“I’m gonna have to keep fighting your asshole friends in the future—I’m gonna learn whatever I can.”

“Haha... Pity I won’t be able to see those events unfold with my own eyes...”

With a scoffing curse under my breath, I lowered my gaze to the medal. That Dia Milus who Pearlman had mentioned was a horned snake, but this guy’s god—Zuri Dien—looked like a birdman. And a really malicious one at that.

“So that your beautiful epic may continue...,” Victor murmured mindlessly. “Let me give you a word of advice, my dear...”

I looked down at him. He seemed...sincere. It irked me that somebody so

insane would take a shine to me, but I was grateful for any intel he had.

“Your enemy is all-powerful... Be wary of Garoh most of all.”

I was going to pretend to ignore him, but instead, I blurted out, “Who the hell is *Garoh*?”

The corners of Victor’s lips twisted upward into a smile as he continued. “I don’t quite know, but he seems to be their trump card... One wrong move and the whole world might be destroyed.”

The whole world, eh? Sounds fake, but I’ll keep it in mind.

“Nah. That won’t happen.”

“Ohh? And why’s that?”

“‘Cause before it happens, I’m gonna kick your gods’ asses.”

“.....Hah! Yes, of course... *That* attitude is what makes you *you*...my dear...”

And with a satisfied smile, Victor lost consciousness. He would probably spend the rest of his life in a dungeon.

Wobbling like I had a hangover, I sat back down across from Colette and Albert.

If only I could just go straight to bed...

Then the auditorium door burst open. The campus professors stormed in, guards in tow. I wanted to snap at them for being so careless when there might be magic charms scattered like landmines...but I couldn’t be bothered to speak. And the fact was, no traps had been laid out anyway— “Mylene...is that you?! And Prince Albert? Princess Colette, too?!”

As the teachers gradually grasped what had transpired, they shook with terror seeing the two royals and troublemaker standing in the center of it all.

With an exhausted sigh, I scratched my head and carelessly said, “Err..... What lovely weather, eh, professors?”

I couldn’t be bothered to do anything else, really.



EPILOGUE

The Little Lady Fights Closefisted

“At long last, it’s over...”

One Sunday afternoon—I suppressed every urge to slump over at the table and sighed daintily instead. Colette arrived at my table with a giggle and Albert smiled sheepishly beside her.

Almost a week had passed since the bomb scare at the Genius Festival. And this was my first reaction once I was finally freed from the questioning of the professors and guards.

If only we weren’t in the cafeteria, I’d be done, you sonofabitch—is what I wanted to say, but as the cafeteria was open on the weekends for a spirited afternoon tea, unfortunately, I couldn’t exactly kick back and relax.

“You did very well, Miss Mylene.”

“As the one who defeated the enemy, you *were* taken through a whirlwind of questioning and award ceremonies—I’m proud to be your friend!”

“Aren’t you both lucky you get to live *vicariously* through me...”

I shot them a death glare, but Colette just giggled mirthfully back. I got the sense she was loving the fact that I was annoyed by it all— I let out a sigh and said, “I suppose I shouldn’t take out my frustrations on you.”

When it’s come to this, I might as well act calm and not give Colette the

satisfaction of my misery.

As I turned my frown upside down, Colette gave an approving “Hum!” and a nod.

“Today is a special day—we might as well enjoy it,” I said.

“Quite right, Miss Mylene! And I think she ought to arrive momentarily—”

That’s right. Today was *special*.

It was the day the long, boring questioning was finally over. But most significantly— “So sorry I’m late. The doctor kept going on and on when discharging me.”

It was the day Melissa would finish her treatment. I wanted to set aside my bitterness and party hard. A little booze would’ve taken the sting out of any bad feelings, but since booze was off the table for us, we had to get drunk off our own excitement instead.

“Are you feeling all right now, Melissa?” Albert asked.

“I had a tough three days, but I’m fine now. I couldn’t even move at first...”

After the fight with Victor, Melissa was rushed to the hospital with torn muscles and magic deficiency from overextending herself while under Victor’s spell. But she’d had a good doctor and had made a full recovery both physically and magically.

As Albert and Colette burst into merriment, Melissa sat across from me and smiled peacefully into my eyes.



For a while, our table chattered with pride over our misfortunes.

“W-was I really that violent?!”

Colette bragged about how difficult it was for her to capture Melissa when she was rampaging like a wild beast— “Oh—ohh...I dread to even imagine it...”

—and Melissa lamented over how much she had suffered during her first three days at the hospital.

Everyone at the table had suffered in some way. I sympathized with their need to spin the whole ordeal into a heroic ballad.

So I smiled softly as I watched them.

“By the way, I haven’t thanked you yet... Mylene.” Melissa suddenly sat up straight and looked into my eyes.

“Is something the matter?” My breath caught a little. I’d never seen her stare at me so directly before.

After taking a couple shallow breaths to steady herself, Melissa smiled and said, “Thank you... You saved my life. I wouldn’t be sitting here right now if not for you.”

It was a heartfelt thanks. It hurt to look her in the eye.

“Well...I almost abandoned you for a moment. Don’t thank me.”

Even though I had saved her life in the end, for a moment, I’d almost made the *utilitarian* decision to let her die.

But Melissa slowly—and pointedly—shook her head at me. “No. You didn’t give up on me, and you kept fighting. You are my *savior*.”

I averted my eyes as I listened. Then Melissa fell silent, Colette and Albert held their breaths, and the table went quiet.

And after an ample moment of silence, I spat out a tired sigh. “Okay...I suppose I’ll accept your gratitude.”

Melissa, whose earnest eyes were stuck anxiously on mine, put her hands together and bloomed into a smile.

Shit... Why do kids of nobility all have to be so stubborn?

Still, there was something softhearted about them. And that’s why I found them actually rather— I carried my teacup to my lips to hide my expression... then returned it to its saucer.

Fine...I’ll admit it.

I had a soft spot for peaceful, idle moments like these. And I had a soft spot for my friends, too. I didn’t want Albert to walk the wrong path. I didn’t want to

become enemies with Colette. And I didn't want to be a burden to Melissa.

I probably wouldn't voluntarily get blood on my hands ever again. But some bad people out there wanted me to.

And I couldn't let them do that—

“I have a request...to ask of all of you.”

So I needed to crush them—I had to crush the Gods of the Moon.

And I couldn't do it alone. I needed Colette. I needed all of them.

And as I stared at them intensely, they nodded reverently in reply.

“.....Thank you.”

I quietly closed my eyes.

Okay. Where do I even start?

There were so many things I wanted to tell them, so many things I had to tell them. But— “Won't you all join me in giving the gods of those villains a fierce punch in the face?”

I had to start there.

I didn't understand why, but those bastards wanted to sow discord in the world.

And I wouldn't feel better until I kicked all their asses.

“Do you mean...with an open hand or a closed fist?” Colette folded her arms, snickering nihilistically.

I pretended to ponder her question. (Even though I already damn well knew the answer.) I folded my hands on my lap and smiled as gracefully as possible as I replied, “With a closed fist, of course.”



Afterword

Firstly, I'd like to thank you for picking up Volume 2 of *Miss Savage Fang*. This is Kakkaku Akashi.

To my illustrator Kayahara, my editors, and everyone involved in publishing this book, and to everyone who bought it, I offer my deepest thanks.

.....At about a seventy percent increase.

I say this because this volume was a great labor to produce...and its completion was completely overdue after already going at a slow pace as it was. And in spite of its heavily delayed progress, here I am, writing the afterword.

Oh, how my heart aches over all the extra strife I've caused to so many people...! Still, I believe I narrowly avoided releasing a subpar product into the world, so I would much rather offer my gratitude than my apology.

By the way, would you believe that the state of emergency was only just lifted where I live? I still feel a little on edge, I'm glad that the publicized number of infected persons has dropped. It's my continued hope that the state of the world keeps getting brighter as I set my pen down at the end of this afterword.

Well, I hope we'll meet again soon...!

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