

NOVEL
1

I Swear I Won't Bother You AGAIN!



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Kondo wa zettai ni jama shimasen! Novel 1
by Soratani Reina, Harukawa Haru
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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by
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PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-417-6
Printed in Canada
First Printing: June 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Seven Seas Entertainment

CHARACTERS

MILANIA DIOR

Third-year student at Tanzanite Academy and student council vice president. Claudia's best friend.

CLAUDIA ACRUCIS

First prince of the Kingdom of Duralia and heir to the throne. Third-year student at Tanzanite Academy and student council president.

MARYJUNE REM VAHAN

Second daughter of Duke Vahan. Violette's half sister and first-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

GIA FORTE

Prince from another country and Yulan's friend since middle school.

YULAN CUGURS

Violette's childhood friend. Part of a side branch of the royal family, and son of the prime minister. First-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

MARIN

The maid who serves Violette.

VIOLETTE REM VAHAN

Eldest daughter of Duke Vahan, imprisoned for the attempted murder of her half sister. Sent back in time. Second-year student at Tanzanite Academy.



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Prologue

VIOLETTE HAD NEVER cursed her stupidity so much in her life.

She lost count of how many curses she spat out as she stared at the chain on her ankle, securing her to the prison wall. Every one of them was directed at herself.

There had been hints about the truth right in front of her, but she ignored every single one. Now, it was too late.

Violette's father and his unfaithfulness, the mistress he preferred, the half sister born from their union, and her crush, who liked Maryjune better...every one of them had tried to kill her. Tried to hurt her. Tried to crush her happiness.

Her father drove her mother insane. The mistress stole her father's heart. But it was their daughter, Maryjune, who took everything away from Violette. It was Maryjune's fault that Violette's mother, her father, her crush, *everyone* didn't love her.

Violette had believed that. She'd hated and resented them and convinced herself that her crazed act of revenge was justified.

She hurt too many people in her blind rage. She destroyed too many things.

She was stupid. An utter fool. She'd done deplorable, unforgivable acts that she could never atone for. Every time she remembered what she'd done, her heart felt heavy and sore.

"...I'm sorry," she said.

No matter how severe Violette's punishment, nothing would fix her selfish behavior and abuse of power. She should be grateful to be alive at all. After all, the crime she committed was punishable by death.

Her beautiful half sister was the one who bestowed this final moment on Violette. She couldn't decide whether it was kind, or cruel.

If Violette begged for forgiveness, her gentle half sister wouldn't punish her. She wouldn't even *consider* taking Violette's life. Like a goddess, she loved all living things—that was a quality Violette could never possess. A girl like

Maryjune could never put Violette's memory behind her. The whole family would bear the shame of the mess she made for generations.

"I'm...sorry..."

How pathetic was she to try to steal someone's happiness? Violette understood now that nothing had been taken from her; her own dark thoughts had made her miserable. Even her relationship with her crush fell apart because of her bad attitude.

But there was no point regretting it now.

If her family was fortunate, they would only lose their social rank; if unfortunate, they would fall into ruin, losing all their status and fortune. In either case, there was no way a family that produced a criminal like Violette could remain aristocrats. No daughter from that family would ever wed the heir to the throne.

"I'm...sorr..." she gasped.

How pathetic. Another useless apology. No matter what words Violette strung together, it was all over.

"So...rry... I'm so...sorry..." she whispered, her voice hoarse. Her dry eyes burned and her nose was stuffed.

Violette wanted to be loved, wanted to be praised, wanted to be beautiful, but she was filthy and ugly from crying. There was no bath in her prison, after all. She cried until she could cry no more. She apologized so many times that she lost her voice. Yet despite all that, her crime would not be forgiven. Everything was swept up in the past, far out of her control.

"Urgh. I'm...sor...ry...!"

The more she dwelled on her regrets, the clearer her memory of that day became. Just one week after her mother died, her father brought home two people he called his new wife and daughter. Violette was heartbroken, terrified that her father didn't have enough love to go around. The day Violette first met her half sister began the countdown to her rampage.

She knew it was pointless, but she couldn't help her feelings.

If only she could return to that day. If only she could go back to before all of this started. She wouldn't make the same mistakes again. She wouldn't stand out, act haughty, or hurt anyone for the rest of her days.

She swore that she would live without bothering anyone.

"Violette...Violette!" a man's voice called.

"Huh? Yes!" she replied.

"What's wrong? You'll offend our guests if you stop in the middle of a conversation like that."

"Huh...?"

Her father was beside her, and a woman and a girl stood in front of her. The girl's adorable smile suited her better than the tears Violette remembered.

Was she dreaming? Or was this a punishment for wanting her life to go back to normal?

She remembered this. This was the day her father introduced her to her stepmother and half sister. Violette's heart had ached with the sadness of her mother's passing, but now it was tinged with relief at finding herself out of prison.

Violette's father had introduced the woman and girl as his beloved family, like he wanted to show Violette that this was the family he truly wanted—a mother with a gentle smile, and a kind, innocent daughter.

This day, the very first of her regrets, had constantly played in her mind while in prison.

"My name is Elfa," the woman said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I'm...Maryjune. It's a pleasure to meet you...sister," the girl echoed.

"Ngh," Violette choked.

In her memory, Violette had splashed tea on Maryjune. She couldn't handle that voice calling her sister, so she'd thrown it right in her smiling face. She still had the cup ready in her hand...but this time, she controlled herself. Still, she

couldn't help but grimace.

"...Violette Rem Vahan. It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Lady Elfa, Lady Maryjune."

Violette looked down, hiding her stiff expression. Her father gasped in surprise beside her—the Violette he knew would never greet anyone so politely, let alone with a smile and a bow!

"I am terribly sorry, but would you mind if I excused myself?" said Violette.

"Uh, all right..."

With a sidelong glance at her shaken father, she bowed and left the room. She lifted the hem of her dress and hurried back to her own room, still in shock. There was nothing there to explain what was happening, but at least she could pull herself together once she was finally alone.

Violette rushed to the hidden compartment in the second drawer of her desk. She pulled out her diary and opened to the page marked by a thin bookmark. It was blank. Flipping backwards through the pages, she found the most recent entry at a date much further back than it should be. She had kept this diary since she was a child. It was the crystallization of all her secrets, known only to her.

The events of the past long before her imprisonment were laid out properly in her familiar handwriting, but the more recent ones were missing.

"Why...? How is this happening...?" she asked.

Did time really rewind? It was impossible. It was *inconceivable*. Not even a magician could erase something that had already happened. But here she was, outside her prison cell. Her ankle was free of chains.

"This isn't a dream...is it?"

The feel of the diary under her fingertips, the room before her eyes, and the sound of the wind outside all told her that it wasn't a dream. This was *real*.

She had returned to the fateful day when her madness was born, to the time before everything. To the time before she ever wanted to kill.

"I...definitely won't make that mistake again."

This was her chance. She could live a life of quiet atonement, never hurting anyone, and keep herself from committing her terrible crime.

She wouldn't bother anyone this time.

Chapter 1:

For Sisters to Become Strangers Again

THE MARRIAGE BETWEEN Duke Auld Loa Vahan and his late wife Bellerose was an arranged, political union. Bellerose was the one who pushed for it to happen, but once it was settled, Duke Auld desperately tried to make it work. Even though his marriage was forced upon him, he could find a way to love his new wife and create a real family...or so he'd hoped.

His hopes didn't survive for very long.

Auld was a perfect beauty—tall, sculpted body, soft silver hair, and powerful eyes with an unforgettable gaze. High society women flocked around him, and Bellerose was one of them. As a woman of high standing, she used everything in her power to gain his favor. In the aristocratic world where loveless marriages were common, everyone wanted a happy ending, a marriage to someone they loved.

But Bellerose wasn't satisfied with just a happy ending. She had married the man she loved, but she wanted Auld to love her back. Her insecurity led to such intense jealousy that she attacked any woman who came near him, even servants and business partners. She grew more and more controlling until she decided that her hardworking husband *must* be having a secret affair. Every day, she demanded explanations for everything he did.

"Who were you with?" Bellerose would scream.

"I was working," he'd respond.

But she couldn't believe him. "Lies. I *know* you were with some woman!"

She'd say, "I know everything." Or she'd ask, "Why don't you love me? I'm not good enough for you?" Or she'd demand, "Don't look at anyone but me! I won't let you leave me!" Auld tried to assuage her fears, but still she'd yell, "You are *not* allowed to think of anyone but me! It's *unforgivable*!"

Worn down by Bellerose's constant needling, Auld gave up on making a real

family with her, and was driven into the arms of a comforting, supportive mistress.

Mistresses weren't uncommon among aristocrats. A man might take a mistress if his first wife hadn't given them an heir, and people trapped in loveless political marriages often sought real romance outside them. Some men, who simply couldn't be satisfied by just one woman, sought several at once. An aristocrat in love with several people at once could easily pursue all their options. As long as Auld could support another family without issue, he had the right to open negotiations with her family.

For the Vahan household, these negotiations were an unmitigated disaster.

There was no way that obsessive, jealous Bellerose would allow Auld to take an official mistress. To escape Bellerose's accusations, Auld frequently visited his mistress, which just fed Bellerose's jealousy, which drove Auld even further from her. During one of the worst of these cycles, like some sort of cruel joke, Bellerose became pregnant.

That baby was Violette Rem Vahan.

She was an adorable girl with pale gray hair and round eyes like a kitten, and she bore a striking resemblance to her father. Bellerose was delighted to have a daughter who everyone said looked just like her beloved. With this child, Auld would surely return to her. Violette would be their connection. Bellerose loved her daughter intensely and pinned all her hopes on the little girl.

Of course, things didn't go according to Bellerose's plan.

Auld no longer loved Bellerose, and although he knew the child wasn't to blame, the thought of seeing Bellerose again was too much. He invented excuse after excuse: the girl had a mother and a plethora of servants; she didn't need him. Then they discovered that Auld's mistress would also be giving him a child. Considering the circumstances, of course Auld wanted to settle down with them. But for Violette, that was the worst thing he could do.

Bellerose's jealousy grew more distorted and hateful as the years wore on, right until the day she died.

In the beginning, she only loved Violette's face. She kept her daughter by her

side, protecting her face from even the smallest cuts or the lightest sunburns. Violette's face was proof that Bellerose and Auld had been together, so she treasured it. She believed that one day, he would return to her.

But no matter how much time passed, he never came back. Bellerose grew impatient.

Her feelings for Violette changed. She ripped off the child's frilly clothes and cut her long hair, doing her best to transform the young girl into a young boy. She made Violette look just like the photos of Auld as a boy.

It didn't end with her appearance, either; Bellerose demanded that the girl not only look like a boy but act like one. Bellerose insisted Violette not learn how to behave like a lady, but instead that she be taught self-defense and weaponry... It wasn't good enough for Violette to act like a boy; she had to be exactly like Auld.

But eventually, Violette's femininity could no longer be hidden. No matter how much she resembled Auld, she would never *be* Auld. As her body matured, as their differences became more obvious, Violette was no longer the child Bellerose desired.

So, she completely lost interest. Now that Violette was clearly a young woman, her mother wouldn't even look at her.

Bellerose's health seemed to decline, and at first Violette was certain it was just a ploy to attract Auld's attention. At some point, though, she did grow seriously ill. As she declined, the only one in her heart was Auld. Violette still had dreams about how easily her mother cast her aside.

And while Violette was still in mourning for her mother, her father officially married his mistress.

Violette didn't want to remember what happened next, but she couldn't help it.

In her hate and anger toward her stepmother, her half sister, and her father, Violette committed a heinous crime. Looking back, she couldn't help but want to apologize to Maryjune. She wanted to throw herself on the ground and

grovel for forgiveness...but they would think she'd lost her mind.

Her heart ached, but it was a distant feeling. A part of her felt like she should be mourning her mother and furious over her family—an echo of how she must have felt the first time, her subconscious mind dazed and hurting.

She'd withstood the pain of being rejected by her parents, but the hatred for her half sister had been too much to hold in. She'd needed to vent those feelings somewhere.

"Lady Violette...are you all right?" Marin asked.

"Yes...I'm just a bit tired," said Violette.

"I'll bring you some hot milk to calm your nerves."

Marin, Violette's attendant maid, had looked uncomfortable during the whole exchange, shooting awkward glances at the mother and child brought so quickly into the house, and at Auld, who'd invited them in so easily.

The meeting had ended peacefully, despite Violette's odd, standoffish behavior. Her father was hopefully too relieved that she hadn't given the expected outburst to punish her for some minor impoliteness. They'd gotten through the first meeting peacefully, so hopefully her father would leave it at that.

"Sigh..."

After checking that Marin had left the room to prepare the hot milk, Violette let out a heavy sigh. She didn't know how she got back here and probably wouldn't be able to figure it out. Instead, she decided to focus more on what she would need to do going forward. Surely, Violette was given this second chance so that she could fix her mistakes and avoid becoming a criminal. But even though no one in this world knew what she had done, the guilt still plagued her. She was *not* going to make those mistakes again.

Violette made up her mind.

After graduation she would sever ties with her family, become a nun, and create a new path for herself in service of God. She didn't need to be loved or treasured. She had already experienced firsthand the dangers of obsessing over

things you couldn't have. She would live and die an ordinary, simple, lonely life.

But first she needed to deal with Maryjune. She would be starting at Violette's school soon. The old Violette had been cruel and vindictive, but this Violette would do better—instead of casting a shadow over Maryjune's life, she would wish for her happiness from the bottom of her heart.

But this new dedication to Maryjune's well-being didn't come from love. Violette only wanted to ease her own guilty conscience.

"Lady Violette, here you are," said Marin.

"Thanks, Marin... Ah, it's warm," said Violette.

Violette warmed her cold hands around the mug of hot milk. She didn't realize how tense she'd been until it all left her stiff shoulders.

There's so much happening...

She started the day in prison, then she was thrown backwards in time to the day when her life was turned upside down. They say that life is full of ups and downs, but this single day had enough to last a lifetime.

"I guess I really am tired. I think I'll just go to bed," said Violette.

"I shall help you change your clothes," said Marin.

"I'll do it myself... I'm sorry, but I want to be alone."

"As you wish."

She needed to organize her thoughts and think through her next steps. She and Maryjune would become sisters, whether she wanted it or not. She gulped the rest of the hot milk, left the bowing Marin, and disappeared into her room.

Chapter 2:

Extremes Can Be Fatal

FROM THE AGES OF twelve to eighteen, nobles, aristocrats, and commoners who were rich enough attended one of the world's most prestigious schools: the Royal Tanzanite Academy. Unlike commoner schools, Tanzanite Academy taught not only regular subjects, but also specialized programs for future world leaders, and noble etiquette. The curriculum was designed around the knowledge students would need to grow into proper ladies and gentlemen. Violette was a second-year student in the high school section of the academy. She had roughly two more years until graduation. Maryjune, now a member of the aristocracy, would also be attending this academy as a first-year in the high school section.

The Vahan household was one of the highest ranked among the aristocracy, so of course its newest member would be the center of attention.

"Oh... How are you today, Lady Violette?" a student said.

"Fine, thank you. And you?" Violette responded.

No one stayed near Violette for very long; people greeted her and then scattered like baby spiders. Gossip about Maryjune joining the Vahan family spread like wildfire and people speculated wildly about what it meant. In the adult world, the presence of a mistress wasn't that big a deal, but for teenagers...they didn't know if they should ridicule or pity the Vahans. The old Violette would have relished being treated like a tragic heroine, handled as delicately as a swollen wound.

This time around, it's surprisingly peaceful.

Violette was raised as a boy, less concerned with smoothing over the feelings of others than a lady had to be. Even though she felt sorry for the concern her classmates felt for her, she couldn't bring herself to set them at ease by claiming she was fine. Instead, she pretended to be the perfect daughter of a duke, above it all, as usual.

She was always afraid that she would slip up, that holes would appear in her façade. To protect her noble mask, she distanced herself from her classmates and only had a few true friends. Many people respected Violette's pedigree, but she knew from experience that if she trusted them, they would take advantage of her.

How tedious.

She'd brought a book with her to pass the time, but pretending to read was so boring. It wasn't that she didn't like books, but after her rough-and-tumble childhood she much preferred playing outside. But Violette wanted to be liked, so she put what she wanted aside and acted like a lady.

But...I don't have to do that anymore, do I...?

Right. She didn't care about being loved anymore, so why bother keeping up appearances? It had never worked, anyway. She would throw away the old Violette, full of lies—her old self might cling to her façade, but not now.

The purpose of this life was atonement, so besides that, Violette was free to do as she pleased. She didn't have to be good or perfect, she didn't have to pretend to be immersed in her reading. She could run around if she wanted, and no one had any right to complain. As long as she didn't bother Maryjune or completely destroy her reputation, she could live however she wished.

Besides, no one will notice me anyway.

Her father, her mother, and the crush who barely knew she existed—the old Violette strived so hard to earn their attention that she'd practically sold her soul to the devil. But now she had all the time and freedom in the world. No one would look at her. No one would care about her. For Violette, who wanted to live a plain, ordinary life, this was ideal.

"All right, let's do it." Violette whispered to herself.

The faces around her were filled with surprise, concern, and pity—they thought she'd been hurt deeply by the shock of Maryjune's appearance at Tanzanite. But she no longer cared what other people thought of her. She'd already lived through this once, so now she felt nothing as she blended in with the crowd. Violette didn't even notice their looks.

Chapter 3:

Treasuring Her Younger Brother

WITH ONLY TWO YEARS LEFT before Violette would graduate and join a monastery, there was so much she wanted to do. Until now she'd been living her life the way her parents wanted, her only goal to be loved, but that had led her to too many mistakes. She'd already driven most of her small group of friends away—not that she blamed them. Those friends only cared about cozying up to her family, anyway, so she didn't miss them. She didn't want to make new ones, either. She wanted to run, to move her body however she wanted, and she could only do that alone. If she was to do as she pleased, friends would only get in her way.

I can do a lot like this.

Thankfully, her classmates noticed her new attitude and didn't bother her during their break. She spread her notes out and started writing, starting with a list of all the things she wanted to do, and discovered how much of it she could do alone. Everyone around her was always so desperate to make friends, so she'd assumed that a group was necessary to do anything meaningful. But when she really thought about it, it didn't seem necessary for several people to go to the restroom together. This revelation delighted her—Violette planned on enjoying her life free of people from now on.

"I wonder where I should go after school..." Violette muttered.

But there was something she had to do today, she remembered—they were celebrating Maryjune's transfer at supper. Her father hadn't bothered to show up to celebrate Violette's own enrollment in the academy. He must really love Maryjune.

Luckily, Violette didn't care about that any more.

Her past self had taken this opportunity to nitpick everything about Maryjune's conduct, from the way she ate to the way she spoke. Maryjune lived among commoners until recently, and although she had impeccable common

manners, she didn't know much about the customs of the aristocracy. Violette had spent the evening setting etiquette traps and laughing whenever Maryjune made a mistake.

Now, she winced at her past cruelty.

Should I even go to the celebration...?

Wouldn't she just get in the way of their happy family? She imagined her father's brow crinkling in displeasure at her presence. But if she was late to dinner without notifying them, her softhearted stepmother and half sister would probably wait for her to come home. And her father would follow their lead, getting angrier and angrier.

I'll ask Marin to bring dinner to my room.

It wasn't the politest move, but this was a unique situation. Marin and the other servants knew about the great distance between Violette and her family and the depths of her personal sadness. They would sympathize with her instead of judging.

She looked up and realized that the teacher was already standing at the podium—she'd been so engrossed in her list that she must have missed the bell for the end of the break period. She hurriedly took out her textbook and opened to a new page in her notebook.

Violette had done this lesson once already, so it wasn't difficult to understand. She'd never been the most diligent student, so there were still parts of the lesson she didn't fully grasp, but this still felt closer to a review than a new lesson. How fortunate—if she got good grades, her father couldn't complain. He never really nagged her, but he often compared her to Maryjune, who always did well. To Violette, this hurt worse than being struck in the face.

Violette took more classes than most and liked knowing a little bit about a broad range of subjects instead of focusing on perfecting a few. She had her own way of studying that might not get her the best grades but worked for her.

But even as she thought through excuses for her mediocre grades, she stopped herself—she was determined to be alone, after all, so who were the

excuses for? She didn't enjoy studying and wasn't desperate enough to do more after school. That was the end of it.

"Now then..." she said, standing up and gathering her books. She was about to head home when she heard a voice.

"Vio!" it called out.

"Huh...?!" Violette gasped. She jumped at the nickname, but she was only confused for a moment. Only one person in the world called her that.

"Yulan, you're being loud. You'll startle everyone," she said.

"Oh...sorry," he responded.

This was Violette's childhood friend and underclassman, Yulan Cugurs. He was big, but the way his shoulders slumped made him look smaller. His soft, burgundy hair and droopy, golden eyes made his face look gentle. He towered over the other students, but he had a smile that warmed everyone who saw it. With a well-defined, beautiful face and a gentle personality, he was the ideal young man.

But with this contrite expression on his face, she couldn't help but imagine him with dog's ears and a tail between his legs.

He belonged to a branch of the royal family, so his father served as the prime minister. Although he was an only child, like Violette, his family situation was... complicated. But unlike her, his parents showered him with love.

He was usually gentle and calm, the type who didn't like to stand out—though his height and handsome face meant that he couldn't avoid it, most of the time. He generally knew how to behave to avoid judgment, even if he did sometimes forget himself when excited. But rushing into the upper classrooms and yelling was very out of character.

"For you to come all the way to the second-year classrooms... Is something wrong?" Violette asked.

"I heard the rumor...about your father," he said.

He didn't need to explain further. Maryjune was in his grade, after all, so he likely heard all the rumors about the Vahan patriarch's new second wife.

“Shall we go somewhere private to talk...?” she offered.

She wasn't trying to hide anything, really, but there was still no need to announce publicly that all the stories were true. Rumors were like a game of telephone—no matter how carefully you told them, they would always be misunderstood. Past Violette didn't know this, so she spewed poison about her stepmother and half sister whenever she could, and those groundless insults were what brought about her downfall. She dared not travel that same path—this time, she'd stay out of it entirely.

If anyone other than Yulan had approached her, she probably would've handled it more appropriately. But she doted on him like a younger brother; she wanted to put his mind at ease.

Thinking of a deserted location, she pulled Yulan's arm and left the classroom.

Chapter 4:

Apathy is Okay

VIOLETTE AND YULAN weaved through the extravagant beauty of a campus that was more like a noble's fantastic garden than school grounds, passing blooming flower beds and a stunning fountain to find a deserted corner of a large courtyard. Tanzanite Academy was a massive building, especially compared to the small student body, so it was easy to find secluded spots to talk. They found a spot hidden from view from the building, near enough to the fountain that the sound of running water would mask their voices.

"Around here should be fine," said Violette.

"Sorry, I..." Yulan began.

"Don't apologize. You were just worried about me, right?"

"Yeah..."

The way he hung his head when he was sad pulled at Violette's heartstrings. That was why she doted on him like a younger brother no matter how big he grew. He folded in on himself, and Violette imagined dog ears flattening on top of his head. He hadn't meant to embarrass her; he was just concerned. Behavior aside, she couldn't fault him for his compassion.

"In short, the rumor you heard is true. I don't know all the details that are going around...but I do have a new mother and sister," said Violette.

"So that new transfer student is really...your sister?" Yulan asked.

"Yes."

"I see."

She could tell he was choked by all the things he wanted to say. Yulan was Violette's closest friend, and he knew better than anyone about her warped relationship with her mother. He knew she couldn't be happy to have a new family so quickly and under such circumstances.

Nonetheless, Yulan had no right to talk openly about someone else's family, especially in front of strangers. Good intentions aside, Yulan had crossed a line.

"Thanks for the concern," said Violette. With a gentle smile on her face, she took Yulan's hand, hoping to ease the crease off his brow. He'd been taller than her for a while now, and she had to use both of her hands to wrap around one of his. "I'm fine. The rumor is true, so it'll probably be harder for my half sister than me," she continued.

There was nothing illegal about having a mistress or getting remarried, but a new daughter just a year younger than the first daughter brought into the family under these circumstances...well, it was easy to draw conclusions from that.

And the teenage students were at a time of their life where this kind of scandal was particularly shocking. Puberty was an enigma, and cheating an unforgivable crime. Violette didn't particularly like being treated delicately by her classmates, but she knew it was out of sympathy. If she ignored them, it would stop soon. If the rumors were going to damage someone's reputation this time, it would be Maryjune's.

It was unfortunate, but she couldn't help her half sister, and she wouldn't ask Yulan for help. The rumors were true, but from Violette's perspective, they were ancient history. She'd gotten over them long ago. Staying out of Maryjune's business meant putting them aside as quickly as possible.

"I...see," he said.

Violette's smile should have comforted Yulan. She was sure her expression and nonchalant attitude didn't seem forced. He *should* be happy to find out that his worries were baseless.

But something wasn't right. He scanned her face, like he was certain she was somehow different from the Violette he knew.

He was right, though he never could have guessed that his childhood friend was a criminal who'd been condemned to prison—or a time traveler, for that matter. *That* was the sort of miracle that required direct intervention from God.

"If you're all right, then it's fine," he said. After one last long look, he seemed

to accept it—though whether he gave up on the mystery, or just decided that if Violette was okay, that was the important part, she couldn't tell. Either way, Yulan looked relieved, so Violette reciprocated with a smile. She didn't want to worry her kindhearted friend.

“Then, shall we go home? I'll feel bad if I make my chauffeur wait any longer,” she said.

“Oh...sorry I kept you so long. I wonder if he's worried.”

“Ha ha, then let's apologize together!”

“Okay!”

They'd only been talking for twenty minutes, but she was still later than usual—the academy had no after-school chores to delay students, so twenty minutes was enough to give a chauffeur entrusted with the precious sons and daughters of nobility a heart attack. If she'd been expected somewhere, she might have been lectured for lateness, but since she had no plans today, there was no way the chauffeur would complain to her father. Still, she should apologize for being late.

The chauffeur wasn't even angry at them—he was only worried about Violette. He asked about her day at school on their way home, wondering if anything nasty had happened. Violette interrupted him halfway through a question with “I'm fine.” She fell quiet, planning how to arrange for her own, private dinner as soon as she got home.

Chapter 5:

Please Let Everything Work Out

THE MEAL MARIN PREPARED for Violette was comforting and delicious. The flavors were just as she remembered, but the chef's cooking had never tasted so good. She was experiencing them from a whole new perspective, after all.

Her father and Maryjune came to her room to check on her, but Marin shooed them away. If Violette had let them in, they would have dragged her to eat dinner with them. She told them she was sick and confined herself to her room—she didn't want to get involved with their family meal. Let them dine alone without any outsiders.

"Lady Violette, the chef has prepared some sweets for your tea," Marin reported.

After dinner, Violette sat in a daze on the sofa. The sweet scent from the white tray in Marin's hand tickled her nose.

"Oh my...but I already had dessert, no?" Violette asked.

"You seem exhausted today, so...I'll just prepare the tea," Marin said. Violette was quite full after dinner, but the chef seemed to expect that—the spread was small but included bite-sized servings of all her favorites.

"Oh...thank you. I'll have to thank the chef later," said Violette.

The delicious-looking sweets on the tray in front of her invited her to eat them. At the same time, they were so cute that she didn't know if she *could* eat them. The worried chef had wanted to give her something to combat her exhaustion, so he'd skillfully created something for her that both looked and tasted *wonderful*.

"Hee hee, it looks like I'll put on some weight," Violette giggled. Many ladies, concerned for their figures, avoided meals entirely, let alone extra sweets. Violette thought of all the fitted dresses stuffed in her closet, and knew she'd have to do the same to maintain her figure. She weighed her options...a spread

of all her favorites versus a closet full of tailored dresses. The choice was obvious.

“I would rather my lady put on more weight. Not in your chest, but around your waist and thighs, please,” Marin teased.

“Hey, it’s not like I asked for this figure,” Violette retorted, gesturing to her own curves. In contrast to Violette’s natural curviness, Marin’s body was thin and firm—much closer to Violette’s ideal.

“Are you teasing me?”

“I’m not!”

Violette was glad that they could talk so casually—as long as Marin wasn’t uncomfortable, of course.

A large bosom and thin waist were considered feminine and beautiful, but it wasn’t like a woman could control the kind of body she developed. Violette was proof: she was a proper, stylish woman who grew curves despite *not* wanting them. She would have swapped with Marin in an instant.

“Well, I don’t envy all the trouble it’s brought you,” said Marin.

“I’m glad you understand.” Violette buried her face in her hands, remembering the sneering glances of the other nobles, the fevered glares her figure drew. Even before she understood what it meant, she still felt the crushing sensation, like the aristocrats were coiling around her body like a boa constrictor.

From now on, she’d try to escape their eyes by becoming a wallflower, behaving politely, but going no further. There was no way to tell what they were really thinking, after all. Might as well keep to herself and let it all pass over her. As long as they kept their thoughts to themselves, they wouldn’t be real.

“Maryjune will be part of your social life from now on,” said Marin.

Violette didn’t know what to say—she remembered what had happened the first time around. In her mind, past Violette protested loudly, but present Violette clamped down on those thoughts.

But she couldn't help remembering her first big mistake. Maryjune had been talking to the boy Violette liked, so Violette stormed up and called her half sister the spawn of a prostitute.

Maryjune was devastated.

Just thinking about it makes my head hurt...

People say that love is blind, but in that moment Violette was blinded by anger, not love. She blamed Maryjune for everything that happened to her and went on the attack. But even though she had been the daughter of a mistress, she had become the real daughter—and a true member—of the Vahan household. No matter how hard Violette disagreed, Maryjune was the second daughter of Duke Vahan.

I'm my mother's daughter.

Violette had inherited her father's charming beauty and her mother's obsessive tendencies, but Maryjune was the one who inherited their father's talents. Maybe that was simply God's unfairness.

"Well, I will be by your side through it all," Marin stated seriously.

"Thank you, but you don't need to worry. Father will probably handle her matters. I want to stay out of it as much as possible."

She didn't need her father's attention or affection. All the problems Violette remembered were ones she made herself. She was a little unsure how to move forward—it was one thing to pledge to do nothing, but she didn't know if she would be dragged in. Her mind ran wild with possibilities.

"I just hope that everything works out..." Violette muttered.

Violette's prayer sank deep into the silence of her heart.

Chapter 6:

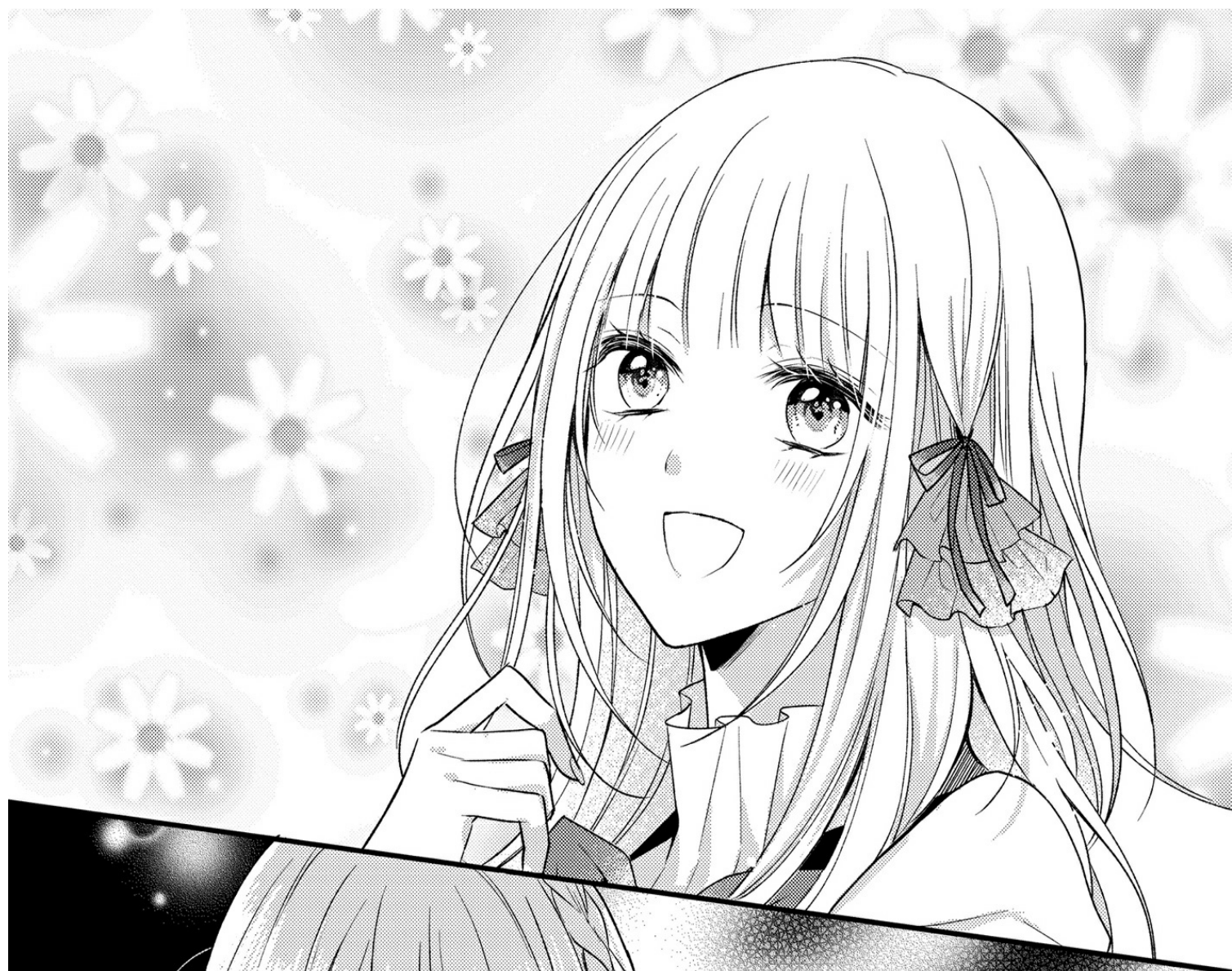
Memories of Regret Become a Dark History

“VIOLETTE, ARE YOU feeling better now?” Maryjune asked.

“Yes...I apologize for my absence at dinner last night,” Violette replied.

“No, your health takes precedence!”

Maryjune’s smiling face shone with the warm light of the sun, and she had the kind of sincere expression that put everyone who saw it at ease. She’d run up the moment she saw Violette, extremely worried over her half sister’s “illness.” Violette knew her own personality was way too warped to understand that level of kindness.



She just hoped that Maryjune could have a happy family life and ignore her as much as possible—and in two years, she could join a monastery and disappear forever.

“We decided last night that Maryjune will attend the next tea party,” Auld said.

“Oh, really?” said Violette. She did her best to pretend that she didn’t already know this from her first time around.

Though tea parties weren’t exactly traditional, the aristocrats still held them regularly as part of the high society social calendar. They were all expected to put on airs and mind their manners at these events, even the children...and Violette knew how children could gossip.

She didn’t think it was wise to introduce her stepmother and half sister into high society yet, where rumors ran wild and unquestioned by most. Her father didn’t see the problem, though. It wasn’t indifference; he probably hadn’t heard the gossip yet. And despite his lifetime of experience in the upper class, he had a strangely optimistic view in a few specific areas. With all his beauty and talent, he tended to attract friends, allies, and flattery. He knew the dark side of humanity, but somehow, he couldn’t imagine that darkness being directed at his beloved daughter.

In a way, his neglect of Violette was a similar blind spot to his fawning over Maryjune. She knew how things would go, and she’d rather be ignored.

Maybe he had forgotten how cruel children could be, or maybe mistresses hadn’t been judged so harshly in his childhood, but regardless, Auld had no idea how bad things could get for his younger daughter. At the tea party, Maryjune would be the center of attention in the worst possible way. Violette needed to come up with a plan in what little time she had left.

In the days leading up to the tea party, Violette tried to think of a way to prevent the disaster that would befall Maryjune, but came up empty every time. With so little time and so few options, she realized she’d have to stay close to the girl if she wanted to help at all. So much for her plan to stay as far

away from Maryjune as possible.

That was why she sat with her parents, waiting for Maryjune to emerge with a spin to show off her new dress.

“Mary, it suits you so well!” said Elfa.

“Yes, truly beautiful,” said Auld.

“Thank you, Mother, Father!” cried Maryjune. Her face bloomed with happiness at her parents’ compliments, with no hint she even noticed that Violette didn’t echo their sentiments. Violette believed that her half sister’s kindness was directly caused by her optimistic mindset—it was both her charm and her curse.

She supposed anyone would be an optimist surrounded by the happiness of a perfect family—two doting parents praising their darling daughter.

“Lady Violette...” Marin said, concerned.

“I think...I’ll wait in my room until it’s time to go,” said Violette.

The scene looked lovely and touching from the outside, but it only worked if Violette wasn’t part of it. Violette was used to feeling that things would be better off without her. It didn’t hurt her anymore.

“I shall prepare you some tea,” Marin stated.

“Tea? Right before a tea party?” Auld asked.

“Lady Violette never eats or drinks much during these tea parties.”

“Ha ha, Marin knows everything, I see,” sang Elfa.

“Yes. Everything about Lady Violette, at least.” Marin had been serving Violette for seven years, and she was much more dedicated to her than Violette’s parents were. She knew everything about Violette: her personality, likes, dislikes, weak points, strong points, worries, and complexes. In the end, when Violette chose to commit her crime, the thought of returning to Marin was the only thing that kept her going.

“I’ll leave it to you, Marin. I’ll let you choose the brand,” said Violette.

“As you wish...Lady Violette,” said Marin.

“Whaaaat?” Maryjune called out to her parents. Violette took the moment to disappear.

With her back to the door and the cheerful voices behind her, Violette arranged her dress around her ankles. The fluffy hem flowed beautifully, but it was harder to move in than it looked. Her half sister probably didn’t realize how constricting these clothes could be yet—just trying on beautiful clothes was still enough to make her heart dance.

Violette was the only one who could teach her how to move in these fancy outfits. She had an unexpected impulse to try to help, but she was afraid she would destroy their happy little family. She wasn’t at all certain she’d be able to explain herself. She’d probably spoil her father’s mood, he would yell at her, and that would be the end. It didn’t matter that she was a true descendant of the Vahan family; she wasn’t welcome.

Violette felt thoroughly disconnected from them.

“You’re as lovely as usual, my lady. That ensemble truly suits you,” said Marin.

“Thanks, Marin,” Violette responded.

Her dress was a vibrant red that complimented her gray hair and eyes. She wasn’t a kid anymore, so the design was more refined than cute. She’d also chosen her own hairstyle and hair accessories. She knew she could trust Marin to be honest with her—their relationship was beyond flattery at this point.

They didn’t compliment me once.

The family that was best without her popped into her head. She knew better than to hope for love from them. It *shouldn’t* hurt her, or even bother her. But the image was still there, taunting her.

No acknowledgment, not even an empty compliment... Violette couldn’t recall a single positive thing her father had ever said to her. He didn’t talk to her or live with her, or even meet her eyes—she had better relationships with strangers.

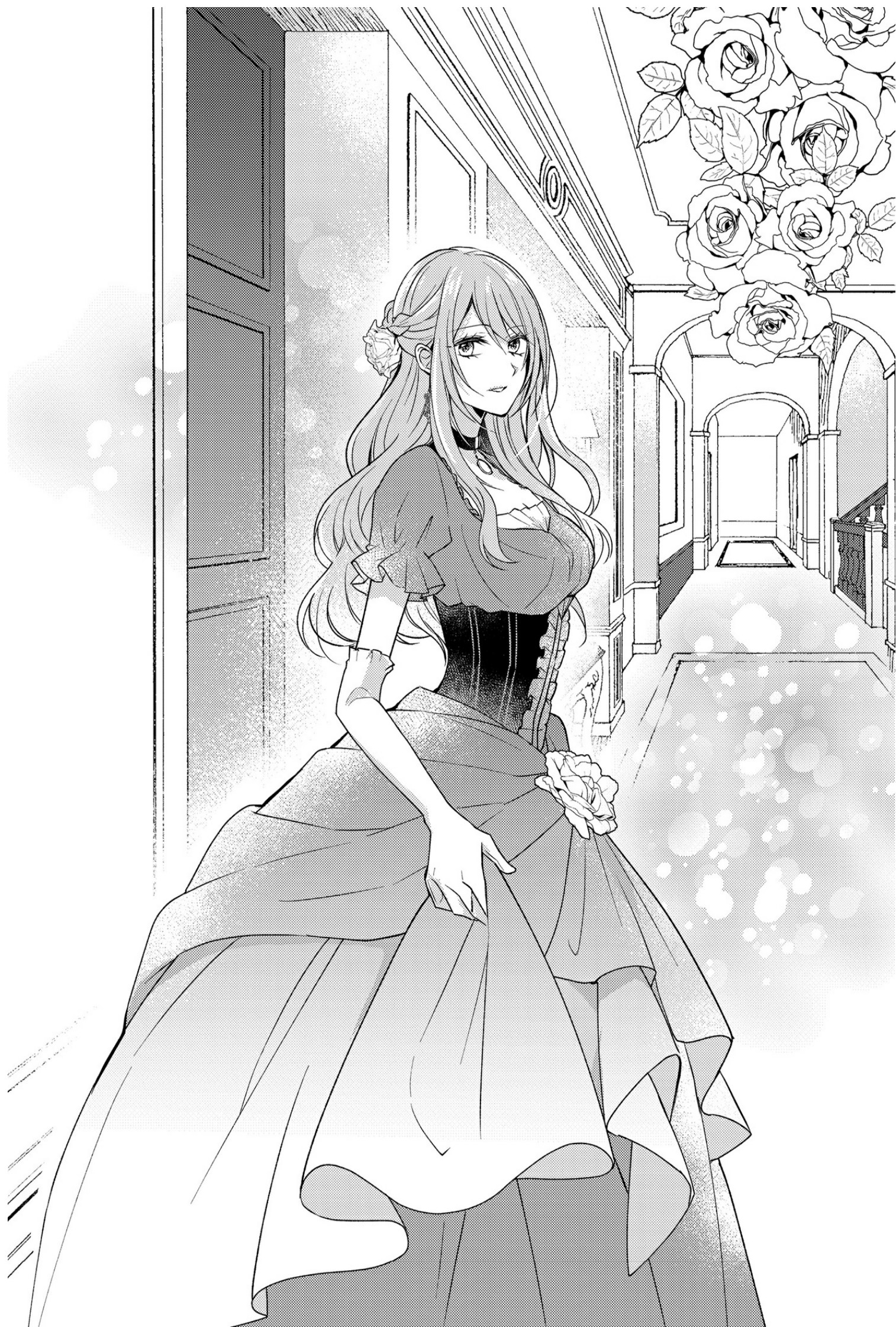
My crime was entirely pointless, wasn’t it?

The more she remembered, the gloomier she felt. She must have lost her

mind to think there was any way to earn love from a man who'd never once shown it to her.

“This time, I'll focus on the important things,” Violette said to herself.

Thinking about it would just cause more pain. Violette shook her head, trying to shake her dark mood with it, and returned to her room to wait for Marin's delicious tea.



Chapter 7:

Impressions Are Just Labels Stuck On

JUST BEFORE SHE COULD ASK for her second cup of tea, Violette was called to leave. She left the servants to tidy up and followed Marin out of the room. Her parents and sister had already boarded the vehicle, so everyone was waiting on Violette.

“Marin, I’m off,” she said.

“I’m sorry that I can’t accompany you, but...take care,” said Marin.

“I will. Thanks.”

Marin’s eyes said that she wanted to come, but Violette turned away. When she boarded the transport, bitter memories awaited her. She would have been more comfortable sitting next to complete strangers than her own family. She wished Marin could accompany her; she would feel safer with her there, and better able to breathe.

In contrast to Violette’s thoughts, Maryjune’s excitement was palpable.

“Oh, my heart is beating so hard...!” said Maryjune.

“Ah ha ha, I’m looking forward to it, too,” said Elfa.

When they smiled, Maryjune and Elfa really looked alike, and with Elfa’s youthful appearance they seemed more like sisters than mother and child. She could see a way that the four of them, on the surface, resembled an ideal family—the two children who each take after one parent. She knew she took after Auld, at least in appearance.

Her father smiled blissfully. Violette wished he would smile at her like that, though she wouldn’t force it. It was pointless trying to compete with these women—they were from a totally different world.

I can’t make him grant my wish...

Past Violette would have never accepted that. She’d despised this girl to the

point of wishing for her death. But now, she had perspective. She could watch her calmly.

Still, Violette would never help Maryjune, not really. As long as she managed not to hurt her, she'd consider that success.

The castle approached in the distance, but Violette was lost in thoughts of her cheerful half sister.

To take full advantage of the beautiful weather, the tea party was held outdoors. The breeze was just strong enough to keep Violette cool in her stuffy dress without messing up her hair.

The party was large, but the venue was far larger than it required; the host was displaying their influence and power. A single compliment from an influential noble could have a massive impact on someone's reputation, so hosts generally went all out.

To the adults, circulating through the room with courtesy and perfect manners was part of their job, but that left the children standing aimlessly next to their parents with nothing to do.

“Whew...”

Violette managed to steal away from the party for a breather. This tea party was the public debut for the new Vahan wife and daughter, so her father was laying it on thick. The other aristocratic households didn't really question the presence of Duke Vahan's second wife so soon after the death of his first one, or the half sister just one year younger than Violette. She was sure some of them had their own mistresses, after all. And although Auld had been a terrible father to Violette, she couldn't help but admire his skills as the head of their household.

Not even the scandal of a new wife and daughter could dim Auld Loa Vahan's brilliance. Compared to his talents, the Vahan family situation was trivial.

I don't care... I already knew all of this...

When Bellerose was still alive, Auld's reputation and aura shielded her and

Violette. There was no way he'd let that delusional woman get in his way, after all. Everyone tolerated her so that they could bask in Auld's brilliance.

And now, the aristocrats tolerated Elfa and Maryjune, allowing Auld to welcome his beloved as his companion to the tea party. No one wanted to be the first to ruin the veneer of respectability that Auld had created around them.

"So *this* is where you've been hiding, Vio!"

"Oh...Yulan."

Yulan's voice snapped Violette out of her labyrinth of thoughts. Growing up by herself, she had developed a bad habit of getting lost in her own world. Called back to the present, she looked up to see a white shirt collar and ribbon tie. She craned her neck to meet Yulan's brilliant golden eyes. He was the only person whose collarbones would be at eye level even when she was wearing heels. He looked stunning in his fancy outfit.

"I was looking for you. You're really good at hiding, y'know," said Yulan.

"Seems like you found me pretty easily," said Violette.

"I'm just good at figuring out where you'll be."

Yulan smiled. In one hand he held a drink for himself, and the other held a plate that must have come from the dessert table. It was the usual selection of Violette's favorites. Not only did he always know how to find her, but he also knew exactly what she liked.

"Here. There was a lot of good stuff," said Yulan. He presented her with an assortment of beautiful sweets, small enough for her corseted waist and dainty enough to keep her hands clean. This wouldn't have satisfied a big man like Yulan, but it was just enough for Violette.

"Thanks," said Violette.

She took a smooth, round chocolate that was slightly cold to the touch. Before the warmth from her fingertips could melt it, she popped it in her mouth.

"It's so sweet..." said Violette.

"Don't worry, I know better than to bring you bitter chocolate."

“You’re not going to have any?”

“No, this is just for you.”

Yulan hated sweets; considering his gentle soul, people expected him to have a sweet tooth, but he didn’t even like bitter chocolate. Similarly, Violette’s sharp beauty made people think she’d like bitter flavors, but even the faint taste of coffee in a café au lait made her frown in distaste. People told her that liking sweets didn’t suit her, so she’d tried to stop loving the taste, and when that didn’t work, she hid her enjoyment. But she’d decided not to bother hiding things like that anymore—and besides, Yulan had known this side of her forever.

Violette sighed. “You should’ve eaten something first. This is a big event, after all.”

“What about you? You wouldn’t eat anything unless I brought it to you,” said Yulan.

“There are a lot of people around the food, that’s all.”

“Which is why I brought you this.”

Violette had always disliked crowded places, but today she had to be especially careful. Before her past self’s downfall, she’d been an impressive lady. Her appearance and bearing had always attracted attention, and people formed snap judgments of her—Violette wished she could fade into the background, but that was out of her control.

That was why she chose to stay away from the start.

“Give me that,” said Violette.

“Huh?” said Yulan.

She grabbed the plate out of his hand, took the top sweet, and started eating until she was full. They’d been standing in the shadows to avoid the sunlight, but now she took a step towards the bustling center of the party before turning back to Yulan.

“It’s embarrassing to be the only one eating. We’re going to get you some food,” said Violette.

She wasn't really embarrassed; she just knew that if she let him, Yulan would stand here watching her eat and never bother to feed himself. He'd known that Violette would forgo eating to avoid the spotlight, and *she* knew he wouldn't think of himself at all while he was helping her. She had to push him a little.

"Okay. Thanks," said Yulan.

"I wonder what they're serving..."

"I didn't get a look. I went straight to the desserts."

There were multiple tables piled with dishes to serve the huge party—other than sweets, Yulan had a broad palate, so she saw plenty of things he would like. Violette took a steadying breath. She didn't want to wander into the tea party crowds, but she also didn't want to keep shrinking into the shadows. She'd finally decided to live a carefree life, so she should try to enjoy herself, at least a little.

Past Violette had conducted herself poorly at this party. She'd been emotional and irrational. This time, she'd be more mature. But in changing her entire attitude to avoid her past actions, she overlooked something important.

She knew how to avoid a single outcome, and it was easy not to repeat that. She'd thought that, as long as she didn't plan to cause trouble like last time, there was no need to be so careful.

But she underestimated her own influence.

"Know your place!!" someone shouted. "Poor Lady Violette..."

She didn't expect that, even without her, people would jump to her defense.

Chapter 8:

Emotions Are the Context for Everything

VIOLETTE WAS SURPRISED to hear her name, but when she realized *why* they were talking about her, the surprise turned to despair. Something terrible was unfolding right in front of her. She had to hold herself back from forgetting her manners and cursing them out.

She could have yelled at them for their stupidity.

“Do you even know how much you and your mother have hurt our lady? You don’t seem to understand your position,” one girl said.

“You *barely* have manners at all! Poor birth and poor upbringing, I suppose,” another girl said.

The girls had gathered around Maryjune in a secluded corner, hidden away from the adults. Last time, she’d been the one wielding bladed words at Maryjune, but hearing it from others made it clear just how disgusting they were.

Violette had assumed that no one would go after Maryjune without her egging them on, and the cheerful girl would naturally win them all over. But she was wrong.

This is a problem...

It wasn’t a very nice thought, but Violette wished they could have done their bullying somewhere else, somewhere she wouldn’t have had to witness it and feel like she needed to intervene. But...no. Knowing how she’d acted last time, she was in no position to judge anyone. Violette was the cause for this commotion, both in her past life and now. This wouldn’t be happening if not for her. Always and forever, Violette would end up hurting Maryjune.

“Vio...are you all right?” Yulan asked.

“I’m fine,” said Violette.

Violette nodded to ease Yulan’s worry, but deep down, she was absolutely exhausted. She pressed her hand to her forehead and stifled the urge to vomit.

She massaged her temples to clear her vision. The argument was getting heated; as the girls' voices got louder, people started to notice.

Who would be blamed for this? Well, the group of girls who'd picked a fight, clearly. Her first instinct was to pass by like it had nothing to do with her and wait for the girls to get bored, or for someone else to break it up. That was the sensible reaction. But...

"I'm sorry, please wait here for a moment," said Violette.

"Huh...?" Yulan said, lost.

She handed him the plate and made her way toward the voices. She felt a little bad for leaving him without an explanation, but this shouldn't take long.

If her goal was to live a simple and quiet life, walking into an argument was the exact opposite of what she should be doing. Violette just wanted to ignore them.

But that wouldn't look good.

This wasn't really about her, anyway. What were those bullies thinking—that she'd find out they defended her and win her favor? But things didn't always go as planned.

Exploiting my name, using me as a reason for your petty fight...that's the worst.

These girls felt they could be extra vicious because they had a pure motive—they were defending Violette. What kind of impression would their words make on the onlookers, especially if she stood by and let them say such terrible things? It didn't matter if she truly had nothing to do with it—everyone would walk away remembering cruel bullies tied to Violette. That was dangerous.

She'd need to handle this quickly and carefully. She had no time to think up a plan, and her dress got tangled in her legs and slowed her down. She wanted to pull it up and run, but she couldn't do things like that at a tea party.

"I wonder what trick your mother used to seduce the duke. I'm sure you're only after power. But we will *never* accept you!" one of the girls said.

"No! Mother and I aren't like that!" said Maryjune.

“The daughter of a shabby mistress acting so *shameless*...!”

Maryjune’s eyes were downcast, and she looked scared and vulnerable but determined to stand up to the bullies insulting her mother. Violette could remember *hating* this same girl, but now all she could see was the kind, beautiful soul shining through. Maryjune might come from humble origins, but she was the epitome of a good person. She loved and was loved. She was like a princess...the exact opposite of Violette.

Even God wouldn’t forgive anyone who hurt her.

One of the girls had a hand raised to slap Maryjune’s cheek, but before that hand could strike, before Violette could say anything to stop them, someone else broke through with a voice as cold as ice.

“What are you doing?”

The speaker’s words froze everyone who heard them and wrapped Maryjune in a layer of protection—a prince’s shield to protect his princess.

“Prince...Cl-Claudia...” one of the girls choked out.

“I asked...*what* you are doing?” Claudia repeated.

The girl in front still had her hand raised and eyes filled with anger, but in an instant her face went pale and her eyes filled with tears. Even if they’d truly been convinced they were doing the right thing for Violette, Prince Claudia clearly wouldn’t agree.

“This party is hosted by the royal family—*what* were you planning to do to upset it? I expect an explanation,” Claudia said.

This was Prince Claudia Acrucis. He wasn’t a fairy-tale character or a fantasy... but the literal heir to the throne, the next king of the Kingdom of Duralia.

Chapter 9:

No Use Crying Over Spilled Milk

EVERYTHING ABOUT Claudia was gold: the threads of his tied-up hair, his brilliant eyes. People held their breath in his divine presence. The girls were flustered by the prince's unexpected appearance, and their faces, desperate for an escape, reminded Violette of her past self. Everyone admired this boy and these girls were no exception. Some were probably even in love with him. How could they explain this situation to such a man?

Violette knew exactly how these girls felt. She had once attacked Maryjune just like this. She had yearned for Prince Claudia, even if she recognized that now as just a silly crush.

"I asked you why your hand is raised. You have yet to answer me," said Claudia.

"Um...I, no, I mean, we were...urgh," the girl stammered.

Claudia knew the answer. It was clear that she was preparing to slap Maryjune, but he was going to make her explain. Whether he meant it as justice, giving her a chance to explain her side, or as malice, enjoying watching her squirm, Violette couldn't say.



Either way, this was an excruciating public execution. There was no way this girl could explain her behavior, and forcing her would likely cause a terrible meltdown. Violette had felt the same way when she reflected on her crime in prison.

“Nn...gh,” the girl choked out. She started to hyperventilate, seeming more pitiful by the moment. Violette witnessed this girl change from an imposing bully into something weak and pathetic. Sympathy bloomed in Violette.

“Please stop right there,” said Violette.

“Ah, Violette...!” said Maryjune.

“Lady Violette...?” the girls said at the same time.

Maryjune and the girls looked at Violette with wide eyes. Only Claudia’s expression didn’t change, except for a new sharpness in his glare—not quite disgust, closer to disappointment...and suspicion.

“Violette...what are you playing at?” said Claudia.

“I don’t believe this is necessary. I’m sure that these ladies understand their mistakes. There is no reason to pursue this matter any further, yes?” said Violette. Of course the girls’ actions were wrong—bullying someone of lower birth wasn’t exactly a crime with a lot of nuance or shades of gray. But the girls had already been shamed into stopping, so dragging out this painful, public punishment would likely just cause even more resentment toward Maryjune. They might attack her again, and their cover motive would be the same: Violette.

Violette had to defuse this now or risk getting dragged into this sticky situation. What if everyone thought she was pulling the strings?

“As I thought...*you* put them up to this,” said Claudia.

“Ah...” Violette muttered. Before she could open her mouth to reply, Claudia turned his sharp gaze on her.

“Making others do your dirty work, bullying your own family... Have you no shame?” asked Claudia. Even twisted in displeasure, his face was still beautiful, but his words cut Violette to her core as she realized how bad this looked for

her. The girls claimed to be acting on Violette's behalf, and she'd arrived too late to help Maryjune but just in time to protect the bullies from Claudia. Of course it looked bad for her.

I guess I just tied the noose...

Violette cursed herself. This would have been resolved easily without her, but she just *had* to run headfirst into danger. She was usually less reckless and more tactful than this—she should have at least pretended to be on Maryjune's side.

"Um...th-that's not true. My sister wouldn't do such a horrible thing...!" said Maryjune.

Violette's thoughts ran wild as she struggled to understand the expression on her half sister's face. She hadn't expected her to contradict the prince of their kingdom just to defend Violette...though she'd done this last time, hadn't she? When past Violette had hurt her, Maryjune had assumed the best, and shown her mercy. Defending Violette just seemed to be in her nature.

Claudia looked at Maryjune with a complicated expression—concern, surprise, and possibly awe. It must be incredibly rare for someone he'd just met to stand up to him. With her pure motive, he must've seen her as a gallant angel.

"I understand that you want to cover for your sister," Claudia began again. "However, she—"

"My sister is a kind person. There must be an explanation for all this!" said Maryjune.

If Maryjune looked like a merciful angel, Violette must look like a grubby troll. She struggled to find a way to explain as the situation spiraled out of control. She dreaded this getting back to her father—he would lecture her endlessly about how badly she'd hurt Maryjune. Past Violette had fought back, but now, she just wanted to get through this with as little trouble as possible. She didn't want anything getting between her and her peaceful monastery life.

This was pointless. Violette hadn't wanted to get involved at all, and now she'd just made everything worse. Was this what they meant by "dig your own grave"?

She was surprised to feel compassion and admiration for Maryjune in this moment—she was so unused to feeling anything positive about her half sister. But mostly, she just wanted this to end.

Something big and warm pressed gently on her back.

“Vio, are you all right?”

Chapter 10:

Those Hands Are For You

WHY WAS Yulan here? She'd told him to wait when she handed him the plate, but here he was, empty-handed.

"Yulan...why?" Violette asked. He could be oblivious to his surroundings, at least when Violette was involved, but this time he seemed fully aware of what was happening—and seeing his friend in trouble was making him heated. When he focused, he could always judge situations correctly and instantly knew what to do...but then, why didn't he understand that it was best not to intervene?

"You were late, so I came to pick you up," said Yulan.

His smile warmed the cold atmosphere. Even the hand on her back warmed her. His touch wasn't possessive, but simple and gentle.

He didn't have to come over like this. She wanted to tell him that—no, she *had* to tell him, but the words wouldn't come out. She was just so relieved that he was here at all. She couldn't relax just yet, but at least it was easier to breathe.

"They just served a fresh batch of sweets, so let's go before they get cold," Yulan said.

"Hmm...sweets...?"

Yulan's words confused her—all she wanted was to grab his hand and run away, but she couldn't flee until this situation was resolved. Even Yulan should understand that, yet he seemed totally unconcerned as he smiled down at Violette.

Through all of this, Claudia and Maryjune had been locked in a passionate debate. Finally, they noticed Yulan—Claudia's eyes went wide in surprise.

"Yulan, when did you...?" said Claudia.

"A few moments ago. I only came here to retrieve Violette—please don't mind us," said Yulan.

Yulan nudged Violette's back to escort her away, but Claudia stopped him.

"W-wait, we haven't finished talking," he said.

"Of course not. That's why we outsiders shall excuse ourselves," said Yulan, tone all ice.

Outsiders... He was talking about both him and Violette. The anger in his voice overshadowed the warmth of his smile and the gentleness of his hands.

"Yulan...?" Violette whispered, but her words were swallowed up by the tense atmosphere. The Yulan she knew *never* spoke in anger. Talking to him always made her feel like she was bathed in sunlight. People might want to spoil him, but he'd always manage to spoil them instead. Affection spilled out of his tall frame.

Right now, he seemed like a different person.

He removed his hand from her back and wrapped it around her waist, pulling her closer. From anyone else, Violette would consider that too much, but although his grip was firm, he held her with all the care of someone handling a delicate glass sculpture. His voice, tone, and expression were all from a Yulan she didn't know, but his hands brimmed with his usual tenderness.



“An outsider?” Claudia cut in. “Violette is—”

“She had no part in this. That makes her an outsider,” Yulan said with finality, and his words reminded the onlookers of what had really happened. Maryjune was the victim, and those girls were the perpetrators. Claudia was the host, with the right and the duty to get involved in any trouble at his party.

So where did Violette fit in?

The perpetrators might have used her as an excuse for their actions, but she had no control over that. And this time, Violette hadn’t raised a hand, stepped in, or said anything to support or defend them. She shouldn’t be punished for their foolishness.

“These girls tried to do something terrible, yet you blame Lady Violette just for being in their thoughts?” Yulan asked with a tilt of his head, tone almost teasing.

He was *defending* her. Violette had never experienced this kind of care. She’d dreamed of it in prison, of being wrapped up in a protective presence that wouldn’t let go whatever happened.

“You dismissed Lady Violette’s words, you didn’t let her defend herself, and finally denounced her publicly...as expected of the *perceptive* Prince Claudia,” Yulan continued.

Claudia gaped, lost for words.

“Wait—Yulan...!” Violette gasped.

Yulan’s words struck something in Claudia—the prince’s regal bearing immediately drooped into one that seemed mortified and exhausted. The tension in the air seemed to dissipate along with Claudia’s righteous anger. And the one who’d taken control of the situation was the one least involved: Yulan.

Seeing that no one would stop them from leaving now, Yulan nudged Violette forward and turned his back on the indignant muttering.

“Outsiders shouldn’t get involved in a disagreement. This matter should be peacefully and *kindly* resolved by the people involved,” Yulan stated. The ice was gone from his voice, but the warmth hadn’t fully returned—his tone was

flat and serious.

No one said anything to stop him as he led Violette away.

Chapter 11:

Are Thanks or Apologies More Important?

“YOU IDIOT!” yelled Violette.

Yulan cringed. “Ugh...but—”

“No buts! Why did you *do* that...?!”

They had barely slipped into a secluded corner when Violette pushed his hand off her waist, took a step back, and started yelling. Yulan hung his head dejectedly. She didn’t *want* to shout at the person who’d just saved her—at least not before thanking him—but she was so surprised and upset that she couldn’t contain herself.

“Um...I know I shouldn’t have touched you like that...I was just desperate to get you out of there,” he mumbled.

“It’s not that!”

“Wait, what?” His head tilted in confusion, like he had no idea why she was so angry. *How* could he not understand?

“What if you get punished for talking to Claudia like that?” Violette yelled.

“Oh, you’re upset about *that*,” said Yulan, his tone totally indifferent now. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“How? *How* can you be this calm...?” said Violette. She had no idea how he could be so relaxed about this. It made her feel foolish for getting so upset. But he’d bared his teeth at the prince and spoken to him with such disrespect. He should know exactly how big a deal that was! Their only hope was that the prince wasn’t quick enough to really understand what Yulan had said...but no, she remembered his expression just before they left. Yulan could be arrested at any moment.

And it would be all her fault.

If only she’d dealt with this better, or handled this problem herself, or just

didn't get involved at all. Then Yulan would be safe.

"I'm so sorry...this is all my fault...!" Violette cried. She messily clutched at her hair, ruining the hairstyle Marin had done so beautifully, but the regret and self-loathing overwhelmed any thoughts about her appearance. Yulan had defended her, *protected* her, and she did nothing to stop him. Her failings weighed down on her. She should have slapped him, done something, *anything* to stop him.

She'd been so overwhelmed by that new feeling of *protection*, she couldn't bring herself to do anything to stop it. And because of that unthinking selfishness, she'd put Yulan, and maybe his whole family, in danger.

But this would be the last time. She'd never wish for love or protection again.

She thought she'd learned from her past mistakes, but when hope flickered in front of her eyes, her resolve wavered. It hadn't even been that long since she swore she wouldn't bother anyone. Clearly, it took more than that to change someone's nature.

"Vio? You messed up your hair," said Yulan.

"I'm so sorry...so, so sorry...!" Violette cried.

"Stop it. Hey, look here. Look at me." Yulan stroked her hands until her tight grip on her hair loosened. She only felt the pain in her scalp when she finally let go. He used a big hand to smooth out the messy strands.

"Thanks for worrying about me, but it's fine, really. I'm not a reckless guy, remember?" said Yulan.

"Not usually. But today makes me wonder."

"Ha ha, I'm sorry. But I swear, everything is okay... Are you convinced yet?" He held her gaze with such confidence, it made her wonder which of them was older, really. He'd always made her feel secure, and she had to admit that the magic of his smile was a big part of it. Suddenly, she *did* feel like everything was fine. Why did he ever think she had to worry? Did he always seem this mature?

"If anything happens, I'll take responsibility," Violette swore. What more could she say? She'd let Yulan handle her problem, let him comfort her, but she refused to yield on this point. She knew trying to get him to undo what he'd

done would be a waste of time. Exhausted from the day's ups and downs, she couldn't think of anything she could say to influence him at all.

"Ha ha, you got it!" said Yulan. He didn't argue, so he must've known she meant it—but he seemed certain that some big gesture where she accepted all the guilt wouldn't be necessary. Considering his attitude through this whole thing, though, it'd be pretty weird if he started worrying now. "All right, let's go."

"Hmm...?"

"I told you they just served more sweets, right? Oh, but they're probably cold now..."

"You're so...silly." Butting heads with Prince Claudia? Yulan handled that like a pro. Feeding Violette less-than-perfect sweets? *That* made him nervous. The incident with those girls and Maryjune took a while; these special sweets were probably either cold or eaten.

"Don't worry, anything you get me will be delicious," Violette said, "but I'm worried they ran out." The plate of sweets from before had already been cleared away, unfortunately—hot or cold, Yulan knew just what she'd find most delicious.

"I doubt they ran out—you know who's hosting, after all," said Yulan.

"That's true, I guess..."

"Vio, you're hungry, right? You haven't eaten much at all."

Grrrrumble...

He was right—her stomach answered for her. Usually, she got through with just drinks, but the few mouthfuls she'd eaten earlier had whetted her appetite. The corset squeezed her body and limited how much she could have, but she needed just a few mouthfuls to quiet her grumbling stomach. If people heard the noises it was making, they'd think less of her. People were always watching, after all. Those girls today proved that.

"I'll go get some more of your favorites," said Yulan.

"I can do *that* for myself, at least," Violette grumbled.

“Huh? I’m much better at it, though.”

“Go get your own food.”

“Hmph...fiiine.”

With his cheeks puffed out, his face was back to its childish form. This was the adorable friend Violette doted on like a little brother. He switched back to his usual self so quickly that she couldn’t help but laugh.

“You were so *cool* before,” Violette whispered.

“Huh...?” said Yulan.

She’d rather be protected by his strong arms than anyone else’s. If someone else had wrapped a hand around her waist like that, she would’ve been uncomfortable, but from him, it was okay. Her cute childhood friend had seemed so mature.

“Thank you for protecting me,” she said. “It made me...really happy.” She knew she didn’t deserve his help, but she couldn’t bring herself to tell him that and hurt his precious heart. Still, she was still floored by his kindness. She struggled between elation and guilt.

He’d make some lucky girl very happy someday. She’d be sure to show nothing but happiness when that day inevitably came.

“Huh? Uh...you’re welcome...?” said Yulan.

“Why do you sound so unsure?”

“I mean...you don’t usually say stuff like that out of nowhere.”

“Even I can show my gratitude, okay?”

“I didn’t mean it like that! Well, whatever.” He sighed deeply; she’d thought he was flustered, but his sigh sounded almost resigned. She knew she’d been running hot and cold since they started talking—she must have surprised him with how angry she’d been, and now she was thanking him, all sincerity and proper manners. Well, she couldn’t change her nature all at once; it was still a work in progress.

“Wow, I’m beat...and kind of hungry, too,” Yulan complained.

“You’re only hungry now?”

“I could’ve eaten, but I wasn’t starving. Now, I bet my stomach’s gonna start grumbling at any moment.”

“It’s always extremes with you. Go get yourself a proper meal, Yulan. I’ll head for the desserts, so—”

“No way! We’re going together.”

Between her heavy dress and shorter stride, Violette knew she was much slower than Yulan. She wouldn’t be upset if he left her behind. But still, he stayed by her side, taking steps that looked annoyingly short.

“Did you get to choose this dress?” he asked.

“Hm? Yeah, of course. Why do you ask?” said Violette. She’d asked for Marin’s opinion, but trusted no one’s judgment but her own. Back when her mother chose her outfits, she’d tried to dress Violette up like a replica of Auld; since then, Violette insisted on choosing her clothes herself. But Yulan already knew this.

“It really suits you. Pretty and cute,” said Yulan. Violette gaped, speechless, and a moment later he continued, “Of course I’d jump at the chance to escort such a beautiful Vio, right?”

“Thanks...”

He offered her his hand, and once she took it, it was much easier to walk. She knew she shouldn’t rely on him, even in this small way, but after growing up together he knew just how to slip past her defenses.

“I wonder what food they have... I’ll bet it’s good, even if there isn’t much left,” said Yulan.

“This sort of party isn’t supposed to fill up your stomach.”

“Plenty of desserts, though.”

“It’s too bad you can’t eat sweets.”

“I wonder if any of the sweets are salty...”

“Ha, unfortunately, I doubt it. There’s plenty of fruit, though.”

“Ugh, most fruit is too sweet, too.”

It felt like a dream—here she was, having a peaceful conversation about nothing with her gentle childhood friend. When she thought back to what past Violette did at this same tea party, it hardly seemed possible.

She was still worried about Claudia, about what he’d said and his impressions of her and Maryjune, but there was nothing she could do about any of that right now. She tried not to let the depressing thoughts drag her down. She’d learned that day that she was destined to walk the path of evil, even if it wasn’t what she wanted. It was a harsh lesson, and she swore to do better.

After all, she strove to live a simple life without bothering anyone.

Chapter 12:

Forgivable or Unforgivable

AFTER THE PARTY, Violette's parents acted as if nothing had happened. This was the same as her first time around—Maryjune mustn't have told them anything in either timeline. That had irritated past Violette, but now, she was grateful. This time, it wasn't Violette's fault. It wasn't clear what Maryjune thought about any of this, though. There was no way she just let it go.

So, did she still blame Violette for what happened? For that matter, did the prince? In the moment, Violette had escaped with Yulan's help, but she had no idea what they thought afterwards. Frankly, she didn't want to know.

But this time, something new happened.

"Oh, Violette!" Maryjune called.

"Maryjune..." Violette replied. For some reason, Maryjune kept trying to start conversations with her. Well, maybe she knew why—she'd tried to do the same last time, too, even though Violette alternated between ignoring and insulting her. It made sense that she'd want to get closer to her new sister, even if Violette had destroyed all her attempts.

"Good morning," said Maryjune.

"Good morning."

"It's so nice out today, isn't it? It makes me want to bask in the sun."

"Yes."

Maryjune's smile was as warm as the sun she described. She never seemed bothered by Violette's standoffish replies, or maybe she didn't notice. She just barreled ahead, trying to coax Violette out of her shell.

I'm so tired.

She knew Maryjune was a good person, but that might be why Violette found her so exhausting. Despite the one-word answers, her half sister persisted,

unbothered. Violette tried to think back to their interactions the first time, and...no, Maryjune had never given up. Their relationship entirely hinged on how Violette decided to interact.

What a miscalculation. Violette had thought that if she just stayed away everything would work out, but things weren't so simple. She knew what would happen if she ignored Maryjune, because that was what she'd done last time; not only would she hurt her innocent half sister, but she'd be setting herself up for endless lectures from her father. Just imagining that made her tired down to her very bones.

"Lady Violette, Lady Maryjune, I apologize for the interruption," said Marin.

"Good morning, Miss Marin!" Maryjune cried.

Marin greeted her with a perfectly courteous bow, but something about it seemed less congenial than usual. Or did her polite neutrality just pale in comparison to Maryjune's dazzling smile?

"Breakfast is ready, if you'd like..." Marin told Violette. Their usual routine had been set long ago—Marin would greet Violette as soon as she woke, help her get dressed, and prepare her breakfast. Violette felt bad making Marin work so hard, so she had suggested on multiple occasions that Marin let someone else care for her sometimes, but Marin always declined. She said she always wanted to be there for Violette. Every day, Marin would come invite Violette to breakfast and lead her by the hand out of her room. At least, that had been their daily routine until recently.

It changed after Maryjune's debut into high society. Violette tried every way she could think of to avoid these meaningless little conversations with Maryjune, including getting up early in hopes of avoiding her. She'd started missing Marin in the morning.

"I'm sorry, it looks like I was up early today," Violette said.

"No, I apologize for being late to receive you." Marin gave her a knowing look. She knew Violette better than anyone, so she saw through her scheme and immediately understood how it had failed.

Marin's soft voice and gentle expression when she met Violette's eyes were

the complete opposite of the cold way she looked at Maryjune. Seeing her familiar expression put Violette at ease, at least a little. She wouldn't be able to relax completely while the source of her tension was still here.

"What's for breakfast?" Maryjune asked.

"I am only involved with Lady Violette's breakfast. My apologies," Marin replied coldly.

"Oh, really? That reminds me. Her meals are always a little different from ours!"

Violette caught the quick downward turn of Marin's mood, but luckily, Maryjune didn't seem to notice. Violette was glad—to Marin, Maryjune was the one who was hurting her beloved charge, but to Violette, Maryjune was the detonator to her father's explosive temper. If Maryjune complained about Marin's attitude, no one in the household, not even Violette, could protect her from his wrath.

"Since we'll all be sitting together, I just thought it would be nice to eat the same thing," Maryjune continued, oblivious. She covered her mouth with both hands, partially hiding the disappointment on her face. It only highlighted her natural cuteness. "Well, it can't be helped, right? Everyone has their own tastes, after all."

She was so kindhearted, honest, and good. She spoke her mind without worry, but whether she said something wonderful or unrealistic, there was never any spite there. She didn't want Violette to change her meal; she simply thought that eating together would bring their family closer together.

But it wouldn't. It would just be cruel. Violette was speechless.

"Lady Violette, shall we go?" Marin prompted her.

"Yes...thanks."

Violette took Marin's hand. She did her best to smile, but Marin didn't smile back. Violette tried to silently tell Marin not to worry. Maryjune eventually changed the subject and Violette gave absentminded, vague answers.

This would probably be fine; Violette hadn't hurt her half sister. Pure,

optimistic Maryjune believed they could become one big happy family, while tainted Violette read dark things into all her sister's harmless statements. Past Violette would have slapped Maryjune right across the face for all this, so it made sense that Marin was concerned. But Violette had shed all her sensitivity back in her prison cell.

I already knew.

Even in the throes of fury, part of her had known. Her anger was totally unjustified.

She's allowed to do all of this.

Maryjune was allowed to say what she thought. She was allowed to have her wishes granted, even if she didn't realize yet that someone would grant them if she only asked. An honest person like Maryjune would agree that Violette's past actions were twisted.

Violette knew her wishes wouldn't come true. She knew that no matter how hard she wished, no one would hear them, that wanting anything was pointless. That's how things had always been, so feeling disappointed or jealous was pointless.

It took her life being rewound for her to finally understand that everything she'd done was useless...or maybe it was just seeing the same events with the new maturity she'd gained living through them the first time. She could think of no punishment more effective than feeling this regret over and over. It was like a nonstop lecture about the futility of everything she ever wanted.

"Lady Violette, would you prefer that I bring your breakfast to your room?"

"Thanks, Marin...but I'm fine," Violette whispered sadly. She wanted to take Marin up on her offer, but eating alone in her room would just make things worse in the long run. If her father got involved, everything would get so much worse.

"I'm sure today's breakfast will be just as delicious as always. I'm looking forward to it," Violette said.

At a glance, Violette's meals looked the same as everyone else's, but the details were handled by Marin. She always made sure Violette had small

portions of all her favorites, and everything was lovingly arranged. Until recently, Violette often ate alone, so Marin took extra care in the hopes that it would make her beloved mistress feel less lonely.

“I’m sure that you’ll be pleased with today’s arrangement,” Marin replied.

“Hee hee, I’ll have to give my thanks to the chef,” Violette said, trying to be cheerful. Delicious meals were always welcome. No matter how uncomfortable the atmosphere got, everyone else could go on without her while she focused on the food. For her family’s sake, she would become a prop for their happy family life. She’d eat her breakfast in silence and let the three of them do or think whatever they wanted.

“Let’s go, Violette! Hurry!” Maryjune called, striding quickly down the hall.

“Coming,” Violette replied, pulling her head out of the clouds. She followed her beckoning sister with heavy footsteps. With each step, she felt her heart turn into nothing.

Chapter 13:

What Does It Mean to Belong?

SHE PUT HER BAG on her desk and sighed as she fell into her seat. At breakfast, both her parents were there, so it was easy to go unnoticed. Going to school, though, was different. If she wanted to go to school on her own, but Maryjune wanted to go together, then they went together.

She couldn't calm down during the ride to school. She couldn't relax at all until she was away from Maryjune. Violette felt more comfortable at the academy than at home. If you didn't want to go to school, you could quit and hermit away at home, but what about the other way around? She was seriously considering finding a way to move out.

"I'll go somewhere this afternoon before heading home," Violette muttered to herself, hoping Maryjune wouldn't catch her after class. If she had to spend both breakfast and dinner with her family, she at least wanted a little alone time beforehand.

"Lady Violette, how are you today?" said a student in a neighboring seat.

"I'm well, how are you?" Violette replied, returning a proper smile. People had avoided her on the first day they heard the rumors, but it seemed that awkwardness was over—the other students had started greeting her and chatting normally now. She couldn't tell whether they still cared about the rumor. But she'd never had many real school friends anyway, so this wouldn't change her daily routine very much.

As long as my life is peaceful, I don't care.

She was okay with being lonely. She hoped everyone else could see that she'd given up.

She propped her elbow on the desk, rested her chin in her hand, and stared at the floor. Her posture was improper, but Violette's noble figure somehow made it beautiful. At the end of the day, she was her father's daughter.

After morning classes came lunch, and Violette made her way through the halls to the cafeteria. Only a handful of students brought their own lunches; even if some of them boasted that their home chef was better, the academy's kitchen more than held up under the scrutiny of the finest gourmand. The academy's menu was healthy and broad; anyone could find something they liked. The hassle of bringing an extra bag didn't seem worth it to most of them.

Violette also stuck to cafeteria food, though in reality she wished she could bring familiar food from home. But she didn't want to create any more work for the Vahan household staff or ask for favors from anyone close to her father.

At any rate, breakfast had been some time ago and she was starting to get hungry. She needed to eat before her stomach started to grumble. She quickened her pace; students were already walking past her with take-out lunch bags, which meant the cafeteria was likely already full.

If it's too crowded, I'll take my food and eat outside.

It wasn't that she felt cramped in the spacious school, but she didn't like to be around too many people. While it seemed like her classmates weren't interested in the rumor anymore, she couldn't be certain. There was a chance they'd still be talking about her. Considering the fuss it had caused recently, Violette wanted to play it safe. Rumors traveled quickly and spread like a poor game of telephone, and there was nothing Violette could do to clear it up or get them to stop. It was best just to avoid getting involved.

"Mademoiselle Violette!"

Violette jumped, then cursed herself for overreacting; but honestly, when someone called her full name like that, trouble usually followed. She turned around slowly to see a boy with navy blue hair and glasses waving as he approached.

"Lord...Mila?" said Violette.

"Hello, it's been a while," he replied. This was third-year Milania Dior. They said his smile could melt the heart of even the most frigid young woman, but she knew better than to let her guard down. His glasses made him look like an

intellectual, and many of the girls said that the mole under his right eye was extremely sexy. He was the sort of person who exuded style—he looked good whatever he wore.

He was also vice president of the student council, and close friend of Prince Claudia. He was the absolute last person Violette wanted to see.

“Yes, it has been some time,” said Violette.

Milania was the eldest son of a duke. As a fellow aristocrat, they had run into each other several times before. Many of the students at the academy had been attending high society events since they were children. The aristocratic community was a small world. Also, as beautiful high-born youths, they attracted a similar kind of attention from the people around them. It made sense that they were acquainted, and there didn't need to be something wrong for him to seek her out.

Except...given the timing, she doubted he just wanted to exchange pleasantries.



“Off to lunch? Your usual companions aren’t with you, I see,” Milania went on.

“Hmm...?” It took her a moment to figure out what he meant; then she remembered the gaggle of girls who used to follow her around. Before Maryjune had arrived at school and the rumors started, when her mother was still alive, she’d always been surrounded by young ladies who hoped to use a connection to her for their own purposes. But now, they all steered clear.

She honestly didn’t mind. She’d never really considered them friends, and she didn’t miss them or regret losing touch. She assumed they’d already found someone else to latch onto. It was actually a bit of a relief.

Their interest must have evaporated because the rumors about her stepmother put her future power and standing in doubt. Her past self would have clung to the friends who’d rejected her, never realizing why they shunned her. Her current self didn’t think much of anyone who’d give up on a friend because of rumors about her parents. It made her wonder if the looks of sympathy she’d received earlier had less to do with the rumors and more with her coming isolation.

“That’s right...those girls probably won’t talk to me now,” Violette said flatly.

“Hm...?” Milania asked.

“They’re not interested in me anymore.” Not that they cared about *her* to begin with. She’d been so desperate for any attention that she hadn’t cared if they had corrupt motives. But she knew now that was just abuse masquerading as love. Even if nothing else had happened, surrounding herself with people like that would have eventually broken her in two. She admonished herself for not understanding that until now.

“Lord Mila, you must have heard the rumor...about my family,” said Violette.

“That’s...”

“Those girls never saw me as a friend, just an opportunity. More importantly, do you have some business with me?” She quickly changed the subject; they weren’t close enough that she wanted to go any deeper into it.

She had harsh judgment for her former friends...but in the past, she'd tried to use Milania as a shortcut to get closer to Claudia. She'd planned to use him and throw him away when she was done, but Milania had figured out her plan and put a stop to it. In her memories of him, he was always smiling...but she was so focused on Claudia—or the *idea* of Claudia, not the actual person—that she didn't notice anything else. Looking back with clearer eyes, she knew his voice had been dripping with disdain every time they spoke.

She understood now. Milania absolutely *despised* her.

Though they'd known each other since childhood, there was no particular love between them, and Violette had never initiated a conversation with him as far as she remembered. Perhaps her confusion was clear on her face, because Milania's expression turned troubled.

"Did something happen between you and Claudia at the tea party?" Milania asked.

"Haven't you already heard this from Claudia?"

"He doesn't want to talk about it."

Then why was Milania bothering her about it? He should know that she and Claudia weren't exactly close, either.

"It's obvious there's something on his mind. That's why...I thought you might know something," Milania stated. She wanted to ask *why*, but she figured that was a lost cause—and she didn't want to explain what happened at the tea party, she wanted to forget it completely. She stayed silent.

Milana stared; Violette felt her face redden in embarrassment under such intense scrutiny. He must know she wasn't telling him everything; he paused like he was deep in thought, but it seemed fake.

"Let me rephrase the question," Milania finally continued, with exaggerated bemusement. "Did something happen between him and Yulan?"

Chapter 14:

Reflection Is Important

“YULAN...?” Violette repeated. She wasn’t surprised, she was *suspicious*. She didn’t know what Milania thought of Yulan. They likely knew each other at least a little, but if they were friends she wasn’t aware of it. But the timing was what made this most suspicious. Milania must’ve known more than he was letting on.

“Don’t misunderstand me. All I know is that Claudia seems troubled... depressed, even.”

“Then why ask about Yulan?”

“Ah, so something *did* happen.”

“Will you please answer the question?” If Milania knew anything about what happened at the tea party, no matter how vague, Violette would have to talk about it to make sure he didn’t blame Yulan. She didn’t know how perceptive Milania was, nor how likely he was to jump to conclusions.

“I only figured it out from Claudia’s mood. I don’t know the details, so...relax,” Melania said.

“Prince Claudia’s...?” said Violette.

“He only acts this way when Yulan’s involved.”

She didn’t understand what he meant by “this way,” though she had to admit she was a little curious. Despite her closeness with Yulan, she didn’t know much about how he got along with anyone else—all she knew about him and Claudia was that their relationship was complicated. It seemed that Milania and Claudia were closer friends than her and Yulan.

“And Yulan wouldn’t even talk to Claudia...” Milania continued, “unless *you* were involved.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She wanted to argue, but his assumptions were surprisingly accurate. She’d

been glad that the party wasn't ruined for Yulan, but this meant Claudia was just one more person Violette hurt, one more victim caught up in her mess.

Yulan would tell her to just ignore the prince, but she couldn't. He was hurt because of her.

"As you said...something *did* happen," said Violette. Milania would surely discover the truth soon; she had to come clean. The story was simple when told from start to finish, but it was easy to misunderstand if obscured by rumors and hearsay. Claudia must still think that Violette was the mastermind, so Milania probably thought the same. Well, so be it. She was used to having a bad reputation.

But blaming Yulan, turning him into the villain...that was *unacceptable*. That was why her first reaction had been to yell at him, even though she'd been so grateful for his rescue.

"Please don't misunderstand what happened," Violette continued, "Yulan didn't do anything. The fault is mine alone. If my actions have harmed Prince Claudia, I would like to apologize."

She knew Yulan would try to convince her that she wasn't to blame, but she couldn't bring herself to believe him. Her intentions didn't matter—she was still at the center of the incident. Next time, she'd have to firmly grab the roots when she pulled out the weeds.

"I see...I don't know the details, but I don't think you're responsible," said Milania.

"Huh...?"

"Claudia is depressed, not angry. And I think it's directed at himself." Milania sighed. "I wanted to find out what might be bothering him so I could help, but I think it's best if I don't pry any further."

"I'm sorry I wasn't more helpful," said Violette.

"No, I apologize for putting you on the spot and interrupting your lunch. All the seats are probably taken by now..."

"It's fine. I was going to take my lunch outside, anyway." That was mostly

true, at least—at this point, there was no way she'd find a secluded table in the cafeteria. It was a spacious enough room, but to her, it still felt cramped. Eating outside would be far more peaceful.

“By now, some people will be returning to the classrooms—” Violette's gaze drifted outside, and she froze, eyes wide in surprise and words trapped in her throat. The beautiful gardens outside looked just as picturesque as usual, except for one important difference.

“Mademoiselle Violette...?”

The crease between Violette's brows deepened, and her beautiful face turned grim.

“I'm sorry. I have somewhere to be,” Violette said.

“Ah, um...”

“Please excuse me.” She clasped her hands and bowed her head in courtesy as she left, but didn't wait around for Milania to return the gesture.

Milania watched her go. The rudeness felt very unlike Violette, so he had to assume that something was amiss. He turned toward the window she'd been looking through before making her abrupt exit.

There didn't seem to be anything strange going on—he saw the usual academy landscape, all manicured trees and gardens. But then he spotted the group of girls.

“Hmm?” said Milania.

A large group of people huddled around one spot, not relaxing, having lunch, or enjoying the courtyard, but clustered in a serious-looking group. He looked closer...there was someone in the middle, probably a girl. He thought she tried to shout, but then the group pressed in on her, hiding her from his view.

He couldn't hear their voices and didn't know the whole story, but whatever was happening there couldn't be good.

“Could it be...?”

He remembered Violette's grim face before she hurried away. Was this what she'd seen? If she noticed this and ran off, then...

"Damn—!"

He didn't need to wonder where Violette was headed. Before he even had time to think, he was running.

Chapter 15:

A Special Person

“WHAT’RE YOU DOING for lunch, Yulan?” Gia, Yulan’s best friend, asked cheerfully.

Gia had been his friend since they enrolled in the same middle school class. The other boy’s tanned skin, rare in Duralia, was common in his home country. His shiny silver hair and ocean blue eyes weren’t particularly unusual, but combined with his darker skin, they gave him a unique, almost mysterious look. He was almost as tall as Yulan, with a lovely, youthful face and lively personality. He’d told Yulan in the past that he always felt restrained by his tie and school jacket—today the tie was missing, and his jacket was tied around his waist.

An onlooker would never guess that this messy, casual person was a prince.



“Oh, I was going to—”

“Eat with the princess?” Gia joked.

“Ugh, don’t call her that,” Yulan groaned. Gia was *very aware* that there weren’t any princesses in this country...and the person he was talking about seemed more like a queen to him, anyway.

“But I’ve never met her! I can’t just call her ‘Violette.’”

“So add a ‘Lady’ in front, don’t give her a random nickname!”

Yulan and Gia had been friends for a long time, but Yulan had never let him meet Violette. It wasn’t that Gia was a bad guy, or that he was embarrassed of Violette, or anything like that. He just wanted to keep Violette all to himself.

Gia seemed to understand, so no matter how many times his best friend disappeared to spend time with Violette, he’d never asked to meet her—though he must’ve seen her around since he knew what she looked like. He simply teased Yulan mercilessly about his “princess.” Yulan always whined at him to stop, and Gia always did it again anyway—at this point, it was basically an in-joke between them.

“I’m a little worried, so I want to see how she’s doing,” said Yulan.

“You’re always like this. If you’re that worried, just go see her every day.”

“No, this is fine.” It was tempting, he had to admit—and he knew Violette would be happy to see him. It was difficult, in the regimented, image-obsessed world of aristocrats, to really get close to someone. Right now, Violette saw him as a beloved younger friend to spoil and dote on. He’d worked hard to befriend her, and he thought he’d done a good job, but he had to be mindful of how often he appeared in her life.

He hoped to be more than just friends, after all.

“Anyway, I’m off,” Yulan said, preparing to leave. “Gia, if you lie around much longer, you’ll be late.”

Gia—a teenage boy on a growth spurt—was a bottomless pit for food; he usually took the full lunch hour to eat and still wouldn’t finish. Gia shrugged, unconcerned, though Yulan couldn’t help but worry that his friend would be

late for class.

But with every step he took toward Violette, those concerns faded.

At this point, Violette had probably already left her classroom. She never brought her lunch—he knew she'd never ask the staff at home. She'd probably already gotten lunch from the cafeteria, and having discovered that it was too crowded, had taken her lunch and found some secluded corner to eat in. Yulan ran through all the deserted nooks and private spots he knew, trying to guess where she would've chosen.

Knowing he'd see Violette soon put a spring in his step. Sure, he was worried about her; if she was hurt, he wanted to be the one to comfort her. But more than anything, he acted on pure, selfish desire—all he wanted was to spend time with her, and maybe see her smile.

That reminds me...I haven't seen those girls around.

Violette's crowd of hangers-on, the girls who circled around her since middle school, had always been there. They were usually polite but cold—their high-pitched voices grated on his ears, and their perfumes were harsh and nauseating. Being touched by anyone other than Violette was unbearable, and he lost count of how many times he'd wished he could shove them away. He wondered if something had happened between them in the past year—he'd be happy if they'd simply parted ways, but knowing Violette, friendships like that had probably ended badly. Despite her beauty and kindness, she was a poor judge of character.

I hope it's nothing...but I should stay on guard.

He wouldn't mention anything to Violette—asking would only add to her worries. He'd just keep it in mind and hope it was nothing.

His head spun with thoughts while his feet moved, searching for his target. He barely noticed all the people he passed.

"Yulan," a voice called out. He stopped in his tracks.

"Huh...? Oh, is there something I can help you with?" Yulan said, turning slowly to face the speaker. He'd pretended not to notice him because he didn't want to be noticed *by* him, but apparently he'd failed. Turning with a mostly

polite look on his face was about the best he could manage—this was the last person he wanted to talk to.

“Prince Claudia,” Yulan spat.

Chapter 16:

A Fragment of Emotion

YULAN DIDN'T KNOW how to act.

He couldn't ignore the prince. He *had* to speak to him with humility and courtesy. He forced his face into a smile and let loose a quick bow. But since the prince called him out in the hallway, he could probably forget about any more formalities for now, right? Claudia wanted to talk to Yulan, not as a prince to a lower noble, but man-to-man, two people with a complicated history. That was why he'd used Claudia's title—under the circumstances it felt like more of a hindrance than a sign of respect.

"To think that Prince Claudia would deign to speak to me. I'm surprised," Yulan said flatly, smile still plastered on his face. He was pretty sure he knew what was coming, and it wasn't a conversation for the middle of a hallway; in unison, they moved to a nearby secluded spot behind some decorative architecture.

"Wipe off that smile," said Claudia.

Yulan remained silent.

"I'm not talking to you as the prince. I need to talk to *you*."

"Fine," Yulan sighed, and as the fake smile faded from his face, the very air between them changed. Yulan's calm, soothing aura evaporated. His eyes were still gentle, but the light in them dimmed. His face was as lifeless as a theater mask.

"I don't have time for you, so can you hurry up and get to the point?" he said. The longer this took, the more likely Violette would end up somewhere difficult to find and he'd miss her entirely. He still had to get his lunch, too—he wouldn't mind skipping food to see her, but it would make her worry.

"If this is about what happened the other day, I don't think there's anything to talk about, especially between you and me," Yulan continued.

“I thought about what you said,” Claudia stated.

“What an honor. So, what? Did I make you angry?”

“No! I really thought about it...” Claudia looked at the ground. None of his usual royal confidence and charisma, so alluring to everyone, was on display now—but why bother in front of Yulan? He was the one who knew where that confidence came from, and where it ended. He didn’t take any particular pleasure in knowing the prince that well, but at least it meant Claudia was usually straight with him.

“At the party, the last thing you said was...that outsiders shouldn’t get involved,” Claudia said. Yulan had meant it as a sarcastic parting insult, but apparently Claudia had taken it seriously.

In any case, it didn’t matter to Yulan what Claudia thought. The only thing that mattered was finishing this conversation as soon as possible. No more useless remarks.

“Yes, I said that. Is there a problem?” said Yulan. He wasn’t the kind of person to think his words over that carefully, anyway—they were just daggers to throw at his opponent and help Violette escape. Why would Claudia think so hard about them?

“I wanted to understand what you were thinking, so I gave it some serious thought...but no matter how hard I tried, I didn’t understand,” Claudia stated. That wasn’t a surprise to Yulan—the two of them were polar opposites. Claudia was driven by a deep sense of justice, but Yulan was led by his protective impulses. Those core beliefs were incredibly different in reasons, actions, and results.

At the tea party, Claudia saw a chance to stand up against evil and protect a defenseless girl from harm. Crowding around one person to throw stones was inhuman—Yulan wouldn’t disagree with Claudia on that. But Yulan would choose protecting Violette every single time.

“You don’t need to understand. I was just doing what I wanted—there’s no right and wrong about it. I didn’t have some grand purpose in mind,” Yulan said.

“But you were obviously doing something you believed in.” Claudia stared

into Yulan's eyes, almost identical to his own. The shape of their eyes and the color of their eyebrows were different, but to Yulan, it still felt like looking into a mirror in a deeply uncomfortable way. Claudia's straightforwardness and beauty were both endlessly frustrating.

"Please, just tell me...why do you think I was wrong?" Claudia asked. Yulan wanted nothing to do with this. He hated the prince, and yet the prince kept getting closer. He looked at this moral, righteous man, so obsessed with doing things right, and only felt one thing.

"Disgusting," Yulan muttered.

Chapter 17:

The Flexibility of Justice

“HM...?” Claudia asked.

“It’s nothing.” Yulan’s muttered curse didn’t reach Claudia, or maybe the prince decided to ignore it. Yulan scowled as he thought about what happened the other day—he wished he could just forget. More than that, he wished he could erase the memory from Violette’s mind.

Claudia must have noticed the change in Yulan’s mood, because he suddenly seemed nervous. Despite just wanting to put all this behind him, he couldn’t leave it alone. He had to know if Claudia was really oblivious to what had happened.

“Did you do the right thing that day?” Yulan asked. Did Claudia really think he’d done right when he stepped in to help Maryjune? In a perfect world, it would’ve been an inspirational story...but that was a fairy tale.

Claudia looked even more puzzled at the question. His thoughts were clear on his face—he obviously believed he was right, and it hadn’t even occurred to him to question it until now. Maybe it was purity, or maybe just shortsightedness... maybe he was so used to only seeing the beautiful parts of life that he truly believed the world could be split neatly into good and evil. Claudia would offer protection to anyone he could. That was an uncomplicated truth in his mind—surely it was honorable and praiseworthy, right?

“When you leapt to Maryjune’s defense, were you really doing it for her?” Yulan asked.

“What are you trying to say?” Claudia’s face darkened, but Yulan couldn’t tell if it was from doubt or anger. He clearly still hadn’t grasped the point. Yulan would have to spell it out.

“When you defended her, you also shoved her into the limelight. She’s a beautiful young woman, too new to the aristocracy to have friends or allies, and now she’s grabbed the attention of the prince...every jealous suitor you have

will want to take her down.”

“That’s...” said Claudia.

“Normally, the duke bloodline would protect her...but, well, you know how they view the children of mistresses.”

Claudia sucked in a breath, but Yulan spoke first.

“You saved her once, but you also made her position much more dangerous.”

In a fairy tale, Claudia’s actions would’ve been wonderful, but that only worked if you closed the book right after.

“Even if you could go back in time and decide not to intervene, the outcome would still be the same. She’s too new to know how to conduct herself in the face of that sort of opposition,” Yulan continued. Every action has roots in the past and tendrils that worm their way into the future. Maryjune’s future was still up in the air, but judging by what Yulan saw the day before, he doubted she’d be good at handling spite or passive-aggressive barbs. Righteous declarations had their place, but aristocrats were expert backstabbers.

“When you jumped to her defense, you robbed her of a chance to learn to fend for herself in this world. The lives of nobles and commoners are more different than you realize.” As royalty, Claudia constantly thought about his subjects, tried to focus on their needs and fears, the good and the bad. But that wasn’t the same as putting himself in their shoes—he *couldn’t* fully understand.

“In the short term, you rescued her, but I wonder whether your actions will bring her more pain in the future,” Yulan sighed. He knew Claudia didn’t intend to hurt Maryjune, but he’d caused her hurt, nonetheless. Claudia had done a *good* deed, but was it *right*?

The prince bit his lip, speechless. His fist was clenched hard by his side, and an unpleasant creaking sound escaped his throat. He thought vaguely that he should stop before his nails pierced the soft skin of his palms...but the pressure was the only thing stopping awful feelings from swallowing him whole. Yulan’s words had rushed into his mind and swarmed like angry wasps in his stomach. Claudia knew he had to face this feeling, but it already felt like a blade had

buried itself in his heart.

Justice was simple and obvious, and it was easy to have faith in it, to use it to guide him. But if what Yulan said was true, justice wasn't strong, fixed steel; it was as malleable and changeable as a lump of clay. He'd always seen his form of justice as universal, but was that true? Did everyone have a personal form of justice inside them?

That was too much for Claudia. His heart was too rigid to hold such a major contradiction. He didn't have time to digest a completely different value system.

"Then...what should I do?" Claudia asked.

At the party, should he really have abandoned Maryjune to her merciless persecutors for her own sake? He just couldn't do that. Even if Yulan was right and Claudia's actions had spurred even more attacks, he couldn't turn his back on someone who needed him.

"What should I..." Claudia repeated.

He had to follow his heart. Even if Yulan was right, Claudia had to carry out his justice anyway, even if this risk of failure was greater than he realized. But this conversation hadn't given him the answer he'd hoped for—instead, it only made the question more confusing. The best way, the *right* way, was hidden, obscured by a thick haze in his mind.

What should he have done? What should he do from now on?

"Do whatever you want," said Yulan.

Chapter 18:

The Name of the World

CLAUDIA FROWNED at Yulan's dismissive words. Yulan could feel the weariness weighing him down.

"I told you. All that is just *my* opinion. You don't need to understand or agree."

"But, then...I'll stay the same," said Claudia.

"So? You don't need to have the same values as me. I have no idea what belief system will help you solve your problem." Plenty of people would've praised Claudia's actions and told Yulan he was being coldhearted, after all. There was no way to know what would have happened if Claudia hadn't intervened. Maybe facing those bullies alone would've left Maryjune scarred and depressed. There was no real way to know who was right.

"Anyway, I don't care about any of this," Yulan continued, his face projecting pure boredom, his eyes as still as a calm lake. "It's none of my business whether anything bad happens to that girl."

"Then, why...?" said Claudia, seeming shocked at the sudden change. Yulan understood—up until now, he'd been arguing that he'd harmed Maryjune. Claudia must have assumed he'd been distressed by all the possible misfortunes that could befall her.

But Maryjune wasn't even on his mind.

"I only care that you slandered Violette."

Yulan never cared what happened to others. The people in front of him could be laughing in joy or breaking down in despair; it never mattered to him. It was like hearing another country's weather forecast. Mildly interesting at best, with barely any relevance to his own life—he'd likely not notice it at all.

Violette was the only exception.

No matter how much suffering there was in the world, as long as Violette was smiling, Yulan was fine. If he had to choose between every person in the world

and Violette's happiness, he would abandon humanity for her.

He wouldn't let *anyone* hurt her.

A paper cut, a bruise she didn't remember getting, an injury so minor that Violette herself didn't care—all were too much. There was no greater crime than dampening Violette's smile.

That day, Violette's smile had been extinguished entirely.

"You refused to listen to her. You didn't have any proof, just flimsy hearsay, but you blamed her anyway," he continued.

Claudia's expression wavered.

Yulan was bitterly aware that Violette loved him like a brother, that her feelings for him were mostly protective and indulgent. In any normal circumstance, she would have been her usual resolute self; she'd straighten her back and leap to protect *him*. But that day, she'd been relieved to have his protection. She'd been *thankful* that he was there for her to rely on. That's how far she'd been driven into a corner.

"You've misunderstood Violette Rem Vahan. You saw the people who worship her, and you assumed that she was controlling them—you don't understand the *charisma* she possesses. *You* are guilty of slandering Violette, Prince Claudia." Yulan felt anger bubbling up inside him—if it had been anyone else who'd insulted Violette's good name, even Maryjune, Yulan wouldn't feel it so deeply. Claudia always got under his skin.

Yulan knew exactly how strong Violette's charisma could be. Violette was talented, beautiful, and influential. Those traits were only the surface, though—they hid and obscured her true self. Yulan saw time and time again how people projected their own selfish impressions onto her, then were disappointed when she couldn't live up to their expectations. Every time it happened, he saw how it hurt her, how it changed her little by little.

He cursed those people over and over in his mind, but he usually channeled his anger into comforting Violette. He would rather think about Violette than the lowlifes who hurt her. It was *frustrating* when the guilty party was someone he couldn't ignore.

“Just as your protection put Maryjune at the center of attention, it also drew unwanted attention toward Violette. She was publicly denounced by the *prince*,” Yulan continued. He could feel his face warp in disgust; he couldn’t swallow it down anymore. Claudia had created this enormous mess, and he didn’t even understand! Even now, hearing it laid out like this, he still wouldn’t grasp it.

Claudia would rule the country someday. His passion for justice was important, and his burning desire to do right would shield his citizens. These were admirable qualities, but they’d only take him so far. Claudia’s biggest mistake was misjudging how strong his justice really was. He didn’t understand the way his words and actions rippled out from him and changed everything.

“You’re so shortsighted. You have no idea how much influence you actually have, or how to use it. You don’t get how *heavy* your choices are.” Yulan frowned. Claudia should’ve been able to see this. Justice wasn’t just a shield, it was also a spear, and the best defense was a good offense. If he really wanted to help people, he had to figure this out. “You can’t just follow your heart and expect things to work out,” Yulan sneered.

Claudia was left speechless. Their eyes met one more time, each pair the same gold but stained with opposing feelings. It was rare for Yulan to openly show this much resentment. His doll-like stiffness gone and his heart laid bare, he must seem like a totally different person.

Claudia swallowed and took a step back.

“I don’t care about you,” Yulan began, “and my thoughts don’t require your approval. Forget all of this...except Violette. You’d better not forget about her.” He came closer, outright dismissing etiquette, closing the distance between them in two long steps. Claudia was tall, but Yulan towered over him, and his eyes were as cold and emotionless as glass.

Then, the corners of Yulan’s mouth crept upwards, plastering a fake smile on his face that only highlighted the blankness of his eyes.

“I won’t forgive anyone who hurts Vio. *Anyone*,” said Yulan. Claudia froze. Yulan’s usual lighthearted attitude was gone; something had reached his indifferent heart.

“So, are we done? You ate up my time, so I have to hurry,” said Yulan. He was already calculating how long it would take to find Violette and lamenting how much of lunch this talk had wasted.

“Yulan—” Claudia called, his voice defeated but still hoping to reach an understanding. He reached out to grab Yulan’s arm, but before Claudia’s fingers could reach him, Yulan stopped.

It had nothing to do with Claudia’s entreaty.

“Vio...?” Yulan whispered.

Chapter 19:

The One Who Inherited Gold

UP AHEAD, Claudia saw Violette hurrying away. Even at this distance, he could see the panic on her face.

“Oh...!” he breathed. Claudia was slow to act—Yulan had already leapt to action the moment he saw her rushing off. He brushed past the prince’s outstretched hand, his blank expression already replaced with concern for Violette.

Claudia was frozen. He could tell there was something wrong with Violette, but even if he rushed after her, he didn’t know what he could do. Normally he’d charge right in and *make* it his problem, but...now he felt the full weight of that responsibility, and it stuck his feet firmly to the ground.

Everything Yulan had said...it wasn’t that he didn’t *know* all of that in some way, it’s just that he’d always believed that if he did things right, everything would work out. For now, though, caution might be a smarter move.

Looking back, he did see that he’d been wrong to turn on Violette so quickly. A normal person would reflect on his actions and learn from his mistakes. But Claudia wasn’t allowed failure and reflection. Royalty couldn’t acknowledge failure, and regrets were pointless. It wasn’t that a prince could never be wrong, it was that it was their duty to turn failure into success. The king had to be the most prudent of anyone.

That was the royal burden. Claudia’s burden.

Did Yulan know?

Did Yulan really know how much responsibility lay on the shoulders of the king and his heir? Claudia was right in the middle of it, but he always felt like he only saw the surface, not the depths of what he should understand. As always, Yulan had outthought him.

“Hah...” Claudia’s voice drooped. He covered his face with a clammy hand. He

must've been more nervous in front of Yulan than he'd realized.

Claudia and Yulan couldn't be more opposite. Their faces, physiques, hair color and texture—all different. The only similarity was their eyes—and Claudia cursed that one bit of sameness. Both of their eyes shone with soft brilliance, like liquid gold, a hue that was a symbol of royalty. People said that anyone possessing those eyes would inherit the throne. People expected the world from anyone whose eyes contained that golden light.

As the golden-eyed, pure-blooded son of the king, Claudia was destined to rule. He'd never questioned that—it was set before his birth. But he knew that didn't mean he was superior in all aspects. Whenever he faced Yulan, rain poured on a seed of doubt, and it was finally starting to sprout. He couldn't help but question his destiny.

Was Yulan better suited to the throne?

If Claudia asked him, Yulan would laugh scornfully, or maybe ignore him outright. He wouldn't stop to understand how Claudia felt. Claudia almost wished Yulan would just come out and say that he wasn't fit to rule; then, finally, he could drag his feelings of inferiority out in the open and deal with them. After all, the only differences between them were a couple of years and blood purity.

"Claudia...?" a voice said behind him. Claudia gasped, caught off guard.

Milania approached, out of breath. He had a harried, impatient look on his face, very unlike his usual calm attitude.

"Mila, what's the matter?" Claudia asked.

"Have you seen Mademoiselle Violette?"

"Huh...?"

Violette's panicked expression flashed in his mind. Now Milania wore the same expression. It made sense that Yulan tore after her, but why would Milania be searching for her, too? He knew Milania and Violette were acquainted, but they'd never been friendly.

Everyone knew that Violette was in love with Claudia; she'd broadcast it just

like the rest of the girls who hovered around him. She was the strong, assertive type, less modest than many of the others, but her behavior never fully crossed the line. Still, Milania had a particular distaste for Violette's abrasive self-assertion and usually avoided her.

"It's unusual for you to talk about her," Claudia added.

"I guess so..."

"Did...something happen?"

"I was talking to Mademoiselle Violette, but she suddenly—"

Milania began to fill him in, though he stumbled through his explanation, struggling to find the right words. By the time he finished, Claudia had decided what to do.

"Let's go. There's no time," said Claudia, marching past him.

"Huh...? Ah, hey...!" Milania called as he passed.

Claudia tried to imagine what he was walking into. He had some guesses based on Milania's story, but he'd learned the other day not to jump to conclusions. No matter what Yulan said, though, he couldn't accept that he should stand aside. Offering aid and protection to those who needed it was still his nature. It was also the right thing to do.

So he'd keep walking this path, but he'd be more careful. He couldn't assume that his instincts would lead him to the right conclusions, so he had to *learn*. There was so much he still didn't know about people.

He had to find the truth and solve the problems he created, even if it meant looking his mistake right in the eye.

Chapter 20:

Changing Our Dark Past Should Be Easy, Right?

VIOLETTE KNEW that leaving in the middle of a conversation wasn't very polite. She'd skipped some of the aristocratic niceties—tradition could be so *annoying*—but she'd at least managed the bare minimum. Milania seemed like a laid-back person who didn't care much about the details, but she wasn't sure; she could only hope she hadn't offended him and created another problem to untangle later.

But there was a more important issue at hand.

This is such a bad idea...

Outside the window, Violette spotted a flash of a beautiful iridescent pearl color, immaculate white like the pure heart of the one who wore it. She knew that color. She'd seen it beside her at breakfast that morning.

"Give me a break..." Violette muttered.

She should have pretended she hadn't seen the pearl figure surrounded by a crowd of other swatches of color. But if those girls were bullying Maryjune again on her behalf, and if Maryjune finally decided to tell their father...just imagining it made her cringe. Her father didn't believe in justice like Claudia; he believed that Maryjune was right and Violette was wrong. Any reaction he had would be a hundred times more vicious than Claudia's intervention at the tea party.

She could shrug off the pain of words, but she was still young enough to need a guardian. Her house was already suffocating enough; he might punish her by forcing her to go straight home after school. If she had to spend any more time there, it would strangle her.

Worrying about her skirt slowed her down, as usual. She was confident in her strong legs from her mother's training, but she no longer had a chance to really use them. She knew if she started exercising again, Marin would praise her; she'd call Violette beautiful no matter how wild or muscular she became. But

the aristocracy, and most importantly her father, didn't want that for her. They wanted to see a fair, delicate lady.

None of them saw how much discipline maintaining the current Violette took. As a young child, she'd been forced to live as a boy for as long as she could remember. Then, after so many years, they expected her to suddenly become a perfect lady.

"Why is this school so *big*?!" she huffed, the words spilling out involuntarily as she hurried along. She'd thought many times that the school and grounds were ridiculous for such a small student body, but now she really *felt* it as she rushed across the garden, unable to run.

"Where did she go...?"

Violette had seen Maryjune surrounded by a few people in the courtyard...but when she finally made it out there, roughly ten minutes later, they were nowhere to be found. She couldn't hear voices anywhere nearby, just the faint rustle of the wind through the flowers of the garden. Normally, a calm, quiet garden would make her smile, but now it just made her nervous.

Had they already gone back to their classrooms? Violette doubted it. She knew searching recklessly would just be a waste of time, though. She pulled herself together and stopped to breathe. She knew where she might find a clue—in the memories of her past life. She'd wanted to forget them all, but at a time like this, they might be useful.

Her past self had surrounded Maryjune with a group of girls, taunted her, and eventually resorted to violence. It was more than schoolgirl bullying, it was unmistakably criminal. But that wasn't important right now—the important part was *where*. She knew what kind of places she'd chosen, deserted and inconspicuous. Somewhere dark would've been ideal, or off campus, but that wouldn't be an option during lunchtime. Then they'd probably moved into the shadow of the school building...

"There...?"

The place Violette thought of was familiar—she'd once bullied Maryjune there herself. She'd hoped she'd never have to set foot there again. Was this destiny?

She made her way there stealthily, a skill from her mother's training that she'd never expected to actually use. She strained her ears so she wouldn't miss a single sound.

Soon she heard it: the voice she was searching for and hoped she wouldn't hear.

"To think that a mere *mistress* would become the second wife just like that... what a harlot," someone said.

"Mother's not like that...!" Maryjune cried.

Chapter 21:

Please Learn How to Leave It Alone

MARYJUNE'S TREMBLING VOICE was completely different from her spirited talk that morning. She stood up well to their taunts, but she couldn't fully hide her fear and humiliation.

"What do you know?! You don't understand anything!" Maryjune yelled. She pulled herself to her full height and held her chin up; she looked like a heroine from a novel. "You should be ashamed of yourselves, ganging up on someone like this!"

"What was that...? You need to learn your place!"

"My *place*?! My birth and status have nothing to do with this! Thinking they're important is just closed-minded!" Violette listened as the fight continued, her already-frayed wits quickly unraveling. At least they hadn't gotten violent yet.

This is the worst...

Maryjune was giving Violette a headache. She couldn't blame the girl for standing up for herself, but she was going about this all wrong. She still had a commoner's mindset; declaring that her birth and status weren't important gave it away. Of course prejudice and discrimination were unacceptable—ridiculing someone for something they couldn't change showed an ugly, narrow mind. But judging others on their birth and status was a necessary skill for an aristocrat. Of *course* it was important.

"You're all *wrong*!" Maryjune proclaimed righteously.

If she were just an ordinary high school student, not a Vahan, she would've been a true heroine of justice. She fought through her fear, stood up to bullies, and lived by her idealistic beliefs. That should have been the end.

But Maryjune was no longer just a girl.

"What do you think you're doing?" Violette interrupted.

“Violette?!” Maryjune cried.

Violette stepped forward before Maryjune could make any more proclamations. Five people surrounded her; although the scene was painfully familiar, Violette was relieved that she didn’t recognize any of them. As she stepped forward, all of them went pale. They knew they were in trouble.

“Lady Violette...um, this is...” one tried to explain.

“Do you have some thoughts about the Vahan family you’d like to share?” Violette asked.

“Ah...!”

Violette unfolded her hands and put her finger to her cheek, pretending to be genuinely curious. She knew that this would be the best way to shake them. She exaggerated the motion like it was the strange, perfect movement of a doll. A cold-blooded imitation would have a bigger impact than human warmth. She didn’t need to smile or get angry. An emotionless question would be read as a threat.

“It seems that you all have opinions about our family’s recent circumstances. I’d ask you not to concern yourselves with them.” Violette walked slowly toward Maryjune until she was standing right in front of the shorter girl. Since she was taller, she cut off their line of sight—all they could see was Violette’s darkened face, devoid of emotion, staring them down. It was uncannily like an unblinking mannequin.

“Maryjune is a descendant of the Vahan family, daughter of Duke Vahan. I can guarantee her birth and status,” Violette continued.

That should be clear; she’d legitimized Maryjune’s status as plainly as she could. If telling people not to interfere with other people’s families actually worked, Violette wouldn’t have had to go to all this trouble. Mistresses were tolerated but not accepted, and setting this precedent for a child of a mistress would be controversial at the very least. If only her father wasn’t so naïve...well, if it took one intervention to make sure he kept ignoring her, it was worth it.

“B-but Lady Violette, this girl—!”

“I’m sorry, was something I said unclear?” Violette interrupted.

“Ngh! I-I apologize...!” One of the girls stepped forward and forced out a few words; when Violette tilted her head and shot her a look, the girl trailed off and bowed, all color drained from her face. Violette thought she’d probably made her point...but if this nail wasn’t hammered properly, everything would collapse. It was worth taking an extra moment to make sure this wouldn’t happen again.

“Then, I would call this conversation *over*. Do you agree?”

“Y-yes...!” the girls chorused. All their fire and energy had been syphoned off, and they drifted slowly away from the group one by one. When the last of them was gone, she finally turned to her half sister.

“Violette...thank you so much,” said Maryjune. They were so close they were almost touching, and Maryjune clearly wanted to reach out for a hug; the euphoria of gratitude was clear on her face. She always expressed her happiness with her entire body. She was the kind of person everyone naturally wanted to protect.

Violette felt a stab of guilt at those eyes—they never doubted that she’d come to her rescue. But if Violette let this go, Maryjune would get into the same mess again and again.

“Maryjune,” said Violette.

“Yes, Violette?!”

“I was asking you the same question.”

“Huh...?”

“What did you think you were doing?”

Chapter 22:

Types of Righteousness

“WH-WHAT...?” Maryjune stammered, her smile frozen as confusion gripped her. Her gaze wavered as she tried to understand, but she couldn’t parse her sister’s statement.

“I heard a bit of what they were saying to you, and your response,” said Violette.

Maryjune’s head tilted in bewilderment; she still had no idea what Violette was talking about. Her expression was just like Claudia’s. She shared his absolute certainty that he knew right from wrong. They were both pure and simple, like children. If they were normal people, raised lovingly as commoners by gentle parents, everyone would praise their goodness.

“Refrain from responding that way in the future,” Violette said flatly.

“Huh? *Why*...? That’s—!” said Maryjune.

“No matter what they say, you are an aristocrat. Arguing is beneath you.”

“It’s so strange that you’re bringing up status, too...”

“It’s not strange.” Violette had to nip that idea in the bud. The skill to smile and sidestep no matter what she encountered would be vital to Maryjune’s future. No matter who her mother was, Vahan blood ran in her veins; and since Violette would never be head of the household, the family belonged to Maryjune. Violette couldn’t let her sister keep thinking like a commoner.

Understanding the commoner mind was a useful skill for an aristocrat to have, but that was different from lowering oneself to sympathize with them. *That* was pure naïveté.

“Learn your place, Maryjune. You are already a lady of the Vahan household. Every action you take reflects on you and your family.”

She couldn’t tell if Maryjune understood; this might backfire terribly. If Maryjune took her instructive criticism as more bullying, she’d see her as no better than the girls from before. The commoner view on social status was so

different it was difficult to bridge this gap.

“What do you mean, ‘know your place’? Are you saying my *place* is to smile at people who say such terrible things...?!” Maryjune retorted.

The grief in her voice awakened old memories in Violette. Could this difficult kindness end up harming Maryjune even worse than the direct attacks she’d tried the first time? But if she couldn’t get through to Maryjune, the girl would never learn. And, frankly, Violette didn’t have it in her to rescue Maryjune over and over. Violette had sworn to atone to Maryjune, not protect her from every dumb situation she got herself into. Maryjune would have to learn how to be an aristocrat.

“If so, then you’re wrong, too!” Maryjune cried.

Violette cringed internally, though of course it wouldn’t show on her face. She’d desperately hoped that Maryjune would understand, but the younger girl was too *good*. She opened up to others, corrected her wrongs, and forgave mistakes—unique among the nobility. Violette was stunned that they could share a father and still turn out so different.

Maryjune took no responsibility for her straightforward declarations or the problems they might cause. Someday soon, the reality of the aristocracy would crush her irresponsible sense of justice.

“You’re right, Maryjune,” Violette stated. The words put a smile back on Maryjune’s face; her whole face lit up with it. Violette didn’t know if there was anything as beautiful as the reflection of the world in Maryjune’s unclouded, sparkling smile. And Violette meant what she said; Maryjune was right.

“But is anyone who disagrees with you evil?” Violette continued.

The world had more than one form of justice.

Chapter 23:

Maryjune Vahan

“**H**UH...?” Maryjune whispered. She froze, confused by the unexpected question. Was someone who disagreed with her sense of right and wrong...evil? Violette could practically hear her thinking it through.

“They aren’t, are they? There are people out there who believe in a different sort of justice than you do. They think they’re doing the right thing. They don’t consider themselves evil.”

The enemy of justice was another form of justice. Both could be right, both could be mistaken, but no one could truly decide right and wrong while everyone had their own perspective.

“But...we aristocrats are different. We are in a position to decide, and our decisions can change the world,” Violette continued.

The declarations of nobles held a different weight. Rejecting another aristocrat’s beliefs was the same as rejecting that person, even their entire family. How would people view Maryjune when she loudly proclaimed that her accusers were cruel, and that the common beliefs of the nobility were wrong? If Maryjune claimed to always be on the side of right and good, then anyone she fought with was cast as evil. But arguments weren’t inherently wrong. People needed conflict to understand each other. If they got angry, it was only proof that their beliefs were worth caring about.

“Think, and conduct yourself more carefully. Think about the responsibility that comes with everything you say.” Nobles had advantages beyond the wildest dreams of the general population, but those benefits came with a vital duty that they could never forget.

“Keep your mind open. Even compromise if you see a way. But if you can’t do that, wear a smile on your face while cursing them in your heart.” Judging someone’s opinion as *wrong* could be the end of an argument. But cutting out anyone who disagreed...well, that would leave her all alone in the end.

Impulsiveness would crush Maryjune one day. She needed to polish her mind into a weapon and be prepared to wield it—to be a rose with hidden thorns.

“You don’t need to love your neighbor. Just let them be,” said Violette. “You’re Maryjune Vahan after all.” Status was inescapable, and now that Maryjune bore the name, she couldn’t run away. It didn’t matter how much her father loved her, how much he protected her like a princess, she would have to stand on her own.

Maryjune was silent. Violette wasn’t sure what her half sister was thinking, or whether the lecture was sinking in, but Maryjune didn’t object, or cry, or scold Violette for being heartless. She’d said her piece; the rest was up to Maryjune.

“Excuse me,” said Violette.

If she stayed, she’d just get in the way of Maryjune’s thoughts, so she turned and walked back to the bright, empty courtyard.

Well, almost empty.

“Welcome back.”

“Yulan...!” He was leaning against the wall and waving at her. His eyes shone bright in the sunlight, and his cheerful smile lit up the courtyard. He stepped toward her and touched her hair with a gentle hand.

“Your hair’s cold.”

“Yes...I was in the shade,” said Violette. Yulan’s hand was warm from the sun; he must have been waiting here a while. He’d likely overheard her whole conversation with Maryjune. She should’ve chosen a more secluded spot.

“Yulan...” Violette began.

“Hm?”

“It’s...nothing. What are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you. I thought we could have lunch together.” He’d definitely heard the whole conversation, but he was pretending he didn’t, probably because he’d rather talk about more pleasant things. His smiling face was as adorable as ever, no matter how tall he got.

They turned to walk inside. She'd never realized until her trip back in time how he always matched his pace with hers. He was a full head taller, with much longer legs; he should have left her behind easily every time they walked together. But he always stayed at her side.

"There isn't much time left. Why didn't you eat first?" Violette asked.

"I wanted to eat with *you*."

"We hadn't even planned to meet up—what if you missed lunch entirely?"

"Right, I'll be sure to find you faster next time!"

"That's not what I'm saying." Violette puffed out her cheeks in frustration, unguarded. After all the tension, her mind was exhausted. It was so much easier to relax and act sisterly around Yulan, even though she'd just left her actual blood half sister. Like Marin, Yulan made her feel relaxed, like she was wrapped up in a duvet made of the ocean.

That was why she didn't notice the golden-haired figure hiding in the shadows. Maryjune scowled, red-cheeked, at Violette's departing back.

Chapter 24:

Contradictory People

IN THE END, Violette and Yulan missed most of their lunch break. They had a few minutes to sit together, but she didn't have time to eat much, more of a snack than a meal.

She didn't really mind, for herself—it wasn't much less than she usually ate, and it was her fault they were late, anyway. But Yulan had grown so big, and he needed a lot of food to fuel a body that size. She hoped he'd be able to concentrate during afternoon classes. She worried about him all afternoon—though she managed to take proper notes at the same time.

I wonder if he has free time now...

As she stuffed her notebooks and textbooks into her bag, she thought about Yulan, or more precisely, about Yulan's stomach. She wanted to treat him to something, but she didn't know if he already had plans. She should have asked at lunch. Yulan was so bright, calm, and good at making others feel good; he must have mountains of friends. Asking him to waste his after-school hours on her would make her feel extremely guilty.

Guess I'll just...stop by his classroom.

Yulan was a first-year, which meant Violette was heading right into Maryjune's territory. Showing up there would be like dropping a lit match into oil—the second-years had gotten over the rumors by now, but things were clearly different among Maryjune's classmates. She'd heard that Yulan and Maryjune weren't in the same class, but she'd still need to walk past her classroom on the way.

If it gets too noisy...I'll just go home, Violette told herself.

She wouldn't let circumstances ruin her plans, but she also wasn't impulsive enough to charge in blindly. It never hurt to have an escape plan.

"Lady Violette, goodbye," said a classmate.

“Yes, farewell,” Violette replied as she left the room.

Violette had entered the high school section of Tanzanite Academy a little over a year ago. The classrooms were spacious, connected by wide hallways with tall ceilings, spread out over the large building. In such a massive building, there were still many classrooms she’d never set foot in.

Yulan’s classroom was one of those; Violette’s class last year had been elsewhere. Even though they were on the same floor, she’d never made the trek down to this room.

And this was another first for Violette. Since they started attending the same school, she’d never gone to visit him in his classroom.

I’ve let him spoil me.

Back in middle school, Yulan had visited her so often that she hardly had a chance to reciprocate, though she felt guilty that she’d never tried. Now, she didn’t want to invite rumors—an upperclassman daughter of a duke visiting a first-year boy might make people talk. Also, school was her only safe haven from Maryjune, so she didn’t want to risk running into her. But those were weak excuses. She shouldn’t have let them stop her for so long.

She tried to muster her courage; after a long, difficult school day, her motivation was low. Despite her determination, her feet dragged. As she made her way toward the first-year wing, she passed by numerous students; her attempt to wait until the classroom had mostly emptied was futile.

“I’m here,” Violette said to herself.

She peeked through the classroom door and saw a few people, but the tall silhouette she’d hoped to find was nowhere to be seen.

“Maybe he left,” she muttered. The mostly empty classroom implied that Yulan had probably headed home. After taunting him for not making plans, she probably deserved this. With a sigh, she turned to leave.

“A visitor?” someone said from behind her.

Violette gasped in surprise.

Someone inside the classroom must have noticed her; she was completely exposed. She turned automatically. The first thing that caught her attention was the speaker's tanned skin, several shades darker than the pale color most common in Duralia. Then she took in the full picture—the young man's bouncing silver hair, large eyes, and sweet expression. His rolled-up sleeves exposed muscular bare arms. He'd probably seem short next to Yulan, but he was still taller than average. And even just standing there, he seemed livelier than the average young lord of the academy.

"Need something from our class? Or are you looking for someone?" he asked.

"Y-yes..." said Violette. He clearly wasn't the type to shy away from strangers, and he didn't seem to have an ulterior motive. She was just thinking that she probably didn't need to be so guarded when he suddenly closed the distance between them—she instinctually stepped back.

Still, he was willing to talk to her, so she wanted to take advantage. If Yulan had already gone home, he seemed like he'd tell her, hopefully without too much trouble.

"I'm looking for Yulan Cugurs. Has he already left for the day?" Violette asked.

"Yulan?" The boy seemed more surprised than suspicious. His eyes wandered for a moment like he was thinking, then he seemed to realize something and opened his mouth.

"Are you Violette, by any chance?" he asked.

"Huh...?" she said.

His question was so sudden that she forgot to nod. She was sure she'd never met this boy before. He didn't seem to notice Violette's bewilderment, just nodded several times to himself.

"Just like he said... No wonder he's so protective," he said.

"Um...have we met before?" Violette asked.

"Heh, sorry. Must be awful having a stranger know your name."

"It's not so bad."

He threw back his head and let out a loud laugh. His laughter reminded her of

the sun, but in a different way. If Yulan was a warm, perfect day, then this boy was the blazing sunlight of everlasting summer. He wasn't malicious, but you could still be burned in his presence.

"Gia Forte. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Violette Rem Vahan. But it seems you already know that."

"Yulan talks about you all the time. Even if we're just meeting, it feels like I already know you."

"Yulan talks...?"

"Yeah, we've been friends since middle school."

Violette was stunned. Gia spoke so casually about Yulan that they had to be close. The whole concept of friendship was foreign to Violette, friendship between boys even more so, but she knew one thing—she was so happy that her precious childhood friend had someone he was so close to.

"He shouldn't have gone home yet. He's not here?" Gia asked.

"No, it doesn't seem so."

"Maybe a teacher sent him on an errand. He should be back soon—do you want to wait?"

"No, it's fine. We didn't have plans. I'll be going." She appreciated his consideration, but the thought of sitting in this strange classroom and waiting made her anxiety spike. For all she knew, Maryjune was nearby. She'd made a mistake, and she had to go.

"Can you pass along a message for me?" Violette asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"Can you tell him...I'm sorry for today, and I'll make up for it later?"

"I shall deliver this vital message, I swear upon my life!" Gia held a hand to his heart and gave an exaggerated bow, shooting her a big, goofy grin.

"Thanks."

Even if her mission was a failure, Violette was glad she'd gotten to meet Yulan's friend. She'd been close to Yulan since they were young, and he always

went out of his way to spend time with her. Seeing that he had his own friends and a full life outside her made her happy. She knew she'd influenced him as he grew up, and she was glad that he hadn't followed in her antisocial footsteps. He was the closest friend she had, but maybe he'd outgrow her soon.

Imagining that made her lonely, but she made herself focus on being happy for him. No matter what happened, he'd have a circle of precious friends around him.

The thought made her smile as she made her way toward the school exit...but it was a mistake to let her guard down before she was safely off campus.

"Violette," a voice called out to her. She turned and saw the speaker.

"Prince Claudia..."

"May I have a bit of your time?"

Violette's good mood evaporated; there was no way she could refuse the prince's request. Claudia's serious expression gave her an idea of what awaited her.

Chapter 25:

Please Forget About It

VIOLETTE FOLLOWED CLAUDIA with her mouth shut tight. He led her to an ornate door, fancy even by the standards of this showy academy. This was a room meant for the student council president and the son of the king. The door opened to reveal an interior that was just as luxurious as she'd imagined.

"Something to drink?" Claudia asked.

"Black tea with milk, please."

"Of course." Claudia nodded to a butler who'd been on standby; the man bowed and left the room.

This was the student council's salon; beyond another door was a room off-limits to everyone but student council members and teachers. For safety and privacy, even the staff were vetted before being allowed to serve there. It was their sanctuary; student council members were always at the center of attention, so they jealously protected the place where they could relax away from the constant scrutiny. A lowly normal student like Violette could only enter this salon as Claudia's personal guest.

"Please, take a seat," said Claudia.

"Thank you," said Violette. Claudia had already sat down, so she chose a spot on a plush sofa across from him, surrounded by soft, red pillows. The softness that enveloped her made her feel a little more secure—for a moment, she almost forgot she was inside the academy. She smoothed her skirt so it wouldn't wrinkle.

After a few moments of silence, the faint clatter of a service cart approached. The scent of sweet milk and coffee wafted in.

"Please leave until I call for you," Claudia told the butler. The man bowed silently and left.

The butler's stoic expression felt artificial and slightly unsettling, but it was a

normal look for servants in places where they might overhear secrets. In the crowded cafeteria, the staff were all smiles, but in this private salon, they tried to act like they weren't even there.

The room was silent except for the sounds of their breathing. Violette's heart thudded in her ears, and she could almost feel the blood draining from her fingertips, leaving them cold and stiff. She wrapped her hands around her cup of milk tea, not trusting her fingers to hold it more delicately, and savored the steaming warmth. Her mouth was dry from nerves, but just breathing in the steam made her feel calmer.

Strangely, Claudia also seemed nervous. He took a sip of his coffee, returned the cup to his saucer, then turned his gaze to her.

"Thank you for speaking with me on such short notice."

"No need. I would never be put out by a request from the prince." She couldn't refuse a request from him *at all*, not unless she had an extremely good reason and couched it in the politest language she could manage. Turning him down, even for some inconsequential request he made in passing, was impossible, even for a noble like Violette.

Past Violette would have been ecstatic to go somewhere private with Claudia, and she would have probably followed him joyfully, oblivious to any embarrassment she caused. That mindset felt so foreign to her now, like her memories came from a completely different person.

Then, she remembered what her past self had *said*.

It was ancient history for the current Violette, but for Claudia, some of this had happened just weeks ago. He couldn't know how much she'd changed. To him, she was the same difficult, pushy girl who'd forced her feelings on him and made things so *terribly* awkward.

This talk could go so much worse than she realized. She tried her best to swallow down her fear and keep her mask of polite calm from slipping.

"You really are different," said Claudia.

"...Huh?" said Violette.

She'd been braced for the worst, but Claudia's voice was unexpectedly gentle, and he wore a bittersweet smile. This was so different from the sharp looks and annoyed tone he usually took with her. He seemed troubled, but there was relief and understanding in his expression, too.

"You...don't have feelings for me anymore," Claudia said.

In the past, everything Violette said to Claudia had an ulterior motive. She'd jockeyed for favor with his other suitors, jealous if he seemed to like anyone else, and eagerly searching his words for the slightest sign that he preferred her. It made her nauseous just remembering how she'd acted.

Love was her excuse, but she'd never really wanted Claudia. She was an empty vessel who thought love would fill her, and she'd chosen Claudia as a convenient target for her obsession. From his perspective, she must've seemed like a selfish monster— an enemy he had to constantly guard against. And yet...

"You stopped speaking to me so suddenly, I'd assumed you were scheming behind my back. It wasn't until later that I heard about your family's...situation." Claudia said carefully. "When I saw you at the tea party, I thought the worst. I made a terrible assumption and declared it as fact in front of a crowd. But I was swayed by my own prejudices. I...had no right to preach justice to you like that."

Claudia stood, and Violette's gaze followed him. Suddenly, in her vision, his piercing eyes disappeared, replaced by the whorl of his golden hair.

Violette sucked in a breath. He was *bowing* to her.

"I apologize. I am deeply sorry," Claudia said, still bent over in an apologetic bow.

"Wh-what are you...?!" This didn't make *sense*! The apology was shocking enough, but for the crown prince to bow his head to *anyone*...

"Please raise your head! What if someone sees you like this...?!" Violette stammered.

Royalty *couldn't* apologize to anyone below them. This practice might upset those who believed in equality, but it was necessary. An apology from royalty wasn't just words—it was an admission that they weren't fit to lead. To protect the legitimacy of the royal family, anyone who received such an apology would

have to be punished.

Violette would be punished.

Claudia had to know this; no matter how oblivious he'd been to things outside his narrow point of view, he should at least understand the significance of lowering his head. If he didn't, he wasn't fit to be king.

"Relax," he said, probably sensing her discomfort. "No one will know what happens within these walls."

"I...I suppose so..." *Violette* said. This *was* the most private room in school, with perfect soundproofing and only open to those with the highest rank. She calmed slightly.

"Once you leave this room, you can forget this—and I'll do the same. I'm not asking to be forgiven. We can act like it never happened."

Then what was the point of all this—of doing something to forget it? If he didn't care about forgiveness, he didn't want to communicate remorse, regret, or guilt, then *what*? It seemed crude and frivolous, but *Violette* knew Claudia well enough to know that he was always serious, always spoke from his heart.

Claudia looked at *Violette*; she still seemed troubled, but she was calm, at least. Apologizing like this might be foolish, but it was important to him.

He knew he couldn't erase what had happened, or even apologize publicly. If he took Yulan's anger to heart, there wouldn't be a next time for him to make right; he would avoid conflicts with *Violette* entirely. He considered doing nothing and just waiting for everything to pass. Maybe that was the best move, but it nagged at him.

Even if he couldn't own up to his mistake, maybe he could ease *Violette*'s heart, just a little. And, if he was being honest, his own. He'd thrown around false accusations and made her life worse. He desperately wanted to make that right somehow.

Maybe this was a stupid idea. Maybe he was just provoking Yulan's wrath again. Still, he wouldn't back down. He knew that this apology, private and

worthless as it was, was the right thing to do.

“Please know...I understand now how I erred,” he continued. “I, and *only* I, was wrong that day.”

He’d hurt Violette once by mistake. He needed to be clear, both to her and to himself, that he wouldn’t do it again.

Violette wasn’t sure whether she imagined it, but when Claudia raised his head, he looked a little lighter, like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

But I was the one who didn’t understand...

Violette’s past self never bothered to understand anyone; all she cared about was healing her own mountain of pain. She’d created an ideal Claudia in her mind and tried to force it to exist. It would’ve been fine if she’d just daydreamed about him, but she’d let her crush affect the real world. She’d been delusional.

Violette started it all.

He’d assumed the worst of her because her past actions proved she deserved it. She’d been falsely accused, yes, but she certainly wasn’t innocent. But Claudia still bowed his head to her. He apologized, not to ask for forgiveness, but to ease any harm he caused. He was an entirely earnest person—straightforward, sincere, and even a little foolish. One day, the world they lived in would break him.

She’d never again imagine the perfect future she’d tried to force on him. It was a lie and a dream. She wanted the happiness she saw around Claudia and tried to use love as a stepping-stone to take it for herself. Claudia had seen Violette’s true nature—too ugly to call love, too corrupt to call affection. Her feelings had been deeply selfish and impure. And yet...

I...loved that side of you.

Prince Claudia was kind, sincere and straightforward...ridiculous, foolish, and shortsighted. He lived by his code no matter what happened. The person she’d fallen for was a flat, imagined version of this real, flawed human being.

But still, Claudia was the first person Violette had ever loved.

Chapter 26:

Joyful Smile

“THANK YOU VERY MUCH for today,” said Violette as they left the salon. As she stepped outside, it was like time started moving again—every second in that room had felt like a hundred years.

“No, I’m the one who took up your time,” said Claudia.

“Still...the tea was delicious.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

It was a safe conversation. Everything that happened in that room would be stored in their hearts, secret from the world. It was late; there was nothing left to do on campus but go home. That meant that they were inevitably heading in the same direction, toward the single gate. They had to go together—an awkward conversation would be nothing compared to one strangely tailing the other.

So they made their way through the expansive campus, each making occasional empty comments, then lapsing into silence. Although their talk had cleared some things up, it didn’t erase Violette’s bad behavior before her do-over, or Claudia’s mistrust

and caution. Finally, the exit gate came into view—Violette could feel the tension leaving her shoulders, and she thought she sensed the same from Claudia.

She turned to bid him farewell, skirt swishing around her ankles, when someone called her name.

“Vio...!”

Yulan called out to Violette in delight, but his mood crashed the moment he noticed her companion. He knew his expression twisted a little, but he was certain he’d balanced it so it would read as a scowl to Claudia and a smile to

Violette. He wanted to keep up the façade for her.

“Yulan, why are you here?” Violette asked.

“Gia...er, my friend, said you were looking for me. The Vahan family’s car was here, so I thought I could meet you if I waited.”

“Oh, him...if he gave you my message, then you know it didn’t have to be today.”

“I just wanted to wait for you.” She’d come to see him, after all. He wasn’t about to let this chance slip past him. He’d been hunting for her since not long after she’d left his classroom—another student had sent him on a wild goose chase for a while. He was lucky he’d caught her before she left. It all worked out perfectly in the end—except for one inconvenient stain.

“So, why is Prince Claudia here?” Yulan asked.

“I...” stammered Claudia.

Yulan’s sweetness vanished when he turned his gaze to the prince. It felt liberating to treat the prince with such disrespect, even if it was a small, pointless rebellion—he wouldn’t be reprimanded for a sour expression. Violette didn’t know about their conversation, and he aimed to keep it that way—but now Claudia seemed to have a secret, too.

Yulan felt hate twist in his stomach. He couldn’t stand seeing them together.

“We ran into each other, and he treated me to some tea. That’s all,” said Violette.

“I...see,” Yulan said carefully. She was *lying* to him. If Claudia had offered such a flimsy excuse, Yulan would be poking holes in it already. But he wouldn’t grill Violette like that. “I...was just surprised to see the two of you together. But... good for you, Vio.”

“Yes.” Violette turned back to Claudia. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“I was happy to invite you,” Claudia said. Despite the polite, almost gentle words, the atmosphere was tingling and tense with everything unspoken. Yulan wished he could express himself plainly, instead of hiding behind the grin plastered on his face.

“Anyway, I guess I shouldn’t invite you today, then...” Yulan said.

“Huh?”

“I thought we could take a detour on the way home, but we can do it another time.” His smile didn’t change, but he could tell that disappointment had crept into his voice—Violette seemed to hear it, too.

When Yulan heard that Violette wanted to apologize, he thought it was his chance. He was confident that she wouldn’t refuse an invitation, but at the same time, he knew she’d have an easier time agreeing if it felt like she was doing him a favor. If he could have met up with her a little earlier, he could have executed his plan on the spot, but if they left now, there wouldn’t be enough time.

“What about tomorrow...?” she said, apologetic. “If you’re free, we could meet up after school. How does that sound?”

“No plans could *ever* take precedence over you,” Yulan countered.

“What are you saying...?”

Yulan let his face go serious, but puffed up his chest in mock heroism. Violette’s face broke into a slight smile—not her rare, true smile, but a tiny private amusement and affection just for him.

Claudia had always seen Violette as a highborn lady who abused the influence and assets at her disposal. That flicker of honest emotion was a surprise. He’d never seen her smile like that—not out of politeness, not as a tactic or a way to appear more beautiful, but tender and unguarded. He’d never known she could smile like that. Was that her true nature? Or...was it because she was with Yulan?

“Then I’ll pick you up after school tomorrow!” Yulan exclaimed.

“I can just meet you at the school gate if it’s too much trouble—”

“I want to pick you up. What, you don’t want me to?”

“Fine, fine. Do what you like.”

“Great! Thanks!”

Watching their cheerful back-and-forth, Yulan’s goofy antics and Violette’s indulgent amusement, was like nothing Claudia had ever seen before. It was... strangely calming, seeing them so comfortable with each other.

“All right. We should head home—it’s getting late.” Violette turned to Claudia once more. “I’ll be taking my leave, Your Highness.”

“Oh...yes, of course. Take care.”

“Thank you very much.” Violette’s cloud-gray eyes were as lifeless as a doll’s when she looked at Claudia. This was her normal expression, at least as he’d seen it in the past... Where had that bright, lively silver sparkle come from, and where did it go?

Claudia watched Violette’s retreat, speechless.

“You overlooked her,” said Yulan.

“Gh...!”

Only once Violette turned a corner, her perfect uniform swishing out of view, did Yulan’s voice finally reach Claudia’s ears. He jumped at the sound—even though he knew that Yulan was right beside him, he’d been so entranced he’d practically forgotten. He could feel an uncomfortable cold sweat dripping down his back—some animal part of his mind was warning him that he was cornered, even though there was no real reason to feel this flustered.

Now that Violette was gone, Yulan’s voice had lost all its joy. Animosity, disgust, and hatred poisoned his ears.

Yulan stepped into Claudia’s line of sight, blocking where his gaze had followed Violette. The taller boy stared down at him, expression flat. Claudia hadn’t done anything wrong, but guilt still nagged at him. He steeled himself for whatever second attack Yulan had in mind.

But surprisingly, when Yulan finally spoke, his words were flat and bland.

“I’ll excuse myself as well, Your Highness.”

Though his words weren’t particularly gentle, they weren’t the barbed jabs of earlier. His voice was emotionless, and even the sway of his hair in the breeze

seemed manufactured. He was handsome, but artificial and cold.

Above the stiff smile, scorn dwelled in his golden eyes. Claudia could almost hear Yulan's thoughts.

Serves you right.

Claudia just stared in shock. Although they were out of each other's reach, he felt like Yulan had pushed into his chest and was wringing out his heart.

As Claudia wondered if it was necessary to reply for formality's sake, Yulan turned and left. Claudia couldn't stop him any more than he could understand the true meaning behind Yulan's gaze.

Yulan turned his back on Claudia and felt filth accumulating in his soul. Claudia's clueless desire made him want to puke. He could understand exactly what the prince was feeling—he'd just witnessed Violette's sacred smile with his own eyes. But...

"You're too late," Yulan muttered.

Her smile was for *him*. He'd spent so many arduous years earning the privilege. Claudia should cry at his own stupidity, letting his prejudices blind him to her beauty.

"Vio, wait up!" Yulan called out.

"It's not much farther to the car from here," said Violette.

"I know, but...can we still go together?"

When he pleaded like this, drawing his face close to hers and tilting his head, she always smiled in resignation. The corners of her eyebrows would lower and her eyes would narrow just a touch, their shine just a tiny bit less luminous than her hair. Violette had told him that she didn't like her eyes much, but to Yulan, they glittered brighter than any diamond. Seeing his reflection in them always left him elated.

"Hee hee," Yulan snickered.

"Hm? What was that about?" Violette asked.

“It’s a seeecret.”

“Y’know, Yulan, you’re a pretty weird guy.”

He’d never hand her over. He’d *never* give her away. Next time, nothing would delay him—he’d never let the prince see her smile ever again.

Chapter 27:

Looking Forward to It

THAT EVENING, Violette saw Maryjune several times, but the girl never talked to her. Usually, Maryjune would rush up to Violette with a beaming grin, totally oblivious to her older sister's annoyance, but after today it seemed she wasn't in a smiling mood. Violette was honestly still worried about their talk, but she was relieved that the younger girl seemed to be giving it some thought. Although, frankly, she wouldn't be surprised if Maryjune's ruminations took her in some bizarre, unexpected direction.

She ate dinner, took her bath, and returned to her room to prepare for bed. Worries aside, the reprieve from Maryjune was doing wonders for her mood. This late in the evening, she was probably safe from any unexpected visitors—Marin would chase them off if they tried anything. She could finally feel her shoulders relax.

She was seated comfortably on the sofa when a steaming cup was set on the table before her. Violette looked up gratefully at Marin.

"Lady Violette, did something good happen?" Marin asked.

"Hm...?" Violette replied.

"You seem happy today. Your expression is softer than usual."

"Hmm. I guess I am..." said Violette.

She hadn't realized until Marin pointed it out. Violette thought back to the strange, hectic day she'd had, and a reason for a good mood didn't come to her right away. She lifted her cup to her lips, feeling the steam warm her face as she took a sip. On a normal day, she might talk to Yulan, but besides that she'd usually keep to herself. Today, though, she'd met new people, and deepened her relationships with others. She thought through the events of the day. It wasn't her talk with Maryjune—no talk with her sister would make her happy. She was glad she'd met Yulan's friend, but that exchange wasn't enough to brighten her mood.

It must be something that came after.

“I suppose something good did happen,” Violette said.

She couldn't recall the taste of the tea she drank with the beautiful prince—and she didn't want to dwell on it, lest it remind her of the discomfort and panic of that conversation. While her talk with him had been positive in the end, it was such a source of stress at the time. She was relieved when it was over, but not *happy*.

There was only one memory left...

“Could it be...because I made plans with Yulan?”

“Lord Yulan?” Marin repeated.

“Yes. We're going out somewhere tomorrow. I've never taken a detour after school before, so I guess I'm excited.”

That wasn't entirely true—she'd gone out once with her old followers to have tea in a strange place inappropriate for young nobles. They'd chatted with a foreign businessman, and even used the VIP room. But it wasn't really a trip with friends. She'd brought her followers along, keeping them entertained so they wouldn't leave her. She'd spent money to spite her family. None of it brought her any happiness.

A detour with Yulan wouldn't be anything like that. They didn't have solid plans yet, but that was fine, even exciting. And since they'd agreed to do this, she'd stopped thinking of it as the apology she'd first intended to offer him.

“To think I'm looking forward to it this much...hee hee, I didn't even notice until you mentioned it,” Violette said.

Looking forward to it...right. That was a perfectly normal feeling. The suffocating environment she'd been raised in always made her feel like she was choking, desperate for air, even with Marin right beside her. But whenever she was with Yulan, the chains loosened, gave her slack, let her move. She was still trapped, but not pinned down. Every day when she returned home, the chains tightened again, but the glimpses of freedom she saw gave her the strength to make it through.

“I'll most likely be a little late coming home tomorrow, but don't worry.”

“As you wish. Um...Lady Violette?” Marin asked.

“Hm...?”

“I hope you enjoy yourself.”

“I will.”

Marin’s face lit up in a sincere smile.

Chapter 28:

Seven Years

“PLEASE EXCUSE ME,” said Marin, taking Violette’s empty cup.

“It was delicious. Thank you,” Violette said.

Marin left to clean up. Even though she brought the same thing every day, Violette still told her it was delicious every time. But today, her expression was brighter than normal. Instead of her usual, tired tone, she seemed almost... lively.

In the past seven years, Marin hadn’t seen anything like it. Violette was always tense, always on the defensive, stretched thin like a rubber band pulled to its limit. When Violette’s father made his mistress his legal wife, Marin thought the rubber band would finally snap, that her full rage would break free.

But lately, Violette’s expression had actually seemed *softer*.

That alone was cause for celebration. Marin’s beloved mistress struggled to care for herself, and her emotions ran wild when she finally couldn’t repress them any longer. Marin always worried that Violette’s pain would entirely swallow up any joy or delight in her life. If only her mistress could experience a moment’s ease.

“We’ll have to prepare Lady Violette’s favorites for breakfast tomorrow,” Marin muttered to herself.

Marin had to be a little sneaky. Violette hated creating extra work for the staff, so Marin did small things behind her back, subtly providing extra treats or making minor adjustments to her menu so it was more to her liking. She always kept the changes small and unobtrusive, so that it wouldn’t seem that any great effort was going into them. She hoped these things would go entirely unnoticed by the rest of the household.

Oh, but I’ll have to keep an eye on Lady Maryjune.

Maryjune had noticed that Violette’s meals were different almost

immediately. Marin was impressed with the girl's powers of observation, but it made her a nuisance. If Maryjune wanted anything, that idiot father would sacrifice Violette without a thought to make it happen. Maryjune might not even realize she was at fault as Violette was forced to go along with a smile.

Maryjune was like an innocent princess, pure and beautiful and worth protecting, but to Marin she was just a thorn in Violette's side. She watched as Maryjune and her parents tried to create some idealized happy family out of a picture book, leaving Violette outside their circle.

They're so...irritating.

Marin realized she was grinding her teeth so hard that her jaw hurt. Thinking about how angry she was would just lead to her hurting herself—then kindhearted Violette would worry. She forced herself to breathe deep and unclench her jaw. As she exhaled, she released the tension in her shoulders. With a clearer mind, she looked at her mess of emotions, and began to sort them out.

Respect, faith, and loyalty.

Anger, disgust, and disdain.

Her love and devotion for Violette.

Her absolute hatred for the Vahan family.

Back when she spoke more frankly, she'd wished they would just disappear. She used to naïvely believe that pain and ruin would make them reflect on the way they treated Violette. But nowadays, she knew it was pointless to curse them. She couldn't expect anything from them at all.

For now, her employer was Auld, the head of the family. But Violette was her only true master. She'd endure any humiliation for Violette. She'd rather bite her tongue and die than serve anyone else.

Since that day seven years ago, she'd devoted her heart to Violette.

Marin became an orphan on her fourth birthday. That was the day her parents abandoned her in a church, like their leaving was a birthday gift. She

waited there from sunrise to sunset, but when no one came to get her, she was more resigned than surprised.

She understood that her parents didn't love her.

It was because of her eyes. Red eyes, the color of fresh blood, weren't uncommon—you'd see them occasionally in the city. The problem was that neither of her parents had them. None of their relatives had them, either. Her father's side was full of green-eyed people, and her mother's blue. There was no way to mix them and get red. Her father wondered how it could happen, but her mother had a simple explanation.

"She isn't yours," she said.

Her mother had an affair and was blessed—or burdened—with Marin. Who with? Who was her blood father? Even now, she didn't know, but she'd also stopped caring years earlier. She doubted a man who'd had an affair with a married woman was a good person.

When her father learned the truth, he made a decision.

"Your child is my child," he said. He loved her, after all, and thought that losing her would hurt more than her betrayal. Marin's father forgave her, and they tried to make it work. But he wasn't ready to be a father.

No matter how much he loved his wife, raising a child—especially a stranger's child—was fraught. Forgiving his wife was harder than he thought, and loving the daughter, a constant reminder of her betrayal, was harder still. After four years, they both reached their limit. They couldn't stand to look at her any longer.

The nuns pitied her. At first, they tried to tell her that someone would surely come get her soon. Later, they tried to say that there must be a good reason why they couldn't care for her. But she knew the truth. She knew they'd never loved her, and they were never coming back.

The nuns believed in God, in a love that couldn't be doubted. Their smiles were kind and warm, and they cut through Marin like knives. They tried to make her feel false hope.

She left that suffocating church when she was twelve.

She was grateful to the nuns for raising her, but they weren't her family, more like distant acquaintances she kept at arm's length. But when she left, she struggled. She was an orphan without a proper education or any friends. She slept outside and starved. When she rarely found work, it was exploitative and paid almost nothing.

When she compared her hard life to the kind-yet-suffocating one she'd left behind, she decided she just barely preferred living on the streets. And one year after she left the church, a little past her thirteenth birthday, she found a turning point.

That day, Marin's life changed forever.

Chapter 29:

The Day She Learned Madness

AS USUAL, Marin's stomach was empty as she wandered the back alleys, searching for food. She didn't care what she found—leftovers, rotten trash, even just some water to drink. Her undernourished mind just told her to put something, *anything*, in her stomach, or she'd die.

She staggered, her vision clouded, and her consciousness started to drift away. She was supposed to be hunting for food, but she got turned around and confused; she'd barely slept lately, and she wandered aimlessly, losing track of where she was. Her mind and body were pushed to their limit.

She kept moving until her legs gave out. She thought she'd close her eyes for just a moment, regain her strength...

When she opened them again, what she saw was so beautiful it took her breath away.

She couldn't understand what had happened, but she didn't have the energy to be surprised. All she could tell was that the gorgeous ceiling that stretched above her wasn't the sky, so she was inside somewhere.

"You're awake?" said a voice.

Marin couldn't speak.

She hadn't heard anyone enter. Marin tried to get up, but her powerless body couldn't manage it—her shoulders jerked off the bed, then fell back. The heavy warmth surrounded her and pushed her down. She felt like a marionette with cut strings.

"I brought you some food, but do you think you can eat?" the voice continued.

Marin still couldn't say anything.

"I brought you some water, too. It might be better to try that first." The tip of a straw touched her lips, and her body, sensing relief, acted on its own. She was

glad she didn't suck the whole glass down in one go, because she'd completely lost control. With every weary sip of the clean, cool water, her mind and vision cleared, until she could finally see the person standing beside her.

"If you think you can sit up, you should try to eat a little...oh, but don't force it. It should be all right for you to wait a bit before trying solid food."

Their light gray hair was cut short into soft waves. Their large, wide eyes reminded Marin of a cat's, the color of the sky before a storm. They had pale skin with a hint of pink on the cheeks, and their thin lips were vibrant crimson. They wore only a white shirt, black shorts, and suspenders, and the simplicity of the outfit just heightened their natural beauty. If she'd been told that this was an angel, Marin would've believed it.

The person's gender was unclear. At a glance, they looked like a boy with a surprisingly beautiful face—at least, their clothes and haircut were masculine. Yet she couldn't help but think there was more to this person than that.

They were probably a few years younger than Marin, but their androgynous beauty made it hard to tell. Marin was taller than most girls her age, but her savior wasn't much shorter. They seemed well-fed and healthy, and there was something strangely elegant about them, the way they stood and moved...

"Wh-who...are...?" Marin tried to say. Who was this person? Where was she? She'd mentally recovered, but her throat was still too raw for her to speak well.

"I..." the person began, then paused, eyes downcast. For some reason, the simple question made them hesitate, but only for a moment.

"I'm Violette. Violette Rem Vahan."

How conflicted had Violette been that just giving her name took that much courage? At the time, Marin had to put all her energy into recovery as her mind wandered between dreams and waking, but even then, she'd sensed something deeply wrong.

Marin was bedridden for another ten days.

"Do you want to work here?" Violette asked.

“What...?” said Marin.

It had been ten days since Marin was found passed out at the back entrance of the Vahan house. The servant who'd found her had reported it to Violette, who'd not only taken her in, but looked after her the whole time. When Marin heard the full story, she thanked Violette from the bottom of her heart, then asked if there was anything she could do in return. She had no money, no family, not even enough food to survive, but she pressed her forehead to the floor and insisted she'd do whatever she could.

And Violette, with a self-satisfied grin, offered her a job.

“I don't get to go out much,” Violette said, “and the servants here are all adults, so I get bored. But if you're here, I'll have someone to talk to. So, will you work for me?”

Violette looked the perfect image of the proper son of an aristocrat as he sat cross-legged in a chair. There was still something about the boy that Marin couldn't put her finger on, though. Still, it wasn't her place to ask, and this wasn't the time. She had more important things to worry about.

First, there was no way Violette's parents would let their child hire a random penniless orphan, right? Violette didn't think it would be a problem, though. “Don't worry about my parents, they won't bother with us.” Did they trust Violette that much? Or maybe they'd been so overprotected as children that they decided to let Violette run wild? Marin, who'd never known a parent's love, couldn't help but feel a seed of envy budding in her heart.

But still, this job offer was incredible, and she wanted it so badly she could *taste* it. She'd have a roof over her head, food, clothes, even some extra money, and an employer she actually wanted to serve. A little spike of envy was nothing if it meant she'd get to live this comfortable life.

Still, there was something strange here. The missing father, the mother who wouldn't see anyone but her own child, and Violette, who'd disappear into those rooms for hours and hours. Marin had been hired to spend time with Violette, but she could only rarely actually fulfill her duty. She started learning new tasks from the other servants, but none of them would answer any of her questions.

Marin must never enter the Madam's room, or she'll be angry.

Marin must never speak of the Master in front of the Madam, or she'll be very angry.

Marin must never address Violette where the Madam can hear, or she'll be very, very angry.

And if Madam was angry, Violette would suffer.

The servants told Marin all of this with teary eyes and sad faces. The rules didn't make any sense to Marin, but she'd follow them without question if the alternative was being cast back out into the street.

It was several months into her employment when Marin finally learned the reason behind the rules.

The door to Bellerose's room was usually tightly closed, but today it was ajar. Marin hadn't intended to peek inside—she'd only planned to close it. But when she approached the doorway, she heard voices inside and her eyes followed on their own.

Marin gasped. She managed to hold back her scream, covering her mouth with both hands. She wanted to vomit.

"You are so, so beautiful," Bellerose said.

Violette didn't reply.

"Your hair, your eyes, even your fingertips are the same...how wonderful...!"

A lady sat on the sofa and Violette stood before her. The lady reached out and caressed Violette's cheeks, hair, palms—a mother caressing her child, but there was something deeply wrong.

The lady's eyes sparkled with delight, but Violette's were as blank as a doll's. Marin had compared Violette to an angel or a doll before, but those were just metaphors—Violette was a living, breathing person. But right now, Violette seemed as lifeless as an inanimate toy.

That wasn't why Marin wanted to scream, though.

Violette...?

The walls, shelves, and desk were all lined with picture frames. Unframed photos littered the floor. They all depicted the same person—a person with gray hair, cloudy eyes, pale skin, and red lips. At first, Marin thought this angelic beauty was Violette—the hairstyle and facial expressions were nearly identical. But then, she noticed the ages.

Some of them matched Violette's current age, or were younger, but there were more of them that depicted an older person, an adult man. Marin had seen that face before—it was the groom in the wedding photos that decorated the front entrance.

"Now call me. Call me..." Bellerose prompted.

"M-mother," said Violette.

"Wrong."

It wasn't a simple reply—Bellerose's voice dripped with utter rejection. A parent should never look at her child with that much hate, especially not for calling her "mother."

"That's not right, is it? Now...*Auld*," Bellerose continued.

"B-Belle...rose," said Violette.

"Right. That's good. Once more."

"Bellerose."

"Yes. One more time...!"

The hellish scene before Marin played over and over.

Marin must never enter the Madam's room because that was her safe place.

Marin must never speak of the Master because that would destroy her delusion.

Marin must never address Violette...because to her, this child wasn't Violette. Violette didn't exist; this was Bellerose's beloved husband, Auld.

"Nnngh...!!"

Marin couldn't suppress her nausea any longer. She staggered back. She couldn't look any more—the sheer madness on display tore into her. She had to run away.

“I love you. I love you...Auld,” Bellerose continued.

Even now, seven years later, Marin couldn't forget that voice, and the confession that was really a curse.

Chapter 30:

The Day the World Changed

MARIN STILL HAD NIGHTMARES about that day, even though she never told anyone what she'd seen. She never asked Violette, either. But surely, everyone in the household knew. If the adult servants couldn't help, there was nothing a child like her could do—nothing except support Violette as much as she could. But her efforts were undone whenever Bellerose called.

Half a year after Marin began working there, something changed. Bellerose started calling Violette to her room less and less. Then, Bellerose could no longer leave her bed. In the end, she couldn't even get up.

She didn't talk to anyone or even look at them, just incoherently mumbled Auld's name.

"Lady Violette, are you all right?" Marin asked.

"I... I'm fine."

Violette sat on the bench in the garden with her hair waving in the wind. Her appearance had gradually changed after she stopped going to Bellerose's room. Her hair grew out, and she started wearing more feminine clothes. Only then had Marin realized that Violette was a girl.

Marin had sensed there was something hidden about Violette for a while, and even at ten, the wrists peeking out from her sleeves, the neck visible through her hair, and her thin waist all seemed too delicate. She was tall and strong for a girl and had managed to pass as male for a while, but the more she grew, the clearer it was that Violette was a beautiful girl.

Bellerose couldn't stand it.

Her stand-in for Auld was becoming a woman. But rather than accept it and face reality, she pushed Violette outside her delusions when she had no more use for her. Perhaps she'd already forgotten her daughter now that she was outside that dream.

“I’m sorry, Marin,” said Violette.

“Huh...?” said Marin.

“I was selfish. I...brought you into this messed-up household, and I made you see things you didn’t want to see.”

She was right—Marin *didn’t* want to see a family this twisted. Marin had given up on her own parents the moment they threw her away, but she still dreamed of other people’s families. She’d dreamed up a kind mother and a strict father, but the mother could be scary when angry, and the father had a soft spot for his daughter...

That was how things *should* be. But this—a father who abandoned his family, a mother so obsessed with her distant husband that she forced her daughter to take his place, and their child left alone and unloved in a big, empty mansion...

“Why...?” Marin asked.

She *didn’t* want to know that a home like that existed.

“Why did you hire me?”

Marin barely passed muster as a servant. She’d been a homeless, dirty child with no talents or connections. There were plenty of reasons to fire her, even now.

“What...are you expecting from me?” Marin asked. She had nothing, and she could do nothing. She was still startled awake by nightmares. There was nothing she could do to rescue Violette. She’d even been *jealous* of Violette at first, even though she owed Violette her life.

What could this girl want from someone like that?

“Your eyes,” said Violette.

“Eyes...?”

“I thought your eyes were beautiful.” Violette held Marin’s gaze. Her red eyes. Proof of her mother’s betrayal.

Marin hated her eyes.

She would never forgive her parents, but sometimes, when she watched

families with children come to church or pass by on the street, she couldn't help but imagine what it would be like. If her eyes weren't red, if she'd resembled her parents, how different would her life be?

"I'm not very good with red eyes, usually. They make me feel like Mother is watching me," Violette continued.

Even though Bellerose hadn't been unfaithful, Marin saw her as worse than her own adulterous mother. Just thinking about Bellerose that day, the nausea returned.

"That's why your eyes surprised me. I never knew this color could be so beautiful." Violette walked over and stood in front of Marin. She brushed a hand through Marin's hair, sweeping her bangs aside for a better look.

When Violette first met Marin, she saw the same eyes as her mother. But for some reason, they didn't make her uncomfortable. They didn't send a shiver down her spine like her neck was being licked. They were the color of a bright red sunset, marking the countdown until she could leave Bellerose's room for the night.

"They're a really captivating color. Such a beautiful red," Violette said. She'd always thought of red like molten iron, slowly flowing around her neck and hardening to strangle her, like Bellerose's obsession entwining with her body. She'd thought that one day she'd be dragged down, too.

"That's why I wanted you by my side," Violette continued. "Whenever I see your eyes, they remind me that things can be different. Do you think that's a stupid reason?"

Most people would probably laugh at a ten-year-old child who hired a servant because of the beauty of her eyes. Maybe it *was* a foolish reason to bring a stranger into her home.

"It's just...I want to change my life. When I look at you, I think that maybe I won't always be trapped," Violette said. The hand touching Marin was delicate, and Violette seemed even smaller than usual. Marin wasn't an adult herself yet, but Violette looked tiny, fragile, and *young*.

“I’m sorry for getting you involved, and making you come with me... If you want to quit, I won’t stop you.” Violette’s crooked smile was sad and lonely, but she still pushed herself to keep some kind of happy expression on her face. She hoped Marin would stay, but she couldn’t bring herself to stop her from going. She *needed* Marin. No one else understood her feelings, or even tried. But she knew what it was like to be trapped by someone else’s feelings. She felt her wishes for the future slipping away.

Marin looked down at Violette and saw herself, alone and orphaned at four years old. Marin had been forced out of her loveless world, while Violette couldn’t escape from hers, but the loneliness was the same.

Would either of them ever find happiness?

Some people would live a happy life with kind nuns after running away from heartless parents. Some would find joy in the wealth and influence of nobility, even if they were unloved. Some people were in such dire straits they were happy just to be alive. But going through lists of less fortunate people didn’t really heal a crushed heart. Marin had heard gentle, kindhearted, *naïve* people at church spout those platitudes before. Marin couldn’t find happiness by simply ignoring her pain.

The pain of abandonment, like the pain of losing a mother to delusions, was real.

Sympathy bloomed in Marin’s heart.

“I’m not going to quit,” she declared.

Marin couldn’t leave this girl all alone, not after her parents had failed her so completely. If Violette’s parents wouldn’t support her, then Marin would at least be there to receive her with a smile afterwards. If they didn’t want to care for her, then Marin would gratefully take their places.

“I’ll stay by your side forever,” Marin continued. “After all, you saved my life.” Violette could have passed her by, and Marin wouldn’t be here. Violette fed her, clothed her, and gave her a place to live. And, more importantly, Violette *wanted* her here.

The church believed that everything worked out if they had faith in God, but they were always stretched too thin to properly care for orphans. There was nothing out there for her that even slightly compared to living and working in the Vahan household.

If that was stupid, then she might as well laugh and join in on the joke.

Violette told her that her eyes were beautiful, and that small kindness was the start of everything. Her heart pounded warmly in her chest. She wanted to stay by Violette's side. She wanted to make sure that *Violette* knew how beautiful she was. This wasn't just sympathy anymore. For the first time, Marin loved someone.

And that day, both of their worlds began to change.

After discussing the next morning's breakfast with the cooks, Marin returned to her own room. She was late getting to bed that day, so she hurried through her bedtime routine—if she showed up with bags under her eyes, Violette would worry.

"Hmm, tomorrow's schedule..." Marin said to herself.

Violette had plans after school tomorrow and would be late getting home. Marin opened her favorite planner and flipped to where she'd already filled out tomorrow's timetable. With the scritch of her fountain pen on the paper, she edited the schedule.

She'd thought that this sakura-colored pen was too cute for her, but she'd use it for the rest of her life. It was a gift from Violette to celebrate her twentieth birthday.

She was an adult now, and Violette would be seventeen soon.

Ever since the day she decided to stay, Marin had stood by Violette's side just as she promised. In that time, she'd seen everything—the open selfishness of Violette's parents and how it warped her. Marin's pity grew into love; every day, she treasured Violette more than the day before. And the more Marin cared for her, the more it hurt to see people treat her badly.

I'm glad she's happy.

Violette rarely showed her feelings on her face. Marin didn't either, but for her, it was more that she had an even keel—she only rarely got swept up in emotional highs or lows—not the mask that Violette used to hide her true feelings. Today, though, Violette legitimately seemed happy. Even while sitting at that awkward dinner table, she seemed like she was lost in a pleasant daydream. None of the others at the table noticed, and Marin was glad for that—they'd only lecture her. They didn't care what Violette was feeling.

When questioned, Violette had told Marin about her plans with Yulan. Marin had only met Yulan Cugurs very briefly, but she still considered him a comrade. He, like Marin, treasured Violette. They both only wanted her to be happy.

If Violette had made plans to go out alone, Marin would have been more cautious. But if she was with Yulan, Marin didn't have to worry. Violette knew that she attracted attention, but she wasn't fully aware of how beautiful she was—how could she be, living in a house where she was constantly ignored? But outside, she captivated people. Marin was glad she'd have a companion who understood.

“Should I reduce her portion for dinner...?” She didn't know whether Violette would eat anything on their excursion. Marin made a few more notes on her schedule, then laid out tomorrow's clothes and climbed into bed.

Just before she drifted off, she wished for Violette to come home smiling tomorrow.

Chapter 31:

You're Not Alone

THE NEXT MORNING, Maryjune was her usual, bright self. She'd gotten in the habit of catching Violette on her way to the dining room and walking the halls with her—Violette found it awkward, but avoiding her or telling her off would be mentally and emotionally exhausting. She'd gotten better at automatically providing polite answers while her mind was elsewhere.

Ever since childhood, she focused intently on the food on the dining table. Whether eating alone or with the “happy family,” the more she paid attention to the circumstances of her meal, the worse she felt. But the cooks were excellent, and the food provided to her always suited her tastes; people said that delicious food soothes the soul, and Violette certainly agreed.

“Oh, that’s right. Violette, would you like to have tea together this afternoon?” Maryjune asked.

“Hm...?”

“There are all sorts of things I want you to teach me. So, tea...in my room?” She must want to talk about Violette’s lecture the day before. Violette was glad, at least, that she was giving this some thought. Maryjune was honest, optimistic, and biased toward her old assumptions about how the world worked, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t open to new ideas. Whatever the outcome, just discussing different perspectives would likely be good for Maryjune.

That was Violette’s objective opinion. On a personal level, the thought of tea with Maryjune made her want to run for the hills.

“I’m sorry. I have other plans today,” said Violette.

That wasn’t a lie, but she still felt a twinge of guilt, like she was a child faking sick to get out of school. Even if she hadn’t been busy today, she might have made up an excuse anyway. Her plans felt like a convenient dodge.

“Really,” Auld cut in with a voice that rumbled with scorn. When she looked up, she saw the creases in his brow deepen. “You can’t change your schedule for your younger sister? What could take precedence over your own family?”

“Th-that’s...” Violette stammered, but she hesitated. All she wanted was to shoot his words back at him, ask if he was in any position to lecture her about *family*. A man who’d cast off his wife and neglected his daughter shouldn’t even be allowed to say that word. And if he was having a change of heart, he could prove it by showing Violette even the smallest bit of kindness.

But in his mind, this wasn’t hypocrisy. When he said the word “family,” it simply didn’t include Violette. Maryjune and Elfa were the center of his world, and Violette only existed to make them happy.

This wasn’t the first time she felt her hands go cold as her heart died.

It happened when there was no one to greet her in the morning, when she ate alone in the cavernous dining room, when her mother whispered that she loved her. Her heart would freeze, the warmth retreating from her fingers and toes, like all the blood in her body had stopped circulating. For a while she’d felt like this daily. It happened a bit less since she met Marin, but she couldn’t avoid it entirely. Her breakfast turned to ash in her mouth.

“Jeez, Father, don’t be so mean about it! If she promised someone else, there’s nothing she can do. Sorry to invite you so suddenly, Violette,” Maryjune said.

“I’m sorry, Maryjune,” Violette replied.

“There’s nothing to apologize for! Oh, but we’ll have to have our tea another day!”

“Yes...of course.”

“Great!”

Maryjune’s smile sparkled unconcernedly. She wasn’t worried about conflict between Violette and her father as she accepted Violette’s excuse. It was clear that Auld treated them differently—his favoritism of Maryjune and criticism of

Violette were incredibly obvious—but Maryjune didn't see that as a reason for concern. Her perspective was syrupy and sickly sweet. It was like she'd been raised in a beautiful flower bed and thought that the gentle meadow outside was the wilderness.

As a person who grew up in the real wilderness, Marin was disgusted enough to feel ill. She clenched her fists to keep it from showing on her face. Her palms were numb, but she knew if she let up at all, she wouldn't be able to control herself.

She looked to her mistress, seated at the table in front of her, and all she wanted to do was hug her and usher her out of the room as quickly as possible. She didn't want these people to exist even in the corner of her eye. But Marin couldn't do that—if she tried, she'd probably be fired. She wouldn't mind losing her job if it actually helped, but if she was expelled from the mansion, Violette would be alone, and these idiots would devour her heart.

She wouldn't let that happen. She tried to turn her anger into thoughts of how to help Violette.

Through all of this, Violette's firm posture remained unchanged. Violette looked just like her usual self—more beautiful and wondrous than anyone had the right to be.

That was why Marin's heart hurt. Violette's mask hid her emotions perfectly, making it seem like she didn't care. Her heart must be broken, but she was also *used to* feeling like this.

Violette finished her meal in silence, pushed her empty plate away, and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. She gave an appropriate excuse and stood to leave.

"Violette," Auld said before she could turn away.

"Yes," she replied.

"You're not alone, you know. That independent streak won't do you any good. I expect you to take care of your younger sister."

"I'll...keep that in mind."

Violette gave a slow bow and left the dining room with Marin. Part of her wanted to lift her skirt and run, another part wanted to plant her feet and stop right there. In the end, she made a slow, plodding walk back to her room.

“Lady Violette,” Marin said, tears in her voice.

Violette turned back, wondering what had happened to the other woman’s usual dispassionate tone. She was met with a face that matched her trembling voice, muddy with tears.

“Lady...Violette,” Marin said again.

“Marin,” she replied.

“La... Vio...ngh.”

“Thank you, Marin...but I’m fine.”

Marin was clearly trying to stop crying, but her efforts just led to a clenched jaw and mumbled words as the tears kept flowing. Violette couldn’t tell whether she was sad, or angry, or in pain—she suspected all three. Marin was always so reserved and composed...even though she didn’t like seeing Marin in pain, it still made her smile knowing that Marin felt so deeply for her sake.

It wasn’t much of a smile, but it contained all the love that hadn’t yet been consumed by Violette’s pitch-black heart. She stepped forward and brushed a hand through Marin’s hair; somehow, telling Marin that she was all right made her *feel* all right...at least a little.

Her father had told her that she was no longer alone.

At that moment, Violette’s dark resentment had boiled up inside her. She’d wanted to scream at him to drop dead. She’d been *so close* to repeating her past mistakes.

She’d been so lonely for so long. She’d wished over and over for a family that loved her. Yulan and Marin were her only comfort, and they reassured her over and over that she wasn’t alone, but it had never really been true. She was missing something important, and nothing could really fill the hole it left behind.

She'd reached out so many times, held out a hand even though she knew no one would grab it. She cried when she needed someone, but she didn't know whose name to call. Eventually she gave up on reaching out, on calling for help, on crying.

Marin promised to stay by her side. Yulan constantly sought her out and spent time with her. And their precious words saved her from the depths of her lonely despair.

She *wasn't alone*? Her father shouldn't be allowed to say that. She'd wanted to yell and scream and throw things. She was glad she hadn't had anything close to hand or she was pretty sure she would have smashed it right in his smug face.

But a clear corner of her mind remembered what her past self had done, and she found just enough restraint to keep it together. As Marin comforted her, the heat boiling inside her began to disperse. Warmth returned to her fingers, like her body was finally finding equilibrium.

Getting angry was pointless. She couldn't talk back, but that didn't mean she had to accept their words. She might be chained and trapped in place, but her gilded cage worked both ways—it kept her from running, but it also kept them away from her heart.

Chapter 32:

That Was Kindness

MARIN WAS STILL teary-eyed, but she had a smile on her face when she saw Violette off to school early the next morning.

Violette headed to school much earlier than usual as a tactic to avoid Maryjune, but there was an unexpected bonus—she was the first person to arrive in her classroom and would likely have it to herself for at least ten minutes. She felt more comfortable here than at home, and she also got a few minutes of privacy. That was practically paradise for Violette.

She let out an involuntary sigh.

She was more mentally exhausted than she'd thought. She was still looking forward to this afternoon, but the run-in with her father left her feeling deeply depressed. Someone once said that a woman's heart can change as quickly as the autumn sky. Still, this quick change from heaven to hell was dramatic for her. The quiet, still classroom was the perfect place to think it through.

She hadn't thought that things could get worse, but her lows just kept getting lower.

I wonder if Marin's all right...

That house was torture to Violette, but it wasn't comfortable for Marin, either. It was easier for a while when her mother was bedridden, but since her father's return, Marin clearly shared some of her pain. The young woman was once a child who Violette thoughtlessly dragged into her life, and despite being an adult now, she was still stuck in that oppressive house. Marin was so precious to her—she rarely smiled, but her affection for Violette was clear. Violette didn't know much about family, but she wondered if Marin counted as hers—they could be sisters, maybe. Still, Violette always worried that Marin would be hurt because of her, so she kept a little distance.

"Oh...Lady Violette?" a student said.

“Hm...good morning,” Violette replied.

“Good morning. You’re early today.”

“Yes, I got an early start.”

She reflexively set her face as her classmate entered; she couldn’t imagine the rumors that would fly if she showed even faint sadness on her face. She wasn’t particularly suspicious of that classmate, but it was always smart to conceal any weakness from people she didn’t trust.

They made idle small talk while people slowly filed into the classroom. Her momentary paradise was short lived, as she’d known it would be. Still, if she had to sit here and maintain this façade until the start of class, she’d only feel more depressed.

“I’m sorry, but I have business in the library,” Violette said as she stood up.

“Oh, I apologize for keeping you here.”

“Not at all. Please, excuse me.”

Violette kept her distance from most people, but her beauty, personality, and lineage drew others to her. She’d honed her use of words to fight or protect; she knew how to defuse a battle of wills at a social event, but somehow, friendly small talk with her peers at school felt so much more difficult.

Now that she’d devoted herself to the wallflower lifestyle, she didn’t have much reason to work at it.

She moved against the flow of people heading for their classrooms, searching for a private spot. There were plenty of good options, but she didn’t want to go too far from her classroom. First thing in the morning, there were far fewer people wandering the courtyards, so the garden seemed like the best choice.

“How beautiful...” Violette muttered. The garden’s flowers were in full bloom, their orderly rows a marked contrast from the mess of her mind. She let the riot of color and the sweet scent that tickled her nose soothe her senses, but they weren’t enough to heal her heart. A sight could heal someone, but only if they had a good memory tied to it. Violette couldn’t remember anything that could overcome what she’d been through.

She didn't know how people got over having their most precious places trampled.

"I'll stay here."

Thinking about it would just drive her further into her own head. It wasn't easy to forget things on purpose, but it was still pointless to dwell on what had happened. Her father would never understand her, never *try* to understand, never aim the love and kindness he showed Maryjune her way. Violette expected nothing from him. So why was she still so shaken by his callousness?

A wind picked up, blowing through her hair and making flower petals flutter past. She hoped her feelings would be blown away with them. She turned into the wind to keep her hair out of her face, and noticed another figure in the garden.

"Oh..."

Dark purple hair trailed straight down her back. Faint pink decorated the cheeks on her otherwise pale face. She bent down to admire the flowers, elegance personified, her entire body as beautiful as the blooms she surveyed. Her lavender eyes narrowed, and the very air around her seemed to fill with divine light. She looked like a goddess.

If Violette was a rose, this girl was a pure white lily.

Violette recognized her: Princess Rosette Megan, royalty from a neighboring country and student in the same grade as Violette, though in another class. Neat, lovely, and elegant, Princess Rosette was an ideal lady, beloved by everyone and the image of every positive attribute one could imagine. Even then, labels didn't accurately capture her essence. Wrapped in veils, revered, extolled, and deified, her appearance reminded Violette of a stained glass window in the church.

How rare...

Rosette was always surrounded by throngs of people whenever Violette saw her from afar. At the academy or outside, it was always the same. Princess Rosette was always gracefully smiling in the middle of a crowd.

While Violette watched her, the bell rang, warning that class would begin

without her if she didn't make it back before the next bell. The princess must have heard the bell, but for some reason, Rosette kept inspecting the flowers and showed no sign of moving.

Violette couldn't say anything.

She knew she should get the other girl's attention, but just calling out to someone was already difficult for her, and calling out to *Rosette* felt so much harder. Anyway, the whole school probably felt awkward around Violette considering all the scandal she'd been at the center of. It was kinder not to drag a virtual stranger into feeling like that.

And while she knew about Rosette, she had never spoken to the princess before. Introducing herself to someone that intimidating just to warn her that class would be starting soon seemed like an insurmountable hurdle.

I suppose it's fine.

They weren't friends, so why force herself? More importantly, she wasn't sure she'd be able to put on her smiling mask while she still felt so raw.

Violette turned away from Rosette and her flowers, pushed her depression down deep inside, and returned to her classroom.

Chapter 33:

How to Repay You

AFTER CLASSES ENDED, Violette's classmates trickled out of the room one by one. This signal that it was time to go home always weighed heavily on her heart. But today was different. She was so grateful to Yulan for inviting her out. Her sadness was still there, but it was buried deep for now.

She had so much trouble handling her worst emotions. Past Violette had tried to suppress them, but they'd just erupted more violently than she ever wanted. Second chance aside, she still didn't know a safe way to let them out.

If she never vented her feelings to anyone, would they disappear on their own someday? She hoped they would, that she'd be free of them in the future. For now, though, they took up space in her mind, keeping her from fully feeling her excitement.

Her head was scrambled, and nausea wrapped around her throat.

She didn't want Yulan to see her like this, weak and in pain. She didn't want to worry him; she wanted him to smile. She was looking forward to this trip, and she wanted so badly to enjoy it. Even if she couldn't, she didn't want him thinking he'd caused her bad mood.

Why am I like this? Why can't I change?!

She felt so pathetic. She told herself over and over to be different, to be *better*, as she shoved those swirling, black emotions deeper into her heart. If she couldn't deflect them and couldn't let them out, she'd have to swallow them. Someday, she'd digest them, and they'd be gone. Someday she could stop fighting her own mind. She told herself that, but she somehow doubted it was true.

"Vio! Sorry I kept you waiting!" Yulan called.

"Calm down," said Violette.

Yulan entered her classroom like an avalanche, big and loud and unstoppable.

He seemed a little frazzled, like he'd run all the way there—was that sweat on his brow? How fast had he run to get here as soon as possible? Her excitement from yesterday tried to burst out of her, but it threatened to bring the rest of her emotions with it.

She averted her eyes as all that pain and sadness stabbed through her. She tried her hardest not to let any of it show. If she let her emotions show, she wouldn't be able to suppress them a second time; they were too heavy to hold and too strong to throw away.

"But I didn't want you to wait at all! I'm really looking forward to this," Yulan said.

"I can wait a few minutes. I don't want you hurting yourself," Violette admonished him.

"Oh...okay, I'll be more careful next time!" His smile seemed even brighter than usual. Was it the light reflecting off his sweaty brow? He looked surprised when she reached her hand out to touch his hair, mussed from running, and he grinned happily when she brushed it out. When she saw his expression, a new sprout in her heart unfurled—a beautiful, immaculate seedling whose roots inched deeper into the soil.

Her feelings were scattered, her heart was still raw, but if she could pretend to be fine just a little while longer, maybe everything *would* be fine.

If Yulan was with her, she was sure her excitement would sprout anew.

Yulan's chauffeur drove them from the academy all the way to the city. He would bring her home at the end of the day.

This shopping district was lined with rows of upscale shops, fancy enough that two academy students fit right in. It wasn't crowded, but the few pedestrians they passed were well dressed to match the elegant buildings that lined the streets.

Violette worried that she and Yulan would stand out in their academy uniforms, but surprisingly, the well-tailored, elegant outfits fit right in with the upscale shops. They didn't attract much attention at all.

“Vio...what do you want to dooo?” Yulan whined.

“Don’t ask me. This is supposed to be my apology to you, after all.”

“Yeah, exactly. So, where do you want to go?”

“Listen to people when they talk to you.”

She didn’t need to look at Yulan to know he had a big smile on his face. But they hadn’t actually picked a store to enter yet. Even though this detour was meant to be an apology to him, Yulan kept trying to push them towards things Violette liked. He never said what he wanted himself.

He’d point at a storefront, saying “Look at all the cute things in the window!” or “I heard the chocolate there is delicious!” But those were all Violette’s favorites, not his.

I don’t really know anything about him.

Yulan understood Violette perfectly, but sometimes she felt like she barely knew him.

He wasn’t a picky eater, but he didn’t like sweets. He was gentle and kind, but tended to stay a step removed from people. He was a true friend who acted like her cute younger brother. And he wanted to spend time with Violette.

That was the extent of her knowledge. Yulan was always by her side, and she understood him better than a stranger, at least. She let him get closer than almost anyone, and they both let their guards down when they were together—or at least *she* did.

But it wasn’t enough for Yulan to understand her.

He was always so kind to her—the first noble who’d ever shown her kindness. She hated to feel like she was taking without giving anything in return.

“Vio...what’s wrong?” Yulan asked.

The faster her thoughts whizzed through her head, the slower and heavier her steps became. She realized her head had drooped when she heard Yulan’s voice from right above her.

“You’re tired, aren’t you...? Let’s rest somewhere,” said Yulan.

He sounded worried. If she looked up, she'd surely see his face scrunched up in a pained expression. Even now, Yulan noticed when something was wrong without having to ask. He slipped an arm around her waist to support her and urge her to stop walking.

Leaning into Yulan's side like this was so comfortable. He always treated her so delicately...that was something else she hadn't repaid. The pain from her father's words that morning flew through her mind again—every time she pushed it down, it popped up somewhere else.

Auld told her that she wasn't alone, and that was true. She had Marin at home, and Yulan outside...

But if Yulan was gone, if he left her...

Violette groaned.

Just imagining it made her whole body go cold. He was so precious to her, closer than her family, her chosen younger brother who she'd cared for all these years. He clung to her now, but sociable Yulan would probably find a wonderful lover soon.

She hoped, once that happened, she'd be allowed to watch over him as an old friend and honorary sister. But that wasn't up to her.

If Yulan left, if he went so far away that she couldn't see him anymore, she'd surely waste away, trapped in that house without him. She pulled away from his hand on her waist.

"Vio...?" Yulan asked, confused.

"Yulan," said Violette.

Before he could ask what was wrong, she moved away and stood right in front of him. The collar of his uniform was at her eye level, and when she raised her face, his beautiful, golden eyes were wide and frozen.

"I...want to give back to you. I want to repay your kindness," Violette continued.

"Huh..." said Yulan.

"You give me so much. You save me every time I need it. That's why—"

She couldn't take Yulan's kindness for granted any longer. It probably sounded empty, since she'd let him spoil her for so long, but she had to change their dynamic. In an uneven relationship, the giver would get worn down while the receiver became spoiled and entitled—that was inevitable, even if they both meant well. Even the most beautiful romance or the kindest familial love had its own give and take, its own balance that needed to be maintained.

Yulan was so important to her. She couldn't forgive herself if she was always gaining and never losing. Even if Yulan didn't see it that way, she knew she'd never really given him anything. She didn't want to become ungrateful or entitled to Yulan's generosity.

Her precious person gave her his precious thoughts. She wanted to do something in return that matched.

"Tell me. What can I do for you...?" Violette pleaded.

Chapter 34:

You Can Sit Back

WHEN YULAN MADE IT to Violette's classroom that afternoon, he could tell something was wrong.

Violette looked excited, but her smile wasn't what he expected. She wasn't great at smiling—they often came out awkward and strained—but she usually relaxed when they were together. Her pleased smirk, her astonished grin, or her aloof, self-satisfied smile—they were each lovely in their own way, and much better than the frigid mask she hid her feelings behind. Most people believed the mask. They were blind to how much she suffered. Ridiculous idiots... He agreed with them that she was wonderful, but they'd barely scratched the surface of *why*.

He wanted Violette to smile all the time—pure, happy smiles. And he wanted to be the one to make her happy.

That was why he invited her out.

He wished he could whisk her away from the Vahan family home, and he vowed he'd do it someday, even if it meant eloping or something even more drastic. He wanted to crush that entire family with his own hands, no matter what it cost him. He wanted to destroy anything that hurt her. But for now, there was nothing he could do.

All he could do right now was give her a little relief. He wanted to make her forget her cage for a little while. She'd never had a fun day out before, so he wanted to give her some happy memories.

Happy memories with *him*, specifically. His motives weren't entirely altruistic.

When he rushed into her classroom, though, she wasn't wearing the smile he'd imagined or her wry mask. Instead, her smile was small and empty, like she was sad or hurt and smiling to force those feelings down.

He did know that face—it was the one she used around her father, at high

society parties, or when surrounded by the girls who followed her, jockeying for favor.

Violette had drawn a line—she was fighting some battle within herself, but it was private, and if he reminded her of the pain it would only hurt her more. So, he put on his happiest smile and fell right into his younger brother role. He became that sweet, kind boy with warm, gentle hands who knew he couldn't close her wounds, but tried to help her forget them.

When Violette stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, anxiety shot through him. Was she sick, or did the mental stress finally wear her down? But when she looked up at him, her expression wasn't sick, it was apprehensive.

"Tell me. What can I do for you...?" she said.

Her lustrous eyes looked straight at him. She had no idea that seeing himself reflected in her eyes made him happier than anything. If he'd told her that he was thrilled just to hear her say his name, she'd think he was joking, and that would be the end of it. Violette didn't have the confidence to believe him.

He used his status as her childhood friend as a shield.

Something Violette could do for Yulan...what Yulan wanted from Violette...

He wanted to go places with her, not just today, but over and over. And not just a little shopping in the city—he wanted to go farther and find more fun things to do. He wanted to pick out clothes for her and show off how beautiful she was. And he wanted to lock her up so she'd only belong to him.

He wanted to walk along, holding hands. He wanted to wrap an arm around her thin waist. He wanted to hold her tight until she said it hurt. He wanted to shower her with love until her cold, white cheeks flushed red. He wanted to make every part of her body, from the top of her head to her toes, all his.

He reached out and covered her hand where it gripped the handle of her bag. Her fingers were red, but they felt cold to his touch. Was she nervous, or uneasy? If anything displeased her, he'd take care of it. He'd do whatever it took to make her comfortable.

He wouldn't let *anyone* hurt Violette.

Still, he was happy that Violette was thinking of him. He wanted to grin wide, knowing that he occupied part of her mind—but he wasn't ready to part with his cute younger brother persona quite yet, so he tamped it down.

"Thanks, Vio," said Yulan. He thanked her for thinking of him, and for wanting to repay his kindness. But everything he did for her served his goals, too. *He* wanted to make her happy. When she was happy, he was happy, too. She didn't have to do anything, she just had to be there. He wanted her to smile when she felt like it, and avoid getting hurt when she could. He wanted to be the one to give her everything else.

"Stay with me," said Yulan.

Her lips parted, but only a tiny sigh escaped her mouth; her face was frozen, and her eyes were round like a cat's. He'd surprised her.

"Stay with me forever. Let me stand by your side. Never try to leave me," Yulan continued.

"Yulan..." Violette whispered.

"Don't forget that I'm with you."

Her mouth opened, but she didn't say anything. Then her face crumpled as she tried to hold back tears. He watched emotions fight on her face—fear, loneliness, and resignation. He knew that this scared her—she'd spent her whole childhood alone. He feared that if he took his eyes off her, she'd wander off before he even noticed.

She was lonely but overwhelmed. She was afraid of love but wanted people to love her. She wanted to be alone, but she wanted someone beside her...and who would even stay? The contradictions swirled inside her, scarred her, wore her down.

As long as she still lived in that house, Violette could never break free. Her heart was worn thin again and again.

He'd just have to overwrite it every time.

"Vio, you're not alone, you know," said Yulan.

Violette bit her lip, and he covered her eyes with one large palm. He felt her

eyelashes brush against his skin, and it felt warm.

Chapter 35:

Now, This Time

YULAN'S WORDS ECHOED her father's that morning, but they couldn't feel more different. Violette blinked in the darkness behind his hand as Yulan waited for her tense lips to relax.

He'd grown so big. He was still that kind, gentle boy who'd followed her teary-eyed, but he'd grown into a physique that could wrap around anyone. It was a little bittersweet, knowing that little crybaby was gone forever.

I...never thought I'd feel like this, watching a younger sibling grow up.

If this was Maryjune, she wouldn't be feeling any of this loneliness or delight. She'd assumed the "older sister" part of her was broken somehow, since she couldn't bring herself to feel this way about her blood sibling.

Once again, Yulan gave her exactly what she needed.

She'd wanted to pay him back for all his generosity, but here he was, giving again. She felt a twinge of frustration, knowing she'd never catch up to him, but it seemed their relationship would never change. Yulan may have outgrown "cute," but she would still treat him as her precious little brother.

"Thank you..." Violette said softly.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I'm sorry for worrying you."

"I'm glad. But let's take a break, okay?"

The darkness of Yulan's hand was removed, and the light blinded her for just a moment. Yulan didn't mention her wet eyes or stuffy nose; she'd managed to keep the tears from falling, but she'd come close. Violette was grateful to him yet again. He must have sensed she didn't want to draw attention to it.

"There's a café up ahead that's supposed to be really good. I'm sure you'll love it!" Yulan said cheerfully.

"Does it have anything you can eat?" Violette asked.

“Yeah, they serve some savory food, too. It’s fine.”

“Then that sounds perfect.”

“Okay!”

Without any awkwardness, Yulan took Violette’s hand and began to walk.

He’d always stayed beside her, but this time he led the way. Violette could see his ears peeking out from his auburn hair. Even though he walked with a spring in his step, he didn’t pull or move too fast for her. Occasionally he turned to look back, and his expression grew even sweeter.

His footsteps resounded with delight each time they struck the ground, like he was dancing.

For what might be the first time in her life, she felt truly blessed.

“Mhm...!” Violette couldn’t voice her happiness properly.

“Ha ha, is it that good?” Yulan asked.

“Unngh...mm-hm!”

When she enthusiastically nodded again, Yulan burst out laughing.

It was freeing, talking with her mouth full and really appreciating her meal for once. At a casual café like this, she finally got to let loose a little.

Round, fluffy pancakes sat in front of Violette. She’d wanted to ask how many were piled up to get a stack this tall, but when she cut into them, she discovered there were only two huge, puffy ones. They were covered in cream, and collapsed a bit over time, but every bite Violette put in her mouth was pure bliss.

“I’m glad you like them! I was a little worried, since you’ve never had pancakes before.”

“Sooooooooo good,” Violette moaned.

“Yeah, I can tell. I guess this café was the right call.”



Across the table, Yulan was eating a simple ham sandwich with lettuce. The café did serve some savory dishes, but desserts were clearly their specialty. He'd ordered his food so that Violette wouldn't feel bad eating alone, but he wasn't that interested. Of the four triangles of sandwich on his plate, he'd only eaten one.

"Instead of watching me, you should eat your food. Your sandwich will get stale," Violette admonished. This café wasn't a bakery, so the bread wouldn't last long. It was the kind of place where orders came out quickly and were enjoyed immediately, so they weren't made to last long.

"I want to watch you eat. I'll eat mine in a bit," said Yulan.

"Hey. Don't look," Violette said with mock annoyance.

He threw her some lighthearted apologies. She wasn't really mad at him, although it did make her a little self-conscious. The utensils in her hands stilled, and she stared at Yulan until he finally surrendered. With a pout, he grabbed a section of sandwich and finished it in one bite.

His expression was different; less gentle than normal. He hadn't completely left manners behind or anything, but when he wiped his mouth with his thumb, he looked no different from ordinary boys. He seemed like a different person—less refined, more rough-and-tumble.

"Vio...?" Yulan asked.

"Ah... I'm sorry. You've just never done that before, so I..." Violette said, trailing off.

"Never, huh...? But we eat lunch together all the time."

"At the academy, you're always minding your manners. Seeing you like this is...unusual."

The academy taught etiquette, so the students were on their best behavior all the time, even during breaks. Yulan and Violette had eaten together many times, but always either at the academy, or at some high society function. They went very few places where they didn't have to put on airs. If someone saw how he was eating now, they'd say he was rude.

“I guess so. We’re always watching ourselves, and it’s a hard habit to break,” said Yulan. As the children of aristocrats, they’d had it drilled into them all their lives that there was always someone watching, so they’d better act above reproach. But no one could stay on guard twenty-four hours a day, every day. Aristocrats were always on the lookout for places where they could let their guards down.

This café was a spot like that. It would be rude, really, to use high society manners in such an informal, everyday restaurant. People said, “when in Rome, do as the Romans do,” after all.

“We’ve been so careful our whole lives...it doesn’t hurt anyone to let loose a little. It’d be a worse mistake to miss out on a chance to relax,” Yulan explained.

“Sometimes you have a crude way of thinking,” said Violette.

“Really? But hey, I’m not the only one who’s showing a different side today.”

“Huh...?”

Yulan slowly extended his large hand and slid his fingers across the edge of her lip. Then, he plucked off a long strand of gray hair.

“You’re eating your hair,” said Yulan.

Violette blushed deep red. It took her a moment to understand what Yulan was doing, but when he grabbed the stray hair, she was horrified. No matter where she was, she shouldn’t have let herself slip so badly. She was always so *careful* of her hair! She must have let her guard down even further than she realized.

“It’s rare for you to mess up like that...it’s pretty cute,” Yulan said with a grin.

“I-It was an accident...!” Violette stammered in response. His teasing voice tickled her eardrums, and his broad, cheerful grin poked at her. Her cheeks went hot, but instead of coming up with a retort, she focused back on the pancakes in front of her.

“They’re good?” he asked.

“Delicious,” Violette replied. Truthfully, she was eating too fast to really taste them, but they were still satisfying.

Chapter 36:

Hurdle to Happiness

TIME FLIES when you're having fun, but slows to a crawl when things are bad.

The time Violette and Yulan spent in the café zoomed past, and now that Yulan was bringing her home, Violette felt a heavy load settle on her shoulders. The melancholy she usually felt at the end of the school day had been forgotten for a while, but now it was back, heavier for being delayed.

Still, her day out had done her some good; she felt better than usual as she arrived home. She told the servants that she was full from the pancakes so she wouldn't have to sit with her family at the dining table. Still, she wondered what they would think. Tomorrow's breakfast would probably be extra depressing, but for now, she enjoyed today's sense of freedom.

"Lady Violette, I have prepared your change of clothes," said Marin.

"Thanks," said Violette.

Violette took a quick shower, then changed into the dress Marin had laid out for her. It was simple, unadorned white, the kind of loungewear that prioritized comfort over design, but still elegant enough that she could wear it outside without causing a scandal.

Violette generally wore clothes that were simple yet luxurious and let her natural beauty shine through. Her accessories were small and subtle. Unfortunately, the current ladies' fashions that suited Violette best were stiff and hard to move in. She found it exhausting that she could never wear what she wanted, even when alone; her father had forbidden the boys' clothes she wore growing up as inappropriate. So instead, she did her best to find plain, comfortable dresses to wear at home.

Tonight's garment was an A-line dress that didn't squeeze her waist. It was neat and elegant, but she didn't think it really suited her. A cute dress like this would look better on Maryjune.

“Lady Violette, if you are going to rest, shall I braid your hair?” said Marin.

“Yes, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.”

Violette sat in front of the large full-length mirror, and Marin took her place behind her and began slowly brushing her hair. Violette’s hair was soft and tangled easily, and its gray hue shimmered even in the room’s dim light. Dividing it into thin sections, Marin wove her hair into a loose braid, and tied the end with a white lace hair tie. She always took so much care with Violette’s hair, treating it like a precious gift.

“It doesn’t hurt, right?” Marin asked.

“No, thank you,” said Violette. The reflection in the mirror didn’t look like her. This version of herself was unknown to her classmates and family. She didn’t normally wear makeup, but just this change in clothes and hairstyle gave her a markedly different air.

She reclined on her bed, burying her cheek in the soft pillow. Marin had prepared her bed, and the sheets still smelled like sun. This was one of the few things in the house that had been made just for her.

“I had fun today,” Violette murmured.

“I’m glad,” said Marin.

“The pancakes were delicious.”

“Yes.”

“They were like a dream...”

She didn’t have to mind her manners or avoid her favorite things because they’d make her look bad. Even if she got a mouthful of her own hair, she could laugh and let it pass. She sleepily told Marin everything that had happened.

“If you’re exhausted, please just rest,” said Marin.

“Okay...” Violette’s eyes fell closed on their own. She’d thought that she could stay awake longer, but this drowsiness didn’t come from fatigue. The soft, warm comfort of her bed gently pulled her under. Sluggishly, she shifted her

heavy limbs into a more comfortable position, and Marin promptly pulled the comforter up to cover her shoulders.

She buried her face in the warmth surrounding her, the day's happy memories playing behind her eyelids. She muttered a final "thanks" to Marin.

As she drifted off, she realized that even after everything, she did end up enjoying herself today.

"Good night, my lady," said Marin.

Marin smiled at the sound of her master sleeping. The small person asleep in the large bed had an ephemeral quality, completely different from her usual elegance. Dreams were far kinder to Violette than waking; even the worst nightmare would disappear when she awoke.

Marin watched over Violette every night as she fell asleep and wished for sweet dreams. *Please, let your mind grant you a beautiful fantasy, not a painful reminder of the past.* Even if the real world was cruel and stifling, she hoped that Violette could laugh freely in the world of dreams.

She would surely have a good dream tonight.

Violette always slept in the same small, curled up position. But tonight, her huddled form didn't look like she was trying to protect herself from danger. Instead, it was like she'd fallen asleep while embracing a precious treasure.

"You've taken the first step, I think."

Violette clearly saw Yulan as someone who loved her unconditionally, a partner whose affection she could accept without suspicion. He gave her the kind of love she should be getting from her family, and she returned it. For now, he was the only person Marin could trust to treat Violette right.

For now, he was the only one who could make Violette happy.

Marin thought she knew where Violette's heart was heading, and she hoped it would work out. Violette wasn't there yet, but wouldn't it be best if she fell in love with the one person who always made her smile? He should do what he could to become Violette's lover...no, he should zip right past lover and become

her official fiancé.

Violette already held a deep affection for Yulan, but changing a friendship to a romance was where things got tricky. Yulan himself understood that it was easier said than done. She had to assume that was why he kept up the pretense as her younger brother, and that he was carefully waiting for the right time to shift things in a romantic direction.

His tactics are impressive, I'll give him that.

If Yulan ever hurt Violette, or made her sad, then Marin would destroy him, of course. So far he'd been nothing but considerate, and Marin had quite a bit of faith that he would stay that way. But until Violette truly fell in love with him, Marin wouldn't help him.

She hoped it would be Yulan, though. In her heart, she was rooting for him. But hoping they got together and actively helping him were two different things. She knew all about obsessive, one-sided love, and people so blinded by their feelings that they caused irreparable harm. Marin and Violette had both experienced the worst of love, after all. She wanted Violette to be happy, and that meant she couldn't force it.

In the end, I can't do this on my own.

Marin knew she couldn't be the one to make Violette happy. And it wasn't just because they were the same gender; even in the past when they were far more taboo, same-sex relationships still bloomed when people wanted them.

But even if she somehow became the perfect man and Violette fell in love with her, she couldn't do it. Violette needed someone who could take her away from this house, and no matter how much Marin treasured Violette, that was beyond her ability. Marin would have to rely on someone else to save her beloved mistress. All she could do was wait, and imagine Violette's smile on the day she finally fell in love. She wanted Violette to have the ideal family she'd been denied all her life, the family that the Vahans should have been.

"Still, I won't give her up that easily."

Anyone who wanted to win her beautiful, intelligent, wonderful mistress's heart would have to put in the effort. She'd build up the highest hurdle to trip

up fools who'd been lured in by Violette's alluring surface qualities. But if they found the right person, someone who passed her tests and who Violette really, truly loved, Marin would use every power at her disposal to prepare a seat of honor for him at her side.

She didn't know yet whether that seat would belong to Yulan, or to some other wonderful prince she had yet to meet, but she would be ready whatever came.

Chapter 37:

They Say Ignorance Is Bliss

VIOLETTE HAD ALWAYS LIKED the expression “a double-edged sword;” it seemed to apply to so many things in her life. Whenever she acted, the consequences were hers and hers alone, even if they weren’t what she intended.

She told herself that as she surveyed the situation she found herself in. This sprang from something she’d done, so she had no right to complain.

She also didn’t have to welcome it with open arms.

“I apologize, Mademoiselle Violette,” said Milania.

“No, it’s fine.” said Violette.

“I appreciate you saying that,” he replied with a refreshing smile.

To his side, directly across from Violette, sat Prince Claudia.

Claudia had a complicated expression on his face that Violette couldn’t quite read, and he sat with his arms crossed and refused to look her in the eye. Milania had clearly noticed his standoffish behavior and had tried to smooth it over a little, but it didn’t do much to ease the awkwardness. Violette could practically feel the disapproval radiating off Claudia; with how turbulent their relationship had been lately, she wasn’t surprised.

But then, *why* had they gone out of their way to sit down at her table?

Milania and Claudia had come to the cafeteria in the middle of lunch break while it was at its busiest. The cafeteria was spacious, but seats weren’t particularly plentiful, and today most people were scattered in small groups throughout the room. There were hardly any empty seats that weren’t next to a loudly chatting group...except in the area around Violette.

Violette was surrounded by a bubble of empty space; the other students were clearly avoiding her. She was pretty sure she knew why, but she also hadn’t minded being left alone.

But she still couldn't imagine *why* Milania had called out to her. She would have thought he'd have enough tact to steer clear and save them all from this awkwardness. When he asked if they could take the seats, she'd had no way to refuse. And she'd been alone at a table for ten people, yet they'd chosen to sit directly across from her.

If her table was really their only option, she'd thought they'd at least sit down at the other end. But Claudia was the prince...maybe she should be the one to give up her seat? No, if she moved now, they'd think she was avoiding them. If only she *could* avoid them!

"Yulan isn't with you today?" Milania asked.

"No...I don't see him as often since we started high school. We're still close, though," Violette explained. They'd spent plenty of time together as children, and in middle school, they'd been together every day. But now that they were both in high school, the days they spent together were fewer and farther between. Violette was happy that Yulan still cared about her, but she was even happier that he wasn't here right now.

Violette and Milania both knew that Yulan and Claudia didn't get along. They wouldn't be so childish as to pick a fight in public, but neither of them was above hiding pointed barbs behind bright smiles.

"Your food will get cold," Violette commented, nodding toward their untouched meals.

"Ah, right. Claudia..." Milania said with a glance at his friend.

When sharing a table with strangers or near-strangers, it was normal to pay extra attention to them, but Violette was otherwise occupied—she was more concerned with avoiding doing or saying anything that a passerby could misunderstand. Practically everyone in the cafeteria knew that Violette was infatuated with Claudia, after all. She herself was the only one who knew that she'd lost those feelings.

Even if Claudia had sensed that she'd changed, that still didn't mean he'd let down his guard yet. He was clearly still on high alert. He finally turned his gaze back toward the table. Violette looked down at her own plate to avoid any chance of eye contact.

Claudia's heart pounded.

For some reason, he couldn't help but remember her smile that day; that soft, gentle expression she'd given Yulan. He glanced up at her. She was smiling today as well—in fact, she smiled all the time. But that expression had been different—bigger, more natural. Her lips had seemed an even a deeper shade of red.

"Um...yes?" Violette asked.

"Oh, nothing," Claudia stammered. He realized he'd been staring. Violette looked up, and their eyes met for just a moment before he quickly looked away again.

Milania sighed, and he and Violette both dug back into their meals. Claudia looked for a way to smooth things over.

"I was just thinking that your lunch is very small," he said.

"Huh...?" said Violette.

Claudia and Milania had normal meals with soup and sides on their trays, but Violette's lunch was just one scant sandwich, if you could even call it that. Even if teenage girls generally ate less than their male counterparts, it didn't seem like nearly enough to feed a healthy teenager.

"It's not strange for a girl to eat this little," said Violette.

"I...understand," he said. It was a flimsy pretense, and probably just caused more awkwardness—and many of the girls dieted, so maybe she was concerned about her figure. As a stranger and a boy, he shouldn't have asked something so personal.

"This isn't some sort of diet meal...I'm just leaving room for dessert," she explained.

"You must enjoy sweets, Mademoiselle Violette," said Milania.

"I do, although...people are often surprised by that. They tell me it doesn't suit me," said Violette. Milania looked surprised, but Violette just smiled like she was used to that response. It wasn't the smile she'd given Yulan, of course;

it was her usual, polite smile that didn't quite look real.

They lapsed into silence, and Violette turned back to her meal. Her pale fingers delicately lifted one triangle of toasted bread, lettuce, and cheese to her lips and took a tiny bite. She chewed slowly, and Claudia caught the movement of her pale throat when she finally swallowed. When she raised the sandwich to her lips again for another bite, he caught a glimpse of white teeth and a crimson tongue.

His imagination went wild.

"It does suit you," Claudia blurted.

Violette quickly swallowed, then replied, "Nnh...hmm...?"

"I think it does suit you. Liking cakes, chocolates, and all that."

Violette had swallowed so quickly that her throat constricted, but it was too late to take the words back. Milania stopped eating in surprise.

"The way you eat is...very beautiful," Claudia continued. He imagined her delicate hands cutting a slice of cake, her mouth taking a bite, the way her expression might light up when that red tongue tasted the sweetness. He couldn't imagine something that suited her more.

Violette froze, her eyes wide like a deer in headlights.

"Ah...!" Claudia gasped as he realized what he just said.

Violette stared blankly as Claudia cursed himself for his clumsy remark. Her polite mask had dropped entirely, replaced with uncomprehending shock.

A spike of panic struck Claudia. Would she take his use of the word "beautiful" and run with it, rekindling her obsessive desire for him? Her infatuation with him had cooled, but it hadn't been long—would this compliment undo that? Would she start pursuing him again, spurred on by one unthinking comment?

After a moment's thought, he didn't really think so. He didn't fully grasp the change in Violette, but it seemed sincere. She felt so different he had trouble imagining her falling back into her old behavior.

But there was *another* terrible possibility.

What if Violette thought it was creepy? She couldn't outwardly show her disgust to the prince, but he would hate even suspecting that she secretly harbored horrible feelings about him.

He couldn't take it back now, and though he racked his brain for an excuse for his odd comment, he came up empty. His brow creased as he cursed himself for even attempting a compliment. Milania was the one who could rattle off some charming comment and have it land just right. Claudia's poor imitation had just dug him deeper into a hole. He gave up, preparing to brush it aside.

"What does that even mean...?" said Violette. She covered her mouth to hide the laugh that welled up inside her. She seemed more confused than delighted, but her face *did* light up with some sort of smile. Not that unforgettable, natural smile, though.

Still, Claudia had made her laugh for real. His heart squeezed as Violette's mask cracked just enough to let her real feelings shine through.

"Thank you," Violette continued as a blush appeared on her cheeks. "I... appreciate the sentiment."

Claudia pushed down the feelings that filled him up and threatened to boil over. A voice inside warned him that he couldn't take much more. But before he could say a word, a shadow fell over their table.

"Hey Vio, can I sit heeere?"

Chapter 38:

Air Is Just for Breathing

“YULAN! You’re just getting lunch now?” Violette asked.

“I got caught up helping in the classroom for a while. Can I sit here?”

“It’s fine with me, but...”

Yulan held out a hand to keep Violette from standing up as he scanned the many empty spaces around the table. It was wide enough for three people to sit shoulder-to-shoulder on each side, so there was plenty of room. If Violette had been sitting alone, she would’ve welcomed him with no hesitation; she always liked having lunch with him. She saw him take in Claudia’s frozen expression and Milania’s wry smile, then he turned to them with a friendly look pasted on his face.

“Do you mind if I share this table with you?” Yulan asked.

“Uh...not at all,” Milania stammered.

“I have no issue with it,” Claudia said flatly.

“Thanks.” Yulan sounded happy; it seemed a little forced to Violette, but that wasn’t unusual for him. He took the seat next to her with total ease, like it was his natural spot. He placed his tray next to hers, and the huge quantity of food made Violette’s lunch look even smaller.

“Just a sandwich again? You’ve got to eat properly, or you’ll *never* get through the day,” Yulan cooed.

“Hey, my lunch only looks small next to yours. I can’t believe how much someone as tall as you can pack away. Anyway, I eat my vegetables. I’ll be fine.”

“You only eat vegetables because Marin makes you.”

Violette glared at him.

“Ha! I knew that was it.”

Yulan saw Claudia and Milania exchange shocked glances; the conversation probably didn't fit at all with their impressions of Violette—and probably himself—as refined, complicated, often difficult people. But Violette didn't notice and Yulan didn't care.

Before he'd joined them, the unusual trio of Violette, Claudia, and Milania was already attracting attention, but now all eyes were upon them. The thin air of tension around the table went unnoticed by Violette and Claudia, though Milania seemed to sense it, too. The whole cafeteria felt like it was holding its breath. No ordinary person would dare approach them.

"Hey, Yulan! I told you to let me know if you found a seat—huh, this is a weird group."

No ordinary person would dare approach, but maybe someone thickheaded enough would.

Gia stood before them with a puzzled look on his face. But he wasn't the only one who had questions.

"Um, Gia...what's that?" Violette asked.

"What do you mean? It's my lunch!" he replied.

"Your...lunch?"

Gia was holding two trays, each piled with a mountain of wrapped bread. Violette looked like only politeness was stopping her from asking, "Are you seriously going to eat all of that?!"

"This again?" Yulan said to his friend. "If you can't finish it all, it's not my problem."

"I can eat this much," said Gia.

"I know you can—but I'm talking about time, not your stomach."

"It's fiiine. I'll only be a little late."

"Being late *isn't* fine. I keep telling you!"

Gia took a seat and set down his ridiculously loaded trays.

"Hang on," Yulan said once his friend settled in. "Vio, you know his name?"

“Yes, we met the other day. I asked him to pass a message on to you,” Violette replied.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” said Gia.

“No, you *didn’t*.” Under the table, Yulan kicked Gia in the shin—not so hard it hurt, but hard enough to let Gia know he was annoyed. Gia was used to Yulan’s two-faced nature and a kick wouldn’t faze him, but he was careful to make sure Violette didn’t see or suspect anything.

Yulan looked at his friend with trepidation; Gia could be both inconsiderate and oblivious, and he might blow Yulan’s cover any moment. Why did he have to come over to begin with? Gia was unpredictable and said whatever was on his mind—sometimes that was a great quality, but right now, Yulan wished his difficult friend was anywhere else.

“Don’t you think it’s *unfair* that I only knew Princess Violette’s name, and didn’t get to meet her for so long?” Gia asked.

“First of all, don’t call her that,” said Yulan.

“All right. Just Princess, then.”

“No, that’s not better.”

Watching her sweet, loyal friend being teased and talking back to the free-spirited Gia was a little strange to Violette. He seemed...rougher when he was talking to anyone but her. With her, he acted like a dog wagging his tail, always eager to please. Maybe this meant he wasn’t quite as open with Gia as he was with her...?

“Then what should I call her?” Gia asked. “How about Vio, like you?”

“Why are you always so extreme...?!” Yulan said, exasperated.

“Well, I’m not going to call her ‘Lady Violette’ or something weird like that.”

“Why not? That’s the *normal* custom!”

“I’ve never heard of a custom like that.” As he bantered with Yulan, Gia started ripping into his breads one by one and taking big bites between

comments.

Gia's antics were just the bizarre cherry on this abnormal sundae; the two top students of the academy, one of them the crown prince, sitting in this bubble of awkwardness while a foreign prince ate endless bread. The whole scene was singularly strange.

"Why don't I ask the lady in question?" Gia turned to Violette. "What would *you* like me to call you, Princess Violette?"

"First of all...why Princess?" Violette asked. Yulan and Gia had started calling her that like it was the most natural thing in the world, but she was the daughter of a duke. It didn't make sense.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I've been using that nickname whenever Yulan talked about you for a while now. I didn't know what else to call you," Gia replied.

"Oh, really...?"

"Yeah...sort of," Yulan admitted, though he sounded hesitant. Violette could tell he wasn't *lying*, exactly—when he actually wanted to lie, he was good enough that he wouldn't make her doubt like this. Most likely, Gia's explanation was mostly correct, but there was some caveat that Yulan wasn't quite sure how to explain.

"Well, people generally call me Violette," she explained. "Only Yulan uses my nickname." Violette's parents would never call her something cute like that, and even Maryjune, who seemed like the type to latch on to pet names, hadn't taken that step yet. The way Yulan spoke to her was unique.

"You can call me whatever you'd like. Violette or Vio is fine. But please stop using 'Princess;' it's misleading." It would look bad for someone who wasn't royalty to claim that title, even as a nickname. Maybe a man could get away with calling his beloved that, but as a private joke that Violette wasn't even in on, it could only cause misunderstandings that might come back to hurt her. She needed to stop this before it became a problem.

"How about 'Miss Vio,' then? It's as easy to say as Princess—but if I stick an honorific on it, that makes it polite and all that, right?"

“Stop it,” Yulan whispered to Gia.

“What? I’m being perfectly tactful.”

“Just shut up.”

It was charming how the two boys leaned in and whispered to each other, although she didn’t catch much of what they said. Yulan was clearly complaining at Gia, based on their expressions. But Gia was probably used to having Yulan poke at him—it didn’t seem to bother him, or affect him at all. Eventually, Yulan gave up and turned his attention back to Violette.

His annoyed expression was replaced by his usual loyal-dog grin. Delight and joy surrounded him like an aura; Violette could practically see little white flowers floating around his head by the sheer power of his happiness.

But even if Yulan had hoped to move the conversation on, Gia threw a wrench in it yet again.

“So,” he said, “are these guys friends of yours, Miss Vio?”

Chapter 39:

If It's You

IT WASN'T JUST Violette who froze at the question; Claudia and Milania seemed just as surprised as she did. Most strikingly, the air surrounding Yulan went from bright pink to gloomy gray.

The question had been a bit rude, but Gia acted like it was a natural thing to ask. And Violette supposed it made sense that he was curious; he would recognize every face gathered at the table, but he'd likely never seen them all together before. Their positions, their ages, their genders were all different; there was no common thread tying them together.

"Not exactly acquaintances, but..." Violette began, but trailed off, at a loss. She didn't want to get into the uncomfortable history between her and Claudia, but she wasn't sure how to describe their relationship without it. Yulan had just opened his mouth to throw her a lifeline when Claudia cut in.

"We're all old friends. Most of the students here are already acquainted through high society, after all."

Claudia didn't look up from his meal while he answered, but his words weren't nearly as stern as Violette had expected. She was puzzled by his response, but it seemed to satisfy Gia; he didn't press any further, and even gave a weak half-apology before stuffing his cheeks like a squirrel.

"I'm more surprised that you know those two," Claudia continued.

"I only met Miss Vio recently, but I've been close with Yulan since middle school," Gia explained.

"Oh, you started here in middle school, is that right?"

Gia had been overly familiar with Violette since they first met, and she wondered if it was his natural personality, or if he'd been raised that way. She was predisposed to let rudeness slide from Yulan's friend, but she wondered if someone like the prince, used to being treated with the highest respect, would

be offended, and whether Gia would get in trouble. But she needn't have worried; Claudia let Gia's rudeness pass without comment. Even Milania seemed surprised.

"Claudia, do you know *him*?" Milania asked.

"We've met several times at diplomatic conferences. He's the imperial prince of Sina," said Claudia.

Sina was an island nation, made up of a string of islands ranging from quite large to extremely small. Most of the population lived on the largest island of the group, so the rest were largely untouched natural landscapes, a treasure trove of rare plants and animals.

Gia was third in line for the throne, Claudia explained, which made him a prince. The citizens of Sina were descendants of a small tribe of hunters, but despite growing into an established country, they were still livelier, blunter, and more casual than the people of Duralia.

Tanned skin, white hair, and blue or green eyes were the norm for Sina's residents, and Gia looked like a perfect example. Every academy student held some sort of privileged position, but Violette never would have guessed that Gia was a prince. Milania's furrowed brow showed the same bewilderment she was feeling.

"The last time we met was when he decided to study abroad," Claudia continued. "I never realized that he was friends with Yulan." At the mention of Yulan, Gia shifted his gaze back to his friend.

Yulan was eating silently, and he had the kind of smile on his face that would usually make Gia look away to give him some privacy. This was his first time seeing Yulan and Violette together, and he was pretty sure that Yulan's mood wouldn't fall as long as Violette was with him.

Well, it might be a little more complicated than that. Yulan seemed extremely happy, but there was an undercurrent of discomfort and negativity, too. Somehow, he managed to exude two opposite emotions aimed at two different people. Gia took a moment to be mildly impressed at his friend's strange skill

before he got bored and dropped it.

“Talk if you want, Gia, but if you don’t eat, you really won’t make it back to class on time,” Yulan said.

“I moh, I moh,” Gia replied through a mouthful.

“Swallow before you talk, will you?”

Gia’s cheeks bulged as he crammed more bread into his mouth, though he did manage to keep his mouth shut for “politeness.” It probably looked like he was about to choke, but he knew the limits of what he could eat.

“You too, Vio. If you’re done with lunch, you should order now,” said Yulan.

“Huh...?” said Violette.

“Today’s special is fruit tarts.”

“How do you know that?”

“Hm? Oh, I asked the waiter before. He mentioned they have lots of fresh fruit in stock.”

“I wasn’t talking about that...” She was surprised that he knew she was planning on dessert today, but maybe she shouldn’t be. She wasn’t exactly hiding her plans, and she ate a small lunch and a decadent dessert most days. She was easy to predict, she supposed.

Sometimes it felt like Yulan knew every possible thing about her. She sulked a little and turned aside, but in the end she ordered a beautiful, shining fruit tart, and any pout was wiped away. Yulan smiled broadly as she made her order.

“How about you, Yulan? If you don’t eat faster, you won’t finish in time,” said Violette.

“I’m fine. I can eat fast, and I don’t have much left.”

“Not much left compared to Gia, maybe. That’s still a ton of food.”

“I don’t want any lectures from someone who eats three bites a day.”

“Quiet, you.”

Chapter 40:

Like a Scene from a Fairy Tale

HE'S SO BLUNT TODAY... *(Chew chew swallow). That's unusual. (Chew chew chew).*

As Gia enjoyed his enormous bites of bread, he watched Yulan with interest. Yulan was normally a steady anchor to Gia's highs and lows. He didn't usually see his friend like this, and it made him rethink things a little.

Gia still remembered the day he first met Yulan.

Sina's monarchy was still new, and their population didn't have much formal education, so it was Gia's royal duty to study abroad. His two older brothers and his father had all attended Tanzanite Academy in the past, so he followed in their footsteps. At the age of twelve, right after graduating from a Sina elementary school, he enrolled in the middle school section and moved into the dorm for international students.

It took a while for his classmates to warm up to him. In a sea of proper young ladies and gentlemen, his relaxed upbringing made him seemed crude; but even if he learned to imitate their manners, the color of his skin would still make him stand out. He had luckily been blessed with two valued traits from his home country: the perceptiveness to notice who had the biggest problems with him, and the boldness not to care what they thought.

Still, no one would talk to Gia. His classmates just watched him from afar, until he started to feel like a rare animal in a zoo. He knew he could get by all right in school, even if he had to stick it out alone, bored out of his mind. He didn't think he had a choice.

"You're going to eat all that?" a student asked him.

"Huh?" Gia grunted, mouth full, as he turned to see an unfamiliar face looking down at him. The question was interested but neutral, not mocking at all.

When Gia looked up into those completely dull, golden eyes, he didn't know

that Yulan would turn his school life completely around.

Yulan was a head taller than everyone else and had a smile filled with kindness and warmth. His size might've made him seem frightening, but with his gentle face, somehow the best word to describe him was "cute." The tall boy had always attracted attention in class, and Gia was surprised he'd come talk to him at all. But even more surprising was the fact that Gia couldn't read his expression. That handsome face was totally inscrutable.

At first, they exchanged brief comments. Next, it was greetings in the halls. Soon, they were talking regularly, then before he knew it, they were spending most of their time together. Gia only realized they'd become best friends when other people described them that way.

"You and Yulan are close, huh? That's surprising," another student told him.

Yulan was well-liked in class, so when he befriended Gia, the others started talking to him, too. They began to see him as an individual, not just a foreigner and an outsider. He never had many actual friends among his classmates, and plenty of them still didn't accept him, but that didn't matter. A comfortable life and a few people to talk to was more than enough.

He wouldn't really claim Yulan as a friend, if he was being honest. That felt pretentious, like he was making more of their relationship than it deserved. He suspected that Yulan felt the same.

Yulan's normal expression was a gentle smile that practically made flowers bloom around him, but with Gia, he'd get exasperated or snort with laughter. His usual gentle tone was replaced with blunt statements or cutting remarks. They could open up with each other, let themselves be a little rude or unguarded, and know that the other wouldn't make trouble. If that made them best friends, then he supposed they were.

But it didn't mean anything.

Yulan clearly liked having Gia around, but he wouldn't feel sad to cut him out of his life. The only person he really cared about was Violette. It was baldly visible on his face when he said her name with a voice as soft as someone handling delicate glass, when his smile overflowed with emotion at the sight of her. He only burst with uncontrollable happiness when Violette was at his side,

and the care with which he shielded her from anything negative—even his own personality—made it clear how much he cared for her.

Gia knew better than to do something stupid like fall for her himself. Yulan treasured her so, so deeply. He was normally indifferent to everything, but his mind and spirit were entirely transformed by her.

Three years after meeting Yulan, Gia finally spoke to her for the first time.

I was right to call her Princess.

As a prince, Gia had seen princesses from many other countries, and he wasn't overly concerned with looks, anyway. But even he was surprised at her beauty. The soft gray of her hair and eyes gave her a mysterious air. Gia didn't think Yulan was particularly hung up on appearances either, but her beauty might explain why he was so overprotective. After all, the attention beautiful people attracted could be a blessing or a curse.

Right now, Yulan's overprotective impulses were out in full force, and the reason was much simpler to understand.

"Is it good?" Yulan asked her.

"Oh yes...delicious. Thank you for asking," Violette replied.

There wasn't a hint of negativity in Yulan's face when he looked at Violette. But when he turned just a few degrees, toward Claudia and Milania, his gaze turned to heavy rain and lightning. Gia couldn't comprehend how he did that—Yulan's two-faced nature was strange and terrible.

It was also *interesting*.

Yulan was almost always impartial, at least when it came to things that didn't involve Violette. He saved all his special kindness for her, but with others, he'd smile politely, act out kindness, but stay aloof. Gia thought his fake niceness was cold and calculating, but it was in Yulan's nature to default to being kind when he didn't care.

For Yulan to display his displeasure so openly, there had to be something else going on.

Did these new people, Claudia and Milania, bother Yulan so much it broke

through his polite mask? Based on everyone's body language, he suspected that Claudia was the problem.

All through the break, Yulan ignored his own lunch to grin broadly at Violette. Gia often ate with Yulan, and he knew this wasn't normal for him; at this rate, he'd take even longer than Gia to finish his meal.

Something must've happened between them.

Gia stuffed a croissant in his mouth and enjoyed the crispy texture as he tore into it. Food here was bountiful, and this country was full of wonderful ingredients and culinary talent.

Gia was sure he could dig up the history between Yulan and Claudia with a little poking around. He couldn't manage that for the average commoner, but privacy didn't exist for aristocrats. Some people believed that a high rank would protect their rights, but nobles had too many things to hide and too many people eager to uncover them. It didn't matter whether the target was a high school student or a newborn baby. Status could protect them from some of the consequences, but it couldn't stop people from finding out in the first place.

But Gia didn't want to do that. Sure, he was curious, but if Yulan wasn't going to tell him, Gia didn't want to know.

Gia felt a little bad for Claudia, being marked as an obvious enemy by his difficult friend. Yulan acted with open hostility toward Claudia—he didn't ignore him, or respond with anything but politeness, but the undercurrent of malice was obvious.

Still, he didn't think even this barely suppressed anger was a sign that Claudia had truly affected Yulan. Violette was still the only person who could do that.

"Miss Vio has it rough too, heh," Gia muttered.

"Hm...?" said Violette.

"What was that? Did all that bread finally go right to your brain?" Yulan asked.

"Nothing wrong with my brain—and you're one to talk. You've barely made a dent in your food," Gia said.

"The way I eat is totally normal," Yulan replied, deadpan, ignoring the

evidence in front of him. He'd barely made any progress on his sandwich, despite Violette warning him to eat faster multiple times. Every time she said it, he laughed it off.

Violette liked taking care of Yulan too, even if he didn't always let her.

When she smiled, Yulan practically danced with joy. Claudia noticed and sourly looked away. Yulan glanced over blankly before returning his attention to Violette with a smile.

Violette was the only person who could reach Yulan's heart.

I hope nothing happens.

He hoped that none of them—not his first friend, not this “princess,” and if possible, not even the prince he barely knew—would get hurt. He hoped that only happiness would circulate among them.

He wished for kindness from an uncertain future.

Chapter 41:

You Don't Lie

THE LUNCH PERIOD was nearing its end. The bell hadn't rung yet, but people had already finished their meals and were leaving the cafeteria or relaxing and chatting with their friends. Today, Violette wanted to join those leaving. She might've stayed to chat if it was just Yulan, but surrounded by Claudia, Milania, and Gia as well, she felt like she couldn't stay a moment longer.

Yulan had already finished eating when Violette took the last sip of her black tea.

"Are you done?" Yulan asked.

"Yes. It was very nice, just as you said," she replied.

"That's good. Then, shall we go?" he asked with a tilt of his head.

"Hm...?" Violette nodded, setting her empty cup aside. She'd expected him to ask more about the dessert he'd recommended for her, but instead he rose from the table immediately and extended a hand to help her up. Violette wasn't sure what Yulan was up to, but his smile widened as he glanced over at Gia.

"I'm heading out now. Don't be late."

"Ngh!" Gia grunted, looking like a squirrel with bulging cheeks. He was down to just one mountain of bread now, but Violette couldn't imagine anyone finishing the whole thing before the bell rang for class. She worried whether he'd be all right.

But Yulan didn't seem worried—the warning seemed more like habit than real concern. Violette wondered whether it was because Gia always made it back in time, or if warnings never actually helped.

Yulan's gentle tug on her fingers pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Pardon us," Yulan said.

"Wai—um, please excuse us...!" Violette stammered.

Yulan gave the group at the table a look, and his eyes lost their usual softness when they locked onto Claudia. The corners of his mouth were turned up in a mockery of a smile, but a robot could pull off a friendlier face. With a firm but gentle grip on Violette's hand, he pulled her along; she had no choice but to follow. She barely managed a quick bow before leaving. She hoped she'd at least done the bare minimum courtesy.

Yulan moved more briskly than usual, but he still didn't push faster than Violette could comfortably go. She could only follow him, watching his soft hair move, only connected by the touch of their hands. If she called out to ask where they were going, she doubted he would answer—she didn't think he had a destination in mind.

Finally, he turned into a small courtyard with a beautiful stone fountain at its center. This one was smaller and more secluded than the larger ones with their blooming flower beds—better for a private conversation. There were a few people scattered around, spending the last few minutes of their lunch break talking. Yulan led Violette over to one of the benches, near enough to the babbling fountain that it would mask the sound of their voices to anyone who might overhear. Their fingers were still touching, and she could tell that the tension in his shoulders had eased.

"Are you feeling calmer?" Violette asked.

"What? I'm fine. I wasn't panicking or anything."

"Right, because calm people run like that."

"Ah ha ha, sorry."

"This isn't a laughing matter."

At that, Yulan seemed to droop, and the shadow of apathy over him seemed to dissipate. Violette knew he wouldn't feel remorse for his rudeness, but he'd apologize for embarrassing her. He did care about that part.

She didn't plan on making him go back and ask for forgiveness, but she racked her brain for some way to get him to act with more restraint. He worried her—what would onlookers think about their relationship, his rudeness to the prince, all of it? What would they talk about behind their backs? If Violette stepped

wrong, would all the blame come crashing down on her head?

“I’m sorry for getting you involved,” said Yulan.

“I’m the one who got you involved in the first place,” Violette sighed. She’d seen Claudia in the cafeteria, and instead of giving him her table, she’d chosen to stay there. Considering their history, of course Yulan would choose to sit between them and shield her. Yulan never would’ve approached Claudia otherwise, or if he *had*, he probably would’ve acted with at least some tact.

She was standing on thin ice, and she’d only just realized how dangerous it was. Her past actions still made her look untrustworthy. She’d come back in time to avoid committing her worst crime, but she still had things she needed to fix. Now that she had this second chance, she didn’t want to drag Yulan or Claudia into her problems. She was supposed to carry this burden alone and atone for it in secret.

“Don’t make that face,” she said to Yulan, scowling. “Don’t apologize to me—you should say it to Prince Claudia, right?”

“I don’t regret anything on that front,” said Yulan.

“Even if that’s true, don’t say it out loud.” Violette let out a deep sigh that drained all the strength left in her. She didn’t want to get involved in the conflict between Claudia and Yulan—she was in no position to lecture either of them about getting along. Still, it was obvious that their relationship was worse than it had ever been. Yulan was never the type who liked getting into fights, so it seemed strange how he always bared his fangs at Claudia. She wondered what had happened between them that she didn’t know about.

Violette fell silent.

“What’s wrong?” Yulan asked.

“No...I’m fine.”

She wanted to ask him about it, but Yulan probably wouldn’t tell her the truth. He was usually honest with her, but he turned stubborn when it came to Claudia.

She doubted she could help, even if she knew.

“Just don’t do anything rash, okay?” said Violette.

“Thanks,” said Yulan. He gave her a wide grin that didn’t reach his eyes, and he didn’t nod.

Chapter 42:

Completely Empty

WHAT DID STUDENTS DO when their classes ended?

Some went home immediately, others took detours, and more took care of after-hours business at the academy. If they had plans, they stayed out, or they went home if they didn't. But could reluctance to go home count as a plan? Violette didn't have friends to go out with. Yulan would probably stay with her if she asked, but she'd feel bad taking up his time just because she didn't want to go home.

So, in the end, she stuck to her usual routine: leave the classroom alone, choose a place with as few people as possible, and wait. She thought about killing time in the library or cafeteria, but other people would probably have the same idea, and she wanted to be alone.

"About an hour, I suppose," Violette muttered to herself.

She could hear the free-spirited voices of people doing what they pleased somewhere nearby, but there was no one in sight. The greenery in this courtyard was beautiful, but the lack of any other color made it seem a bit lonely. Maybe it was just her.

The academy gave its students a fair amount of freedom, but that didn't mean they had free rein of the campus. Unless they were on student council or had some other business at school, they were expected to head home at the end of the day. Violette could only hang around for about an hour before she'd have to go home—until the sky started to change color. She opened the book she'd brought from home; she would probably finish it today.

What should I do next? I could go out, but I feel like it'll just cause more trouble.

On her day out with Yulan, she'd felt free to do whatever she wanted. But now that she had time to think it through, she realized that spending her time going out would cause more problems than she realized.

If she took another after-school detour, the chauffeur might tell her father where she'd gone. Auld had made it clear that she owed Maryjune for declining her invitation, and she knew he'd expect her to pay it back with interest. If Maryjune wanted something, after all, their father would stomp on Violette's heart without a thought to give it to her.

Violette couldn't deny that it hurt.

Stealing this extra time at the academy was her compromise. But the school didn't have much to inspire or delight her. She'd been here for four years already. Even if the buildings changed on occasion, even if the rooms she learned in changed year to year, it was always the same.

"I'm emptier than I thought..."

As she said the words, she realized how true they were. It was probably a stretch to call this a new side of herself—there was barely anything to it, after all. In the past, she'd never bothered much with introspection. She'd allowed her parents to dictate her entire life, and it pushed her past the breaking point. But now that she'd removed all that pressure, she was left an empty shell.

This is awful...

The epiphany sank deep into her heart and lodged itself there.

She'd thought that if she escaped her house, she could fly anywhere. But it wasn't true. Freedom was a responsibility, and every choice she made would come with consequences. In that moment, she felt the full weight of how difficult that would be.

"Violette...?" someone called out.

"Ngh..." she said in surprise. Her revelation had left her frozen until that voice brought her back to reality; she raised her face to see Claudia standing there, holding a stack of papers. Her quiet spot was close to the student council room; it was generally abandoned at this time of day since no one wanted to disturb the work of the council, and especially the prince and student council president.

Claudia was clearly surprised to see her; it hadn't sounded like he meant to call out to her at all, just unceremoniously let her name fall from his lips when he saw her there. But now that they'd noticed each other and Claudia had

spoken, she couldn't just leave.

"You haven't gone home yet?" he asked.

"Um, well..."

She couldn't tell him that she was avoiding her house, but she also didn't want to come up with a lie. He must have sensed something from the way she trailed off and averted her gaze, so he didn't press any further.

"Prince Claudia, are you doing work for the student council?" Violette asked.

"I am. But it's about time for the regular students to go home," he said.

"True..." The sun was beginning to set. She went through this melancholy every evening, but she just couldn't get used to it. On the bright side, looking forward to school every day was probably a good thing. But feeling this dread every afternoon made her feel pathetic.

Claudia trailed off too, and for a long moment they both got lost in their thoughts. Violette searched for a way to excuse herself, but she felt rooted in place. Claudia must have sensed her hesitation.

"Do you have plans this afternoon?" he asked.

"No, not really..."

"If you have some time, could you help me for a while?"

Chapter 43:

Thanks as an Apology

WITH CLAUDIA'S REQUEST, the scale tipped in favor of postponing Violette's painful trip home.

Violette wasn't angry at Claudia; honestly, she was grateful to him. She knew he didn't like her, and she'd planned to give him as wide a berth as possible to keep people from gossiping about them. So far, she'd had trouble avoiding him, and the more time they spent together, the more likely that her past and present actions would be lumped together in a huge, troublesome mess. She should stay away from him whenever she had the option.

But...the lure of staying at the academy just a little longer was too much to resist.

Violette nodded and followed Claudia to the salon that functioned as his workplace. Last time she'd been there they sat across from each other, but this time, only Violette sat down. Claudia told her to wait and disappeared further into the student council room.

While she waited, the salon butler prepared beverages and tea cakes. This time, though, she wasn't here as a guest. She didn't want to watch hot tea go cold, but she hesitated, unsure if she should drink without Claudia's permission.

In the end, her concern was unnecessary. Before she could start feeling bored, Claudia returned with a stack of documents.

"Feel free to make yourself more comfortable," he said.

"I appreciate it," Violette said. She realized how tense she'd gotten and consciously straightened her posture, reaching out for the teacup she'd left untouched. He seemed to study her for a moment, and she wondered if he noticed her discomfort.

Claudia sat down across from her, crossed his legs, and dropped the stack of papers he'd been holding on the table with a thud. He started spreading them out and going through them.

“Thank you for agreeing to help. It’s a busy time, and we’re low on people,” Claudia explained.

“Not at all. I’m happy to help,” said Violette. She knew she should be the one thanking *him*. Claudia had probably thought she looked pathetic and taken pity on her...although considering the massive pile of documents he was sorting through, maybe he did legitimately need the help.

“I’d like you to look through these, fix any errors, and let me know if any of the numbers seem too far off,” he asked.

“Of course,” said Violette. He offered her a fountain pen with red ink, and she began going through the papers. Claudia read through similar papers, writing something out in black ink. His face was intense with concentration. Violette glanced at him and wondered why he was taking on such a big task alone.

“Um, did the other council members have to leave today?” Violette asked.

“Mila stepped out to handle something else.”

“But what about the others?”

“Graduated. We still haven’t picked their replacements.”

True, most of the student council members last year had been third years. The only underclassmen were Claudia and Milania—second years at the time, third years now. Violette didn’t know the inner workings of the student council, but it seemed strange that new members hadn’t been selected in time for this busy period. It would make more sense for them to be appointed during the previous year, so the graduating members could help them get used to the work. Leaving them with just two members seemed totally unreasonable.

“Shouldn’t you have some new members joining around n—”

“The selection requirements this year are particularly strict,” Claudia interrupted.

“I...understand, but...” said Violette.

This year, the prince was the student council president. The council would attract more attention, be given more responsibility, and have higher expectations for its members. It made sense, she supposed.

“First, we need personnel who can do their job without focusing on me,” said Claudia.

“I’d hope that was obvious...” Violette could imagine the disaster it would be to bring in people who were starstruck in his presence. The thought exasperated her on his behalf, but then she remembered how *she’d* acted in the past. She could just imagine how much of a burden she would’ve been on the student council, trying desperately to charm Claudia and letting all her work fall to the side, getting in the way of any diligent workers and overshadowing their efforts.

I’m...really sorry.

As the former leader of his obsessive fan club, Violette couldn’t help but feel apologetic and awkward. She apologized in her heart, but she knew openly asking for forgiveness would just make things worse. Instead, she redoubled her efforts on the work Claudia had entrusted her with. Even if she was just checking over documents, a job was still a job.

Violette gripped her fountain pen tighter and picked up a new document.

Chapter 44:

One Side Isn't the Whole Story

CLAUDIA GLANCED OVER to where Violette was working silently.

Her usually straight back was bent, and she held her hair back in one hand while her eyes scanned the paper in front of her, not straying once. He heard the scrape of her pen a few times, and a small wrinkle had appeared on her brow, making her expression seem almost stern. In the past, he would have assumed this meant she disliked this job and was in a bad mood. He would use that as an excuse to think less of her.

But he realized now that he'd been predisposed to think the worst. Her expression could be mistaken for pouting, but after watching for a little longer, he thought he understood the truth. The wrinkle in her brow lightened every once in a while, and her frown relaxed sometimes. She sullenly puffed out her cheeks, then tilted her head deep in thought, then suddenly burst into motion, scribbling with her pen as she thought of something. Violette was apparently capable of a much wider range of facial expressions than he'd given her credit for. It wasn't that her normal stoic demeanor was a lie, but this version of her, tension gone and lost in thought, was also real. She tucked the loose lock of hair behind her ear, giving him a clear view of her face.

Claudia had always thought of her eyes as dark, but they were surprisingly vibrant. Her hair was a pale gray, closer to white than black. Her eyelashes were long enough to cast shadows, which made her eyes look even more dramatic. He'd thought the brightness of her lips was intense, but it was only in contrast with her pale skin; up close, they were really more pink than crimson.

He knew that Violette was beautiful. She had always *been* beautiful. But Claudia hadn't expected to be charmed by her looks. Only now, with this chance to look closer, did he realize that he'd only skimmed the surface of her beauty.

"Oh...um, about this—"

"Ngh—!!" Claudia exclaimed. As Violette raised her head to ask her question,

their eyes locked. Violette's eyebrows jumped in surprise at the eye contact, but Claudia jerked back dramatically, luckily too surprised to scream out loud. As a prince and a man, he was incredibly relieved that no scream had escaped him, but he couldn't keep himself from shrinking back.

"Um...?" Violette asked.

"Ngh...oh, is there a problem?" he said, correcting his posture and clearing his throat, sure he wasn't covering his awkwardness as well as he'd hoped. He racked his brain for a topic change, but before he came up with something, Violette continued.

"About this part here..." said Violette.

"Is something wrong?" said Claudia.

To see where she was pointing, he had to lean closer. Their shadows overlapped over one piece of paper. He read the line traced by Violette's thin finger, but he just saw unimportant words and numbers. He couldn't tell what the problem was.

"The salon perishables?" Claudia asked. The student council room was a salon, but there were many others scattered across the academy grounds. The line Violette pointed to didn't necessarily refer to this one. The other salons on campus were open to all students as places to relax, and it was the student council's responsibility to furnish and supply them.

"It's about the tea leaves," said Violette.

"Yes? This looks the same as usual." The numbers seemed right, and the brand was the same one they usually bought. He couldn't understand what Violette was trying to say, and his brow furrowed in confusion. He wasn't offended, just baffled, but Violette seemed to shrivel next to him. She seemed at a loss for what to say next.

I guess she's good at reading facial expressions.

That was something else he didn't know about her.

"Please, continue," Claudia instructed.

"Ah...yes. Um, about the tea leaves. Do you, I mean, is there any particular,

um, reason for the choice of brand?" Violette stammered.

"We've been buying this brand for a long time, and no one has complained. Malkuth tea is popular," he explained. Malkuth was a company that provided first-class quality and taste in a range of products, and aristocrats preferred them at school and at home. Claudia defaulted to their products whenever possible, as did most aristocrats. Violette should have done the same.

"Then...would it, perhaps, be wrong of me...to suggest trying another brand?"

"It's not wrong, but..." Claudia was confused; he couldn't understand why they would bother. Their current tea was the best possible, and if there was something better, Claudia would have certainly heard of it.

"It's from a country called Cardina, but there should be a store in Duralia that deals with them," Violette went on.

"Cardina...yes, I've heard of it," said Claudia. He knew the geography of the world, of course. But Cardina wasn't a particularly impressive place. It was an agricultural country without much to attract outsiders. The greenery and landscapes were beautiful, but the majestic mountains and rivers also made it hard to traverse.

As someone who had never been there himself, Claudia only had superficial knowledge about the country, but he'd never heard of them producing anything his fellow students liked. Violette seemed to catch his puzzlement and went on.

"Cardina's products aren't well known, and generally their tea doesn't compare to Malkuth. But...the student council is only responsible for stocking the salons, right?"

"Yes. The cafeteria and the rest are covered by the academy." A school for aristocrats valued independence among its students, so the student council was given the salons to manage. The cafeteria and other stores ordered at a much larger scale, however, and had to be left to the adults. But how did that relate to Violette's questions?

"This is right around the time when Cardina harvests their tea leaves. Cardina's tea is usually harvested and sold within a year, but the process used to preserve it reduces the flavor drastically." That was unsurprising;

preservation kept foods safe to eat longer, but it couldn't maintain food at its freshest state. Adding preservatives meant sacrificing taste to extend its shelf life.

That might be good enough for commoners, but academy students were particular about their food and drink. Taste could be subjective, of course, but their classmates would expect a certain level of quality.

"Then, why are you suggesting Cardina's products?" Claudia asked. If Cardina couldn't match their current tea brand, there was no reason to change it.

"Right now, since it's the harvest season, it's possible to order tea that hasn't been processed. Naturally, the sale period is short."

"Have you ever tried it?" Claudia asked.

"Many times... Personally speaking, I much prefer it to Malkuth's."

"I see..."

Aristocrats were responsible for judging the quality of all sorts of items. That meant inspecting them carefully and doing research into markets to compare different brands on all kinds of factors. And to do that, they needed to try new things with an open mind.

Whatever Violette's personal likes and dislikes were, she'd just demonstrated knowledge that even Claudia didn't have.

I guess we could just try it once...

As Claudia pondered in silence, Violette's anxiety seemed to increase every moment.

"U-um... No, let's leave it as is," she backtracked suddenly. "With its limited availability, I'm sure it'll be too much trouble. I'm sorry, please forget it." She reached out to take back the paper they were both looking at, cringing away from him.

But before Violette's fingers could touch it, the sheet was already in Claudia's hands.

"I appreciate your valuable insight," he said.

“Huh? But—” Violette protested.

“I’ll have to handle the adjustment myself, of course,” he continued and went right to work noting down the change. As an outsider, anything beyond checking for errors was outside her job description.

The whole awkward exchange over, Claudia looked away. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do about Violette. Although their relationship had greatly improved, there was too much between them for him to forgive her this easily. But every time he stole a glance at her, his heart thumped loudly, and he didn’t fully understand why.

“Um...thank you very much,” Violette said.

“I should be the one saying thanks,” Claudia replied.

“I guess we can call it even, then.”

Was it his imagination, or did she finally relax? From the corner of his eye, he saw a hand over her mouth, like she was laughing. Or was that just wishful thinking?



“Uh, Viol—” he began.

“Huh, you’re working in here?” another voice cut in as the salon door swung open.

“Argh—!!” Claudia grunted in surprise as Milania entered the room.

“A-are you all right...?!” Violette asked.

“Oh, Mademoiselle Violette? What are you doing here?”

Claudia tried to stand up, but banged his knee against the table. He swallowed down the pain—high-quality, durable furniture was also extremely sturdy and hard. Instead of crying out, he aimed all his annoyance at his friend.

“Mila...didn’t I tell you to knock first?” he snapped.

Chapter 45:

Justification Required

BY THE TIME Violette finished helping the student council, the sky was dark.

She was so focused on her work that she let her second cup of tea grow cold. She drank it quickly, not wanting it to go to waste, but it was still delicious even if it wasn't fresh.

"Sorry for keeping you here so late," said Claudia.

"You've been a huge help," said Milania, "but look, it's already dark."

"I'm just glad I was useful," Violette replied.

Claudia and Milania both put their work aside for a moment and slumped over in exhaustion. Still, there was unfinished work left on the table. They only paused to see Violette off.

"I'll check over your work later. You're free to go home if you'd like. Your chauffeur..." said Milania.

"He should be at the school gate," said Violette.

"That's good. It's dark, so I'll walk you there." Milania thumped his stack of papers on the desk to line up the edges, then placed his fountain pen on top as a paperweight. Finally putting his work aside, he pushed his chair back and stood with a stretch. Claudia didn't comment; he was already back in work mode.

Violette only understood when Milania held out a hand to escort her.

"Oh, um...it's just the school gate, you don't have to..." It was a short walk to the gate, and she didn't want special treatment, especially if it meant taking Milania from his work.

"You can never be too careful."

"That's true, I suppose..." The academy's security was solid, absurdly strong against attacks from outside, but did nothing against enemies already within

the gates. Under the surface, this stately academy hid a mess of conflicting factions and shifting loyalties, made even more dangerous by teenage infatuation and ulterior motives. There was no harm in being vigilant.

“You helped us out here today, Violette,” Claudia said without even looking up. “We just want to make sure you get home safely. Consider it a thank you.”

“That’s right. And if you refuse, I’ll have to follow you like a creepy stalker, and I’d really rather not,” Milania added.

That persuaded her. Violette didn’t like it when people went out of their way for her, but she hated causing trouble even more.

“Then...could I trouble you to escort me to the gate?”

“Of course,” Milania responded with a broad smile and casually grabbed Violette’s bag. As he got in position by her side, it might have looked to an observer like he had a hand on her hip, but his fingers never actually touched her.

Violette was surprised at his care. She studied his face, wondering if this was what made him so popular; he met her gaze with a perfectly mannered smile. Despite the smile, he felt like a stranger—like his true thoughts and feelings were being carefully hidden.

Right before she left the salon, a voice called from behind.

“Violette,” Claudia called.

Violette stopped. “Yes?”

“Thank you again for all your help.”

“Huh...”

Claudia turned away, but Violette could see how his pale skin flushed red in the bright light of the room. Even his ears were crimson. In a calm corner of her mind, she was amazed at just how many times today had surprised her.

Full of surprises, but not bad.

“I’m the one who should thank you,” Violette replied.

When Claudia found her in the courtyard, he’d given her exactly the excuse

she needed. Claudia might have just been looking for some help with the paperwork, but to Violette, it was a lifeline that saved her from drowning in pain. She was so grateful.

Claudia might not understand why she thanked him, but Violette still bowed her head before leaving the room.

Tip tap, tip tap. Tmp tmp tmp.

The sound of their footsteps echoed in the quiet hallway, the only sign of life left on campus. At least, that's how it felt. There were likely other people around somewhere, servants at least, and of course Claudia was still working in the salon. But the academy seemed cavernous and eerie when it wasn't full of people.

She preferred this awkward silence to struggling to find something to talk about. Milania strode ahead of her, and she ended up trailing him. She kept her gaze straight ahead and tried to stay detached. Being alone with Milania made her nervous in a different way than the anxiety she felt with Claudia.

To Milania, Violette was an egotistical girl who harassed his best friend. He likely didn't even realize she'd changed. Claudia had noticed that Violette seemed different, but neither boy was the type to gossip, and Violette hadn't confessed to Claudia or been rejected. He probably didn't know anything.

The two walked in silence for a few more minutes.

As they neared the school gate, they spotted a vehicle still shining under the dark sky. Only then did the tension in her shoulders finally relax. The atmosphere between them was strained, like something heavier than gravity weighed her down, and she had just about hit her limit when the gate came into view.

"Um, this is fine," Violette said.

"That's your chauffeur?" Milania asked.

"Yes."

"All right, I'll head back. Be careful on your way home."

Violette retrieved her bag from Milania, bowed to him, and turned to leave. The walk to the car had been uncomfortable, but now the realization that she was going home dragged her spirits down. Maybe the ride home would be the most comfortable part of her day.

I hope I don't get in trouble for being late.

Even though she had a good reason for her lateness, she hoped she could get through the evening without having to explain herself. She had to hope that her parents' apathy to everything she did would protect her—they probably wouldn't notice if she got home late, or even never came home at all. Maryjune was the only one who put in the effort. If she was concerned and brought it up, Violette would have to figure out an excuse—hopefully one that didn't include Claudia and require an explanation of everything that had happened between them.

Maryjune might want them to be close, but Violette couldn't do it. It wasn't her fault, and it was even less Maryjune's. It was the dysfunctional environment they lived in.

As she watched the scenery drift by, she tried to guess what would happen when she got home. She let out a sigh so soft that the chauffeur couldn't hear.

Chapter 46:

Excessive Self-Consciousness

EVEN IF VIOLETTE announced she was home, no one would welcome her back. Sometimes Marin would greet her, but when she got in late like this, the maid would usually find her in her room later. The mansion was as still and quiet as ever; despite the three new people living here, it felt the same as it did when she was alone.

Violette was just as distant from her family as when they all lived elsewhere.

“Lady Violette, welcome home,” Marin said. “I apologize for not greeting you at the entrance.”

“No need. I didn’t tell you that I was going to be late, after all,” said Violette.

“What were you doing?”

“I...was asked to help out with the student council.”

“Oh...?” It was unusual to see Marin’s sharp eyes get wide. Violette didn’t think it was that surprising, but apparently Marin thought differently.

Marin had been with her through every day of her infatuation with Claudia. Even if she never actually saw them together, she was a constant sounding board for Violette’s grumbling that she wasn’t making progress. But Violette wasn’t acting like someone who’d finally achieved the romance of her dreams—it had to be throwing Marin off.

“They are severely short-staffed this year. And I didn’t have any particular plans,” Violette explained, her voice neutral.

“I see... If you’re tired, I’ll bring your dinner here,” said Marin.

“I helped for a while, but I couldn’t do that much. I’m fine.”

Violette undressed, handed over her clothes, and changed into the new ones Marin had laid out. She put on a white shirt and long, pale blue skirt with a flared fishtail; when she’d dressed, Marin gave her a once-over and fixed her

collar. It was annoying to change just for dinner, but Violette knew what they'd say if she sat at the dining table in her uniform.

These clothes weren't her most comfortable, but they were closer to nightwear than something she'd wear out. As long as nothing she wore was torn or damaged, she could probably escape any comments from her father.

"Then I'll return when dinner is ready," Marin said.

"Yes, thanks."

"It won't be long, but please rest until then."

Marin bowed and left the room, and Violette slumped on the loveseat. She couldn't really rest without creasing her outfit, so carefully arranging herself on the short loveseat was the best she could do. If she fell asleep, she would probably end up curled up in a tight ball due to all the stress in her life lately, and her clothes would be completely ruined.

But it was fine—Violette's body wasn't tired, only her mind was worn out from the extra strain she'd put on it today. She hadn't even helped that much, but her mind just needed a little rest...before she realized what was happening, her eyelids fell closed, and her swaying consciousness plummeted into the world of dreams.

She didn't know how long she slept.

She woke to being shaken gently. The first thing she saw was an indescribable emotion on Marin's face, painfully lowered eyebrows and a deeply furrowed brow. Violette jolted when she realized what Marin's presence meant. She quickly straightened her clothes, fixed her hair, and rushed over to the dining room, pushed faster by a panic her sleepy mind hadn't fully registered.

When she opened the door and saw her father's stern expression, she understood the look she'd seen on Marin's face.

"You're late. What were you doing?" Auld asked.

"My apologies," said Violette.

"Hurry up and take your seat. We're all hungry, and you made us wait."

"My...deepest apologies."

Violette bowed deeply before quickly hurrying over to her seat. Auld looked ill-tempered, but Elfa, seated across from Violette, softly stroked his hand with a smile to calm him. Next to Elfa, Maryjune puffed out her cheeks and cried “Father, don’t say it like that!” It wasn’t clear to Violette whether Maryjune was angry or not; she couldn’t read her beyond the puffed-out cheeks.

Father and daughter began to talk while mother watched over the two with a smile. His ill temper disappeared completely as his daughter’s words soothed him, and they moved on to happier topics. This happened every day, and Violette had no desire to be included at this point, but she did wonder why this happy family, so complete without her, would bother waiting for her to start eating.

Auld had said they were hungry, but no one touched the food while they talked. There was no steam rising from the dishes, so they couldn’t be waiting for them to cool. Violette said her thanks for the food quietly so no one would hear and picked up her knife and fork.

She concentrated on going through the motions of eating. Move her hands, open her mouth, take a moment to relish the flavor before chewing and swallowing, then repeat. Eating faster wouldn’t help her—she couldn’t leave her seat without asking to be excused, and she didn’t want to talk to anyone. The other three began eating their meal in Violette’s peripheral vision, but the only thing that mattered to her father was Maryjune’s bliss as she enjoyed every bite.

I was too self-conscious.

That thought taunted Violette as she ate in silence. She pretended to chew so no one would notice, but even that didn’t matter. She wasn’t needed here. She was worth about as much as the plants arranged around the walls of the room—a talking decoration. They barely remembered she existed. They wouldn’t care if she didn’t come to dinner, or even if she disappeared completely.

Her optimism revolted her. Did she really still believe deep down that her father cared for her? How was she still holding on to that childish dream?

That torn thread could never be repaired. He’d never cared for her, even at the very beginning. This gap between them was deeper than the depths of

purgatory. It could never be filled.

Violette bit into a soft piece of fish. The food had been made exactly to her tastes, but it turned to sand in her mouth.

“It was delicious today, too!” Maryjune said cheerfully as she ate the last bite of her meal with delight. Her parents nodded, satisfied by her reaction, as they enjoyed their after-dinner tea. They’d probably send their compliments to the chef later.

Over the years, staff members came and went, but the head chef was a veteran who’d been working there since long before Violette’s mother died. She was glad that they appreciated his work, at least. She’d been neglectful of him lately, distracted by everything else, but she should visit and thank him for such delicious food.

Once everyone finished eating, they dispersed surprisingly quickly. She’d almost been expecting them to force her to sit with them longer under the pretense of tea. She was never sure whether they’d demand her presence or ignore her—luckily, Auld’s packed schedule didn’t give him many hours for family time, so it could never be too much of her day. She felt strangely rejected, being sent off like this; she reminded herself that it would be far worse to have to sit even longer playing happy family.

Violette said nothing as she left the dining room, only lightly raising a hand in thanks to the servants lined up against the wall behind her. It was enough to communicate her appreciation; they’d been attending Violette long enough to understand why she wouldn’t want to speak. She sensed Marin following her as she exited the dining room, even though the woman was as silent as a shadow.

People at school thought Violette had presence, but at home she seemed to disappear into the air. It might be handy if she could disappear like this outside the house, too...

Was that thought her trying to find a silver lining, or defiance against the home that made her feel like nothing? She didn’t know.

“Shall I prepare a bubble bath today?” asked Marin.

“Huh...? What’s this all of a sudden?” Violette asked.

“I thought it would be a good chance to wash your back. I can wash your hair for you, too.”

“Oh ho, the full package.”

“Yes, to show you my full appreciation.”

It wasn’t uncommon for aristocrats to be bathed by their maids; children, of course, often needed help, but some maids were hired specifically to help their charges with beauty regimens. Violette had bathed by herself for almost as long as she could remember; even when her mother wanted her by her side at all times, that didn’t extend to getting dressed or bathing. Even after Marin started working for her, she usually bathed privately.

But sometimes, Violette was so exhausted or depressed that she wanted to sink under the water. Marin always seemed to know when she felt like that, and without fail she’d offer to wash Violette’s hair and rinse her back. After Bellerose was confined to her bed, they’d even bathed and played in the bath together for a while, though she was too old for that now.

There were so few opportunities for her to feel the touch of another person’s hands on her skin. It was always such a relief.

“Hee hee, if you don’t mind...” said Violette.

“Of course not. I can tell you haven’t been doing your hair care recently, you know.”

Violette felt the tension drain from her shoulders. She thought she could probably taste food again if she ate something. Escaping the oppressive cage of her family was part of it, but Marin’s sympathy and kindness was what rescued her from sinking deep into dark thoughts.

A few minutes with Marin made her so much warmer than an hour surrounded by family. She could feel her defenses coming down as she smiled softly at her oldest friend.

“Violette!” a voice called out.

With a twinge, her defenses slammed back into place. It felt like her heart was

cracking at the intrusion; the pitter-patter of light footsteps grated on her ears.

“Maryjune, what’s wrong?” Violette asked. By the time she turned to face her half sister, her soft smile was shoved back behind her mask. Nevertheless, Maryjune smiled wide, blushing slightly like she might be embarrassed. Even Violette had to admit she was adorable.

“Um, do you have some time now?” Maryjune asked.

“Yes...I’m free,” said Violette. She couldn’t help but hesitate for a moment; she wanted to refuse, but she knew that would lead to scolding, or even a slap from her father.

Maryjune was annoying, but *nothing* was more annoying than that. She knew what was coming, and she had to accept.

“Then, um...if you don’t mind, can we talk? In my room, please!” Maryjune asked.

Oh yes, just as I thought.

Chapter 47:

A Place Where Her Love Can't Go

MARYJUNE'S ROOM was like a different world.

Violette's own room was dark, painted a subdued color, and honestly felt more like a guest room than a teenager's bedroom. It had been hers ever since she was born, but despite that, she'd never even had the walls painted; it didn't reflect her tastes at all. Still, it had everything she needed, and it was the only place in the mansion where she could relax, so Violette was fond of it.

Maryjune's room was in a completely different style; you'd never guess that the two rooms were part of the same mansion. It was decorated with bright colors and cute furnishings, and every object exuded Maryjune's taste. There were stuffed animals and picture frames scattered everywhere. There was much more *stuff* here than in Violette's sparse room, but everything was meticulously organized, which kept it from feeling cluttered.

A room is a reflection of its owner; it clearly displays its owner's tastes and lifestyle. If the dark and clinical room was Violette, then this soft room was Maryjune. It showed the loving, open mind that treasured so much of what it came across. It was a place built from love.

"Please, take a seat! I'll prepare the tea now. Are you...ah, you just ate, so you won't be hungry," said Maryjune.

"Yes...thanks," said Violette.

Maryjune fluttered around her room restlessly, probably nervous. Her eyes had been full of determination when she invited Violette here, too. This wasn't something she'd normally do.

It was honestly a little surprising to see Maryjune nervous. Violette thought of her as the type who could get through any hardship with a smile. But they hadn't spoken one-on-one since the day she rescued Maryjune and then immediately lectured her.

That...was nerve-racking.

Just remembering that day made Violette's whole body tense up. She didn't regret speaking out to the bullies or to Maryjune; she'd only done and said what was necessary. She was actually *proud* of how she handled herself. But that was only Violette's view. If Maryjune decided that she was a cruel girl who'd heartlessly harassed her younger sister, that's what she'd be.

"I have black tea—how do you take it? With milk, or without?" Maryjune asked.

"Milk, please," said Violette.

"Of course!"

Maryjune had a tea set prepared and began to pour a cup of black tea with experienced hands. Violette was good at making tea—when Marin wasn't around, she generally had it alone—but most nobles left those details to the servants. Even the most aromatic, highest quality tea could be ruined by just one mistake in the brewing process.

She'd assumed that spoiled Maryjune wouldn't bother learning.

"Here you go," said Maryjune, passing her a cup.

"Thank you." The sweet fragrance of the steam rising from the cup tickled Violette's nose. When she took a sip, she was met with the sweetness she'd anticipated, but a texture beyond her expectations. She glanced up at Maryjune, who was stiff in anticipation of Violette's verdict.

"Delicious," she said.

"Really? I'm so glad...!" With that one word, all the tension finally melted away. She finally lifted her own cup to her lips with a smile.

"You seem very used to brewing tea. Do you always make it yourself?"

"No, not exactly...I was practicing for when I had you over."

"Hm...?"

Maryjune hid her bashful smile behind the cup she clutched in both hands; her cheeks were slightly flushed. She was so pure and innocent, like a child:

honest, kind, and soft. Violette already knew that Maryjune was a good person, but it still surprised her to see that goodness on display. She felt the barrier around her heart grow thin and crack around the edges.

“Violette...I’ve been thinking about what you told me,” said Maryjune. She clasped her hands in her lap and squeezed them; it was clear that she’d earnestly reflected on Violette’s words, despite having them thrown at her by someone who ran away a few moments later.

“You’re right. As a daughter of this household...I’m lacking. The duties and social etiquette change at every new event, and I don’t understand any of it,” she said, slowly and carefully.

Maryjune straightened up and looked straight at her. Violette had always hated Maryjune’s eyes; from the first time they met, through the many times she’d hurt this girl, and when Violette went back in time and met her all over again. She still despised them. Even on the verge of tears, they were never clouded.

“But I don’t think I was wrong,” Maryjune continued. “Even now, I have trouble understanding why I should care about anyone’s status. But...I know I wasn’t fully in the right, either.”

Violette stared. This girl was open enough to accept new ideas, consider them, and sometimes change her view, always moving forward, wavering but never stopping. It was just her nature. To Violette, that was incredible...and *terrifying*.

“I know I can’t assume that we...aristocrats, I mean...are always right. But I still don’t know whose beliefs are the right ones...”

Just a few days ago, this young girl was practically a commoner. She came from a noble lineage, but she wasn’t raised as an aristocrat. She was a child stuck in limbo between two worlds, unable to really belong to either of them. It was wrong to force her into the nobility and expect her to fit in immediately.

Still, the aristocracy didn’t tolerate mistakes.

Their father should have been the one to slowly introduce her to this world. But Auld loved his daughter too much to put her through any pain. Maryjune

had come unquestioningly into this world and stayed the pure person she'd always been. How could that be wrong? She'd been raised as a good person, after all.

She loved and was loved. She was kind, gentle, calm, and beautiful.

Why are you—?!

Why was Maryjune so pure? Why was she so *immaculate*? In the past, she forgave Violette for all her crimes. She showed mercy. Violette didn't like to admit it, but her lecture hadn't been for Maryjune's sake; she'd just been venting her anger.

The truth stabbing her heart wouldn't let her look away.

Violette had thought that being raised in a happy, loving home, being doted on and spoiled, had made Maryjune a good person. But she'd been fooling herself. If that was true, she could blame her depressing life, her pain, and her twisted personality on circumstances. She wanted to believe that if she'd been raised like Maryjune, she could be happy. She wanted to think that Maryjune *stole* the happiness she deserved. But even if their positions had been reversed, Violette knew she would *never* be like Maryjune.

Even among all the lucky people in the world, raised by loving parents into lives full of pleasure and joy, only a special few could forgive someone who hurt them like her past self had hurt Maryjune. That level of mercy was just that rare.

Violette didn't know if Maryjune's purity could have survived Violette's life. But even if she'd been raised like Maryjune, she wouldn't have turned out that way.

"...ter? Sister, are you all right?" Maryjune asked.

"Nnh, um...I'm sorry. It's nothing," Violette stammered. She couldn't look into those eyes, full of concern for her. She gazed into her teacup, not bothering to drink, just swirling the contents.

"Oh my, you must be exhausted. I'm so sorry, let's call it a night! May I invite you back another time?"

“Yes...another time,” said Violette with a nod.

The girl’s infectious happiness was adorable. Everything about her was adorable. She was a sweet younger sister in every possible way, and she wanted desperately to play that role. Violette *should* want to protect her, should want only the best for her. She might even love her.

“Then, excuse me,” said Violette.

“Good night!” Maryjune.

Violette turned away and never looked back. She had to intentionally slow her pace; her instinct was to break into a run. Her heart pounded hard in her ears.

Maryjune was kind and beautiful. If they hadn’t been sisters, Violette would’ve *worshipped* her, and it would have been right and noble to feel that way. But Maryjune was her younger sister, the blood half sister who their father loved.

So Violette couldn’t bring herself to love Maryjune. She just *couldn’t*. The moment Violette loved her would be the same moment she hated her forever.

I’m sorry, Maryjune.

Violette couldn’t swallow her hatred. She couldn’t clearly separate Maryjune from her parents. She knew it wasn’t Maryjune’s fault, but she just couldn’t get past her resentment.

In the end, Violette wasn’t like her.

She couldn’t love, couldn’t forgive, but she also couldn’t blame Maryjune. For a broken person like her, best to devote her life to God and atone for the sin no one knew she’d committed. All Violette could do was wait for the day when she could finally leave this world behind. All she wished was for Maryjune to forget she’d ever had an older sister.

Violette wanted Maryjune to be happy.

That, at least, wasn’t a lie.

Afterword

HELLO, this is Reina Soratani.

I'd like to thank you for picking up this book. I hope that you enjoyed it, even a little.

I started serializing this story thinking I wanted to write a rom-com, but suddenly, it turned serious.

If you're asking how it turned out like this, I, the author, am the one who knows that answer the least.

Vio became more contradictory than I imagined and Yulan more spiteful than I expected... I believe the main reason for that is Vio's father. Every time that guy appears, I'm sick to my stomach. I shout "Go to hell!" in my thoughts, but just yelling won't make him fall there, huh...? I guess I can imagine dropping him into hell.

Conversely, it's interesting to write from Yulan's point of view. Although he has an enigmatic personality, at his core is the absolute truth that Violette is number one. In a sense, he's very easy to understand.

Someday, I hope that he and Marin will create a "Violette Convention" to discuss her! Its other name will be "The Convention for Those Who Worship and Revere Violette—by Violette Addicts." I don't know how much of a demand there is for that one, but I'll enjoy it.

I ended up making Claudia more incompetent than I'd planned. What a delightful miscalculation! Arrogant yet incompetent types are my favorite! Mila and Gia are also completely crammed with my favorite tropes. We have a captivating older-brother-type and a handsome boy with a cute face. I especially love, love, love Gia.

Maryjune is...a good girl. She's an all-around good person, but that level of goodness comes from the average. You know, the kind of goodness that a majority of people would vote for. There's still hope because she's pure, but likewise, a potential for despair lurks. I also think that girl has her own kind of

suffering.

There are a bunch of kids who I wish happiness for...but what will happen? Who knows? Not me.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has gotten involved with this book. I'm truly indebted to those in charge. I know I have trouble with my plot being too rough or contacting you too late... I will never forget all that you have done for me.

Haru Harukawa-sama drew the illustrations. Thank you so very much for turning my poorly written prose into beautiful pictures! As you're also in charge of the manga-ization, I found the bright world and everyone's expression to be so much cuter there than in the novel. Also, I'm super excited for the sequel...!

The manga is already on sale, so for those who haven't yet read it, I implore you to obtain a copy for yourself. I've also written a short story in there!

Also, thank you so, so, so much to everyone from the editing department and the readers reading this book!

I'm still very inexperienced, but I plan to keep devoting myself to this story, so please treat me well.

I hope we can see each other again.



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