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The Former **Assassin**  
Who Got Reincarnated  
as a **Noble** Girl

2

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The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl Vol.2

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# Prologue: In the Kingdom of Rienbul

## Side View: Shahrnaz

I was happy, so very happy.

As the daughter of a noble—and a duke at that—I knew I would marry for politics. Love would never be a part of it.

My parents were like that. Marriage and children were obligations. Work. Once a child was born, their job was done. The rest could be left to servants and wet nurses.

I only saw my parents in the manor a handful of times a year. All other times, they stayed with their various lovers.

I believed that was just how nobles were. I believed that was just how marriage was.

The servants had other jobs to do, so they couldn't be with me at all times. To them, caring for me was just another duty, and they only did the bare minimum of what was required.

And so, I believed that was just how my life was.

It all changed when I was a student. Meeting Prince Raheem changed my everything.

Prince Raheem was incredibly popular amongst the ladies from the moment he began attending the academy—unsurprisingly, since he was the king's only son. The house a woman marries into determines her life.

That wasn't the only reason for his popularity, though. He was tall and handsome. He could be arrogant and pushy, but that was countered by his looks and status, only increasing his popularity.

I, too, was one of the ladies who swooned over him.

Considering I was a lady of a duke's house, it wouldn't be odd if I married into



royalty, but I didn't believe I could possibly approach the prince.

We sometimes greeted each other when we crossed paths at the academy, which was enough to satisfy me. And it was why I was so utterly shocked when it happened.

"You've been on my mind from the moment we met. I want you to become my princess consort."

I thought I was dreaming when he said that to me.

"How incredible! I guess even you can manage things when you try," said my mother in one of the rare instances she spoke to me.

"Well done. A duke is always delighted to have a tie between his family and the royal family," said my father, in an uncommon compliment.

They saw me for the first time. They spoke to me. They acknowledged my existence. That made me happy.

And I was engaged to the prince I had pined over. That was the first time I knew joy and happiness.

That was why I forgot. I forgot that for nobles and royals, marriage was just a job, and love or happiness wasn't involved. It was something I should have never forgotten.

"Shahrnaz, I'm sorry. I have a previous arrangement to meet her," he would say. "I'm sorry."

"...It's nothing, Your Highness. Please, enjoy yourself."

"I will. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The prince was still popular with plenty of ladies even after becoming engaged, and he was so social he regularly went out with people other than me.

But it's fine. I'm his betrothed. We will marry, and he will pay attention to me once I bear him a child. But...isn't bearing a child just work? Once that is done, will our relationship be over?

No, it couldn't possibly. I'm not just some object meant to birth him an heir.

I'm going to give life to the future king of this country. I have nothing to worry about.

I pay no mind to the ladies who smile proudly at me as they go out with the prince, who sneer at me, the person the prince didn't invite out. I am his fiancée, after all.

And right now, I am so happy. After all, in the most literal sense, I am the only one who can stand beside the prince.

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## WHY?

We graduated from the academy and married. I gave birth to a child, a boy with silver hair and blue eyes. We named him Shaghad. Everyone was happy, as they should be. It was the birth of Rienbul's successor. So many servants and nobles congratulated me.

Even my parents told me I did well.

I did my job well, as I was meant to. So then...why?

"He won't be home today either?"

"My apologies, my lady. His Highness is out on business. He likely won't return this evening."

Liar. I know what's going on. I know where he is, who he's with, and what he's doing.

Tell me then: why?

"Mother?"

In such a short time, Shaghad, once just a babe, had grown into a four-year-old boy. How many times has his father returned to the royal palace in that time? How many times has he even seen his son's face? How many times has he even spoken to me?

"Mother, are you lonely?"

Oh, what a kind child. A lovely child. The child that came from the prince and me.

He squeezed my hand, looking uneasy, but smiled and said, "I'm here with you. Be happy."

"Be happy?" I repeated.

"Mother?"

That's right. I have a child here. I gave birth to the future king. And yet, the prince still won't come back.

"Why isn't it him here by my side?" I said aloud.

"....."

Not that anything would come of asking this child that.

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**SHAGHAD** turned six, and the prince finally returned to me.

"What did you say?" I asked.

It had been such a long time since he'd spoken to me. I was overjoyed that he would finally be turning his attention to me, but when I went to him, I saw a young, beautiful woman beside him.

*I know her.*

She was well-known in the royal palace and social circles. She was the daughter of a viscount and the prince's favored lady. If I remembered correctly, her name was Anita Alaban.

Next to them were two children close in age to Shaghad. They both had peach-colored eyes, but the boy had blue hair, and the girl had hair the color of a sunset. They both looked a lot like His Highness and Anita.

"These are my children with Anita. They're twins. The boy is Ismail, and the girl is Aisha," said the prince.

"You impregnated your mistress while I was carrying Shaghad?" I asked.

"Did you just call her my mistress?"

"Raheem, darling, it's all right. It doesn't bother me," cooed Anita, addressing him without his title and drawing close to him so her ample bosom pressed

against his arm.

*What a vulgar woman.*

“Anita is the love of my life. I will not allow you to degrade her honor with such ridiculous things as calling her a mistress!” shouted Raheem.

“The love of your life?” I repeated dumbly.

*Then what am I? Didn't you tell me you loved me?*

“Hee hee, I'm sorry, Shahrnaz,” tittered Anita. “It's just, we love each other very much.”

*There it is again, that smile. I've seen that same pride-filled sneer from so many other ladies. I'm sick of it.*

“Well, love is just wonderful, Viscount Alaban's daughter,” I said. “But you'd do well to mind your manners between us nobles if you're going to be the prince's lover, Viscount Alaban's daughter. Regardless of whatever your relationship is with His Highness, I am still his wife, and I am from a duke's house.”

“Oh, dear, I'm so sorry, Shahrnaz,” she said.

“No, I should apologize,” I said, “for stepping in to look out for you when I shouldn't have. I know His Highness likes that aspect of you, but many people in the palace won't let that sort of behavior slide.”

Despite me pointing out that I was of a higher rank than she, Anita simply insisted that could easily be overturned. That's why I had the last word and told her she couldn't survive in the palace if she continued acting like a harlot. I was starting to feel ridiculous attacking a woman like that.

I looked at the children standing next to Anita. “Your Highness, what are your plans for these children?”

No nobles in this country treated children born out of wedlock with decency. It was even worse for royal children born out of wedlock, as they were sometimes eliminated out of fear they could become the spark that would set conflict ablaze. That didn't apply to the children of acknowledged consorts, however.



What was even worse was that Anita was a viscount's daughter. Neither she nor her family had much power. All she did have was the prince's favor, and it wasn't certain how long that would continue.

"It's obvious. I'll have them officially acknowledged as my children," said the prince.

"Urk. Then what do you intend for Shaghad? Are you aiming to start a struggle for the throne?" I asked, incredulous.

"A struggle for the throne? No, that won't happen."

"But you just said you're going to have those twins acknowledged as your children! That would mean giving them a place in the succession line for the throne. Can you honestly say there would never be a fight for the throne if you did that?"

"I can."

I looked at Anita and saw a confident smile despite the prince's proclamation that her children wouldn't seek the throne.

*What does this mean?*

I could tell Anita was hungry for power. Now that she had the prince's love, she would be after my position of princess consort. I was certain she would run Shaghad and me out and then place her children in line for the throne.

I know love is blind, but is the prince really that oblivious?

"Shahrnaz, be honest with me. Is that child really mine?" His Highness asked me.

*What?*

"What are you saying? I swear on my life, he is your son," I vowed.

"He doesn't look like me."

"I know he resembles me more, but look at your father's portrait. Doesn't he resemble His Majesty when he was young?"

"If you go far back enough, you'll find a royal marrying down into a duke's family. It's not unbelievable that he'd resemble the royal family from your side."

“Wait, are you saying Shaghad may not be your son? Which would mean Shahrnaz has laid with another man,” said Anita, the shock seeming an act. Then she smiled. “That is a betrayal of the worst kind.”

I was the one who was blind.

They planned to attack me with suspicions of adultery and make Shaghad out to be a bastard child. I always had servants and guards assigned to me. I couldn't possibly slip out of their sight and commit adultery.

“Don't be ridiculous!” I cried. “What absurd accusations. Shaghad is the son of Prince Raheem and I; there is no questioning that.”

“Oh, a fiery reaction like that is quite suspicious,” said Anita.

“Be quiet, you whore!” I snapped.

“Shahrnaz!” roared the prince.

“Eeeek!”

He struck me.

“Princess Shahrnaz!” called one of my guards.

I saw him run over through blurry eyes. The prince glared at me, huffing in rage even as the knight tried to calm him.

Anita watched me with amusement. She didn't voice the word “Pathetic,” but she did mouth it.

And she was right. How utterly pathetic I was.

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***BUT everything will be all right. King Rashid will return from the border after quelling the skirmish there with our neighboring country and fix all this.***

*It will be all right.*

“I heard Prince Shaghad isn't actually Prince Raheem's son.”

“I can't believe the future queen consort had an affair.”

It will be all right.

“Who do you think she slept with?”

"I imagine it was because Prince Raheem treasures Lady Anita more."

"Likely. Adultery is the prerogative of powerful men, but not acceptable of women."

"You're just being snide because His Highness wouldn't take you as a partner."

It will all be all right.

"Mother...?"

It will all be all right.

"What does Prince Raheem plan to do?"

"In no normal situation could the daughter of a viscount become the princess consort, and I doubt His Grace will stand silently by while the prince insults his daughter. Shahrnaz is safe as the prince's consort, though she'll be his wife only symbolically."

"You're probably right. He only has eyes for Lady Anita, after all."

It will all be all right.

"Shahrnaz!"

"Mother, Father, I..." I said as my mother advanced on me, her face contorted like a demon's before she struck my cheek with all her strength.

"You pathetic girl! How could you lose to that viscount's daughter who popped out of nowhere? What have you been doing all this time in the palace?! You cannot begin to understand the shame you've brought on our family."

"How shameful to give birth to the prince, then turn into *this*. I'm disappointed in you," said my father.

It will all be all right.

"Mother."

*Hm? When did my parents leave? I never even noticed. It's dark in here. Have I eaten? When was the last time I ate?*

"Mother."

*Well, I'm not hungry. I'm sure it's fine.*

"Mother."

*Would you look at how dusty this room is? When did the servants stop cleaning in here?*

"Mother."

*Has Shaghad eaten? Well, I'm sure it's all right. He's not a baby anymore. If he's hungry, he can take himself to the dining hall.*

"I'm so tired," I said.

"Mother. You're tired? Why don't you go to bed? I'll take you."

Something tugged on my sleeve. I looked at it.

*Oh. My son. The prince's son.*

"I gave birth to the prince, the boy who will one day lead this country. The child between me and Prince Raheem. And yet..."

My son stopped tugging at my sleeve. He looked up at me with worried eyes.

"Mother?"

"Stop."

"Mother?"

"Stop calling me that!"

"....."

*It will not be all right!*

How could any of this be all right? What makes you think any of this is all right? It couldn't possibly be! How has no one realized that?

Someone, please, save me!

I loved him. We swore everlasting love to each other, but it was all pointless. There's nothing for me here in the palace.

"Mother?" Shaghad gripped my skirts and looked at me uneasily. To me, he looked like a chain keeping me from fleeing.



“You, too, would keep me bound to this prison?” I asked. His hands loosened for just a moment.

What am I saying to my son? He was the same as me: an imprisoned innocent. He was the least guilty of us all. All he did was come into this world.

“Mother...” And he still just tugged desperately at my skirt. Like he wanted me to see him.

My beloved son. My beloved yet utterly useless son. I love you, but you have his blood, and he’s the one who put me in this situation.

He and I loved each other so deeply. He told me I was the only one and swore his undying love to me, but those promises were no more than a castle built on a foundation of sand.

“I...want to be happy,” I said.

“Mother?”

Before I realized it, I was tearing my son’s hands away, shocking him. He would never understand what I had done or what I was planning on doing next.

“I want to be happy,” I said.

And then I ran with pained cries behind me.

Yes, my son is calling me. I know. I have to go back. I have to stop. But what for? Why must I stay trapped here? Why must I endure this?

No one loves me here. No one turns to look at me. They all mock me. Sneer at me. Say how they pity me.

And that means there’s no reason for me to stay here, no reason for me to turn back.

“Osman,” I said, taking the hand of the one knight who ever held out a helping hand to me and fled the palace.

Leaving behind my beloved son.

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**Side View: King Rashid of Rienbul**

**“GET** my son and his woman in here this instant! As well as that worthless man’s advisor!”

*Curses. This is a disaster.*

I knew my son failed to think things through, but he fulfilled his duties without issue, which made me believe he would be all right on his own so long as I gave him an advisor. I was clearly wrong.

I left for duties far from the capital after my son Raheem made Shahrnaz his princess consort and bore him a son. She was meek and considerate, and I suspected she would dedicate herself to supporting Raheem.

I never imagined I’d return to find things like this.

“Search for Shahrnaz and Osman,” I ordered.

“And return them?”

“No. She left because she could no longer bear to be here. I would pity the woman if she were forced to return.”

Nobles who ran from their status once were scorned by society. There was no need to intentionally create a tragedy here.

“I just want you to confirm she’s living somewhere safe. The daughter of a duke will find commoner life difficult. Prepare a small sum to help support her lifestyle as consolation.”

My advisor stepped out, and in came Raheem and the viscount’s daughter, who caused this mess, as well as the two children carrying Raheem’s blood despite being born out of wedlock.

“Father, you must be tired after your long duties away. I have a joyous announcement to give you,” said Raheem, oblivious.

“Captain of the Knights, take the tiara from that woman’s head!” I said. “Bring the treasury’s chamberlain; his head will be removed right here.”

“Father!” Raheem cried.

“What?! What are you doing?! Don’t touch me!” the woman shrieked.

“Your Majesty.” The Captain of the Knights brought the tiara to me after

removing it from the woman's head.

It was, as I thought, a national treasure, a tiara meant to decorate the head of only the queen. It was a gift from me to Shahrnaz.

It was not something that should ever be on *this* woman's head.

"I've brought the chamberlain," said a knight. His mouth formed a straight line, and his knees trembled as he led the chamberlain in.

Releasing national treasures from the treasury for use was one of the chamberlain's duties, meaning the tiara only made it onto that woman's head because he allowed it despite his duty to protect it.

The law made it clear that failing to administer national treasures appropriately was a crime, regardless of the reason. The chamberlain knew that. That was why his expression was twisted in fear.

"Do you have a defense for your actions?" I demanded.

"...No, Your Majesty. I apologize for failing to carry out the duties you entrusted to me."

Giving a tiara meant only for the queen to another person was a severe crime, even if Raheem had brandished his authority and forced the chamberlain to open the treasury, even if the chamberlain's friends or family had been taken hostage. There were no exceptions, as something like this could unfold into an event that could rock the country to its foundation.

"I swear your family will escape the worst of this," I said. "Out of respect for the fact that, up until now, you have carried out your duties honorably, I shall ensure they receive no less than a certain amount of support."

"I am grateful for your benevolence, Your Majesty."

"Do you have any last words for your family?"

"Tell my wife thank you for everything and that I love her. And to please look after the children."

"As you wish."

The executioner who came with the chamberlain beheaded him on my order.

“Eeeeeek!”

The woman shrieked at the sight of someone being beheaded right in front of her while the children and Raheem paled.

I picked up the chamberlain’s head after it rolled across the floor and held it out to Raheem. “This is your crime.”

“Mine?” he uttered dumbly.

“Yes, *yours*. This is what it means to use your authority to have your way. The innocent become the guilty and risk losing everything, up to and including their lives. That is what it means to have power.”

I turned my eyes to the children, and they jumped. I pitied them too much to kill them, but they risked causing war. Perhaps it would be better to keep them close and monitor them rather than send them far away.

Both my fool of a son and this woman were nothing more than masses of greed lusting for power. But they hadn’t committed a crime that justified a death sentence.

I would not be a king if I executed for no reason. I would be a tyrant who would destroy the kingdom.

“Lady Shahrnaz’s family has objected to what has happened,” I said. “Your actions created a rift between us and them. We may be royalty, but we cannot run a country if the nobles refuse to work with us. Royals alone cannot rule a kingdom.”

I had repeatedly told him until I was blue in the face that he needed to treasure his retainers, yet this happened. I’d had my reservations about officially declaring him crown prince, so I hadn’t. That was the right decision.

“I am removing your advisor. And, Raheem, I am removing you from the line of succession for the throne.”

“But Father!”

“Not only did you remove a national treasure from the treasury without the king’s permission, but you also humiliated the princess consort, the daughter of a duke, and even attacked her with accusations of infidelity until she was forced

to flee. My decision is appropriate. The guards watched her at all times. She never had time alone. She couldn't possibly hide an affair. You should know that better than anyone, yet you spread those baseless rumors. I know because I already had it investigated. Shahrnaz was not unfaithful. There is no questioning that Shaghad is your son. He is the successor for the throne."

"Your Majesty, I've brought Prince Shaghad."

Shaghad came closer, looking uneasy, and I removed a ruby brooch from my chest and pinned it to his. That action sent both Raheem and my retainers reeling. Only that woman and her children didn't know what was happening.

"Shaghad, this brooch is a national treasure. Our kings have worn it for generations. It is also something to give your dearest beloved."

"Dearest beloved?"

"The person you love the most."

By giving him that national treasure, I acknowledged Shaghad as the sole successor to the throne.

But it was a double-edged sword. While it would offer some protection for him, it would also put him in a dangerous position. It was still better than when he had nothing, though.

"Rubies protect their wearer from all dangers and disasters, encourage the growth of an unyielding will, and show the way towards victory in battle," I said.

I didn't know what future awaited the two remaining pitiful children. That is not something a king should bother himself with.

"The only successor for the throne of Rienbul is Shaghad," I declared. "Those two will not be members of the royal family. They are not permitted to take the name Rienbul as their surname."

"But, Your Majesty, Ismail and Aisha are Raheem's children," said the vapid woman, arguing back.

"Which is why I'll allow them to reside in the royal palace. It would be cruel to separate them from their mother. You may live here as well. I imagine you have nowhere to return to now."

Apparently, the viscount attempted to disown his daughter out of fear of misdeeds the moment she became pregnant with Raheem's children, but I wouldn't allow him.

"The two of you will use the name of your father: Alaban."

There was no greater humiliation for a woman who truly believed she would become royalty.

"That is all. You are dismissed."

# Chapter One: The Exchange Students

**THREE** students were going to come from the kingdom of Rienbul to study in Astra.

“I don’t see why that means I have to look after them.”

My father, Art, had returned to the manor for the first time in a long time, immediately called me to the sitting room, and forced an incredibly tedious job onto me.

“It’s a request from His Majesty,” he said. “And there is no greater honor for the Violette family than to forge a closer relationship with the royal family of Rienbul.”

It doesn’t matter if they’re royalty; making a new relationship with another human being isn’t about whether it’s an honor or not. It’s only about whether it’s profitable or not. What is Art aiming at dressing this whole thing up with a sham about honor?

“I’m not actually meant to look after them, am I?” I asked.

“Hm?”

Of the three students coming from Rienbul, two were allowed to live in the royal palace but weren’t recognized by the current king as members of the royal family, and their mother wasn’t given the title of princess consort.

“Only Prince Shaghad, son of former Princess Consort Shahrnaz, is officially recognized as royalty and allowed to carry on the surname Rienbul,” I continued. “The other two, Master Ismail and Miss Aisha, use their mother’s surname. They are not royalty.”

According to the information I gathered in advance:

They shared the same father, Prince Raheem, the sole legitimate child of King Rashid, who married the former Princess Consort Shahrnaz, the daughter of a

duke. The marriage caused quite an uproar. It was seen as a true marriage of love, rare amongst nobles and royals, and the union resulted in First Prince Shaghad's birth.

However, Prince Raheem had already tired of his relationship with Princess Consort Shahrnaz by then and had taken on a lover named Lady Anita, the daughter of a viscount.

Unable to bear the situation, Princess Consort Shahrnaz fled the royal palace, leaving behind six-year-old Prince Shaghad. When she did, Prince Raheem brought Anita and her two children into the palace and treated them like his princess consort, prince, and princess.

King Rashid couldn't stop that outrageous behavior because he was away on distant duties at the time. His fury was great when he returned and learned of what happened in his absence. He removed Prince Raheem from the succession line, refused to acknowledge Anita as princess consort, and wouldn't even allow them to marry. Ismail and Aisha both had royal blood but weren't acknowledged as royalty.

The one mercy, perhaps born of a father's weak heart, was that the king allowed the three of them to reside in the palace.

"It is true that Prince Shaghad is the only one currently recognized as a legitimate heir to the throne," said Art. "But there will be three students coming. I believe it is too early to solidify how we should engage with them. You never know what may happen."

King Rashid was currently fifty-five, though still active as king. Prince Shaghad and his half siblings were the same age, seventeen—Ismail and Aisha were twins. If something happened to King Rashid before Prince Shaghad could develop a strong foundation, nobles who wanted to manipulate Prince Raheem might interfere.

The greedy don't tend to find the legitimate rulers to be the most convenient pawns.

And if something were to happen to Prince Shaghad, then Prince Raheem's faction would be in a superior position.



In addition, it wasn't entirely clear why Rienbul and Astra agreed to have not only Prince Shaghad but also the other two come as exchange students, nor what the twins' goals were.

Art was trying to say it would be best to treat the twins with a certain amount of respect in case something unexpected happened.

*Sigh, I shouldn't've been reborn as a noble. I have to deal with all these pains, and none of it even fills your belly.*

"I understand, Father," I said. "May I ask another question while we're discussing this?"

"What is it?"

"Why our family? We're not the only high-ranking nobles in the kingdom. There are plenty of other people capable of looking after those three. Why was our family chosen?"

*Why was this annoying job hoisted on me? It wasn't because Evan pulled some strings for some plan, right?*

*Because if so, I'll strangle him.*

"There are two reasons. One: Of all the high-ranking nobles, our house is the only one that is not part of a political faction. Which doesn't mean we're low in rank," said Art.

Just a short while ago, the Astra nobility had been divided into three factions: the Queen's faction backing First Prince Evan, the Royal Consort's faction backing Second Prince Heinrich, and a neutral faction.

In the end, Heinrich failed, and the Royal Consort was assassinated by someone, leading to the dissolution of the factions.

It was me. I assassinated her.

Even though one side had been destroyed, that didn't mean everyone could get along factionless like nothing happened. With only one prince now, the nobles formerly in the Royal Consort's faction were scrambling to earn Evan's favor, as were those in the neutral faction.

Our family was the only one who stood back from the whole thing. Which, I

suppose, meant we were the only family they could trust.

“While Rienbul may look fine on the surface, several issues are playing out behind the scenes,” explained Art. “Even though King Rashid’s intentions are clear, there is still a struggle for the throne.”

If some clumsy nobles came too close and helped one of the three students, the entire kingdom of Astra might end up embroiled in Rienbul’s succession strife, but Astra couldn’t refuse to accept them since we were allied nations. The two kings likely had some sort of agreement regarding the three that would benefit both sides.

“The second reason is you, Selena,” said Art.

“Me?”

“You should be able to handle problems if they should arise. Partially because of your intelligence, of course, but also because many nobles saw how you handled yourself better than most unskilled knights at the Festival of Hunting.”

Royal Consort Hera had tried to end the life of the Queen’s son, First Prince Evan, during the Festival of Hunting in the middle of the struggle for the throne by drawing monsters to the festival. I found myself eliminating monsters during that crisis as the horde attacked an area filled with noble children, as well as the prince. While the place was utterly chaotic, so many people were participating in the festival that many also saw what I did.

I bet Scarlanette was enthused to tell of it. I should have let her die.

Art never once asked me why I could fight. Maybe he wasn’t interested or just decided it wasn’t a significant issue. I wasn’t sure why.

I’ve always had a hard time guessing what he was thinking anyway. I originally thought it was because we interacted so little, but I was wrong. It’s because he hides it, carefully concealing his thoughts and emotions.

“Do you mean something will happen that requires combat skills?” I asked.

“I’m just saying the possibility is there.” He smiled pleasantly, and I couldn’t read his true thoughts. “Oh, and that boy, Tiegel, was it? You may take him to the Academy with you. You’ve been given special permission. There are many

things a lady such as yourself wouldn't be able to assist with, and Prince Evan has his official duties and may be unable to handle everything. This special arrangement is only while the exchange students are here."

Art smiled, adding, "This issue is not up for debate."

While all of noble society was a pain to deal with, he was particularly annoying. "Yes, Father."

I could only pray I wouldn't have a lot of annoying issues to deal with.

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**ON** the day we were greeting the students, I went to the royal palace an hour before the guests from Rienbul were due to arrive because I wanted to meet with Evan, who would be working with me on caring for the students. Tiegel accompanied me since he would have to support me and Evan.

"Ah, Selena, you're as beautiful as ever," said Evan as he pressed his lips to the back of my hand.

Gentlemen of this country greeted women by complimenting them the moment they saw each other. It was practically a natural reflex for a prince like Evan.

But he didn't need to greet me. I'd told him that several times, but he never changed how he greeted me.

"It looks like we both have a mess to deal with. It's a bit of a tedious story, but I should tell you what's going on behind the scenes, what the king of Rienbul is really thinking," he said before jumping into the explanation. "Do you know the relationship between the three coming from Rienbul?"

"I do."

"Then I'll leave that out. Only Prince Shaghad is recognized as royalty, though there is no denying the other two have royal blood. Leaving them free to roam would likely end with fools trying to take advantage of them. That's why the king chose to keep them in the palace."

That made sense. Rumor said it was due to the king's mercy, but he had a rational reason for that decision.

“Just them having royal blood makes them difficult to handle. If something were to happen to Prince Shaghad, for example, the next king would be chosen from people with royal blood,” continued Evan.

Assassins had been sent to kill Prince Shaghad, and not just a few times. Apparently, some people thought one of the two twins would end up in line as successor if Prince Shaghad were killed, though whether that were nobles or Prince Raheem, I didn’t know.

“But I didn’t think King Rashid had acknowledged the twins as royalty,” I said.

Even if Prince Shaghad was killed, I had a hard time believing that would easily bring the twins closer to the throne. They’d possibly move further away since they would be the most suspected of foul play.

“And the royal family would have subbranches. If it comes down to it, someone from those branches could just be chosen as king,” I added.

“Possibly. But if they did that, the royal blood would be thinner. They would want to avoid that.”

“How idiotic. ‘Blood’ is nothing more than a function for circulating your life force; it has nothing to do with your capabilities or talents. But royals and nobles are always so obsessed with blood, like it’s something sublime. It’s ludicrous,” I sighed.

“Hah, haha!”

Just as I noticed Evan had fallen quiet, he hugged his sides and burst into laughter.

I have no idea why his sense of humor makes him laugh at what he does.

“Oh, dear,” he said, wiping tears from his long lashes because he’d laughed so hard. “You’re absolutely right. Selena, you really are incredible.” His expression turned serious in a way I rarely saw. “One day, we’ll live in a world where people are judged not on their blood but their abilities.”

At the time, I had no idea of Evan’s resolve when he said those somewhat prophetic words.

“Anyway, getting back on topic,” he said. “The king of Rienbul wants Ismail

and Aisha to cause some sort of problem during their studies here that they can't recover from. We want to overlook things, to an extent, sort of releasing them into the water to sink or swim, so to speak."

"He wants them to cause a problem so they can be punished?" I asked.

"Yes. We don't expect them to do anything so severe it will result in execution or banishment, but the king is hoping for a mistake bad enough to convince the majority of the Rienbul nobility that the twins couldn't possibly take the throne. That would make it so even if some nobles tried to push them onto the throne, they would find it too difficult because of the forces against them."

"That's an overly elaborate plan for eliminating them. It would be easier to just kill them," I pointed out. "If you're going to kill them socially, it shouldn't be that big of an issue to kill them physically instead. I think that's actually the kinder method. It's not uncommon in this world for living to be the greater hell."

"How violent of you. Lives shouldn't be stolen that lightly. That would make us no different from the lawless."

"I still think my suggestion is much kinder than sending them to Astra, knowing they'll cause a problem."

It would be an insult to them to be sent away from the palace because they caused some issue. I've seen enough nobles to know how joyous it is for them to be allowed to live in the palace. I've also seen how much blood they'll spill for the chance, how much blood they crave.

I've also seen what happens to nobles who leave the palace after losing the fight for power. Not in this world, though. My previous one. Thinking of that makes killing them seem way more merciful. Though, it's not like I care what happens to them.

What I didn't like was how the king of Rienbul treated leaving them with their lives, if nothing else, as if it was some kind of mercy and demanding they be grateful for it. The gall.

"And he's intentionally sending them to another country to cause problems in," I said. "Astra is far from the smallest country in the world. If they create a

problem here, they won't escape social exile. That is essentially death for a noble, isn't it?"

I wouldn't mind if it happened to me. It didn't matter if I became a social pariah or was disowned by my family; I could live anywhere. After all, I might be a noble lady now, but I was a filthy slum rat in my past life. I survived on dirty water and rotting food scraps. And I could still get a certain amount of work as an assassin in this world.

That would be impossible, however, for anyone born as a noble and raised in a royal palace with a golden spoon. They wouldn't know anything. How could they survive in this world?

"Is it because they won't have a direct hand in the twins' deaths, which lessens any feelings of guilt by letting them say they had nothing to do with it? I loathe hypocritical actions like that," I said.

"Most humans are hypocritical," said Evan. "And we're simply meant to carry out the duty His Majesty gave us. Like I said, we need them to make some faux pas of a significant degree. That's why you and Tiegel need to turn a blind eye to the smaller things. The two of you are also going to be Shaghad's guard."

"That's not a job you assign to a noble lady," I said.

"His Majesty would never ask something like this of a *normal* noble lady."

"Your Highness," came the voice of a palace servant, interrupting us just as our conversation was turning to simple chit-chat. "The visitors from Rienbul have arrived."

"We'll be right there," said Evan. As we left the room, Evan pressed again, "Be careful, you two."

Like he doesn't trust me.

We greeted the guests outside the palace.

Evan had on that fake smile he wore whenever going out in public. "Welcome to Astra. I am Evan, the first prince. This is Lady Selena, daughter of Duke Violette."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "I will be helping to support you during

your time here, along with Prince Evan. I look forward to getting to know you.” I pinched my skirt and gave a curtsy appropriate of a noble lady.

“This is Tiegel,” said Evan. “He is a servant of House Violette. I introduce him now as he will be available to help you when I am busy with my duties and studies.”

Tiegel brought a hand to his chest and bowed gracefully.











“Thank you for such a considerate greeting.”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

*What in the...?*

Once our introductions were complete, it should have been time for the students from Rienbul’s to make theirs. Normally, the person of the highest rank would begin by introducing themselves, followed by the next highest, and so on. The introduction Evan made was normal as per the rules of etiquette.

The highest-ranking member of the group from Rienbul was Shaghad since he was the only royal among them right now. But for some reason, Ismail, who ranked lower than Shaghad, had stepped forward.

No one in the Rienbul entourage criticized him for this behavior. I observed the servants and attendants who accompanied them with the assumption they were holding back on criticizing the behavior because they expected these idiots to mess things up, and, therefore, they let some smaller things slide, but I quickly realized that wasn’t the case.

*I see*, I thought, deciding it wasn’t just Ismail and Aisha that Rienbul expected to run wild; it was also their attendants. Meaning all these people were absolute morons who thought one of the twins could be the next ruler.

When did Astra turn into a place to throw away your garbage?

“I am Ismail Alaban. This is my sister, Aisha.”

“I am honored to meet you, Prince Evan,” said Aisha, her cheeks flushed as she looked at Evan.

Regardless of his personality, Evan was handsome, making him popular among the ladies. It seemed Aisha was no exception to that.

Ismail had blue hair and peach-colored eyes, while Aisha had hair the color of sunset and the same peach-colored eyes.

*So, these are the problem twins, hm.*

That meant the remaining young man with silver hair and blue eyes was Shaghad Rienbul.

Once Ismail completed his introduction, he looked at us like he was demanding we hurry up and show them into the palace. No one seemed interested in introducing Shaghad to us.

It didn't matter how lightly they took this in their own country, status existed. They should at least put on a façade of caring while in another country, but apparently, they weren't willing to do even that.

In any other situation, it could be assumed they were mocking the kingdom of Astra with this behavior. Actually, Evan's subordinates standing behind us seemed about to burst into angry shouts.

It hurt getting hit with that much hostility from behind.

But these idiots probably weren't mocking Astra. They just thought they could get away with the same behavior here they got away with in their own country. They didn't even seem to question it. Neither did their attendants.

"Prince Shaghad, it is an honor to meet you," said Evan, having no other choice but to act first. He stepped forward and held out his hand for a handshake.

"It is my honor, Prince Evan," said Shaghad. He took Evan's hand, though he looked uncertain the whole time.

The idiot twins glared at him as he did. Their eyes almost seemed to demand Evan send Shaghad back to Rienbul for insulting the Astra crown, but Evan ignored them.

*I suppose this farce will have to continue. How irritating.*

"Prince Shaghad, please, just call me Evan. We're the same, after all. There's no need for such formality between us. I'm sure the two of us have common worries. I would like it if we could build the sort of relationship where we can share those worries."

"Thank you, Evan. Please, call me Shaghad."

"As you wish, Shaghad."

*That's cruel, Evan,* I thought. He'd let Ismail's lack of decorum slide, but he was clearly angry.

The twins' faces were bright red as they glared at the ground after having the prince of another kingdom basically say right to their faces that they were by no means in the same standing as he and Shaghad.

They're idiots. They could have happiness appropriate to their station if only they had an attitude appropriate to their station. Instead, they've come here to destroy that themselves. Greed really has no limits.

## Chapter Two: Tea Parties Are Always Savage

**“PRINCE EVAN,** could I ask you to be my escort to the banquet this evening?”

There was going to be a party that evening to welcome the guests from Rienbul. We told the three guests to rest in their rooms until then and went to leave, but then...Aisha jumped in with that request.

“Miss Aisha Alaban, I was under the impression your brother would be your escort,” said Evan.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. I’d prefer you, Prince Evan.”

Evan parried her request with a smile and an indirect refusal that really said, “Know your place. You’re not royalty; you’re a girl of a viscount’s house.”

But, for some reason, Aisha swayed her hips and looked up at him through her lashes. “You don’t mind, do you, Lady Selena?”

“Why are you asking me? I have no say in what Evan decides.”

“Really? I’m happy you have such a kind heart, Lady Selena. I think we could be friends.”

Aisha never heard me say, “You must be joking. I’d never be friends with a moron like you,” because Tiegel clamped his hand over my mouth.

How dare she call this blatant hostility “friends.” I don’t know the right word for it, but I at least know it doesn’t fall into common sense.

“Miss Aisha, I cannot be your escort,” said Evan.

“Your Highness, call me Aisha, please. And may I call you by your name?” She moved over to his side and tried to touch him.

He guessed what she was doing and casually stepped away. “I apologize, but I have my status as a royal. It would be best for both of us to keep an appropriate distance to avoid giving the wrong impression.”

“...I see.” Aisha gave up then on getting Evan as her escort, perhaps because

she was trying to avoid him disliking her for coming on too strong. But she seemed the type of girl to turn a profit even from a failure because she suggested, “Why don’t we have tea together to learn more about each other’s countries?”

Evan gave in and agreed to that suggestion, probably because they were state guests from a friendly nation. It would be bad to destroy our relationship with them by refusing everything outright.

When all is said and done, while I might not have any real interest in Evan, I have spent a long time with him, which means I can tell a lot from his expression.

For example, right now, he has on that smile the ladies love, but he’s doing everything in his power to hold back a sigh and scowl as he deals with her. He’s tired because he chose to put on the mask of a normal person and put in all this time and effort. If he’d just killed them like I suggested, he wouldn’t have to deal with this pain in the rear assignment. You reap what you sow, Evan.

*And I should make my getaway to my room before I get dragged into something annoying, too.*

Aisha doesn’t seem to think highly of me either because she keeps throwing a hostile aura at me every now and then. She doesn’t seem to think Evan’s noticed, but he sees right through her. What a stupid girl.

“Selena, you too,” said Evan, snapping his hand onto my shoulder the moment I stood to go to my room.

“You two enjoy yourselves. The *two* of you,” I insisted.

“Oh, don’t be like that, Selena. As a lady, you’re the one who will be interacting the most with Miss Aisha. You need to strengthen your relationship with her.”

His eyes told me there was no way he was letting me escape.

*“Don’t drag me into this mess. Fix it yourself,”* I said to him with just a glare.

*“Impossible. I hate dealing with people who won’t listen like her. You’re better at it. You had a sister who was like that,”* his eyes said back.



*"Only if I can do the same thing to Aisha I did to my sister."*

*"What did you do to your sister?!"*

*"....."*

*"No. Even if they are just guests. They're honored guests invited from another country."*

While Evan and I conversed silently with eye signals, Aisha stared at Evan in awe.

"Lady Selena," whispered Tiegel. "It's your duty. Lady Aisha is more likely to cause a problem if you're there. Wouldn't it be better to actively engage with her to help things move along more quickly so you can send them back to their own country?"

He didn't often step in like that, but it seemed he'd guessed what my silent conversation with Evan was about.

"Exactly. You're right. You put it perfectly, Tiegel," Evan whispered back happily.

The two of them normally just get in each other's way or bicker, but they collude against me at a time like this? I do not get their relationship. It seems good sometimes and bad other times.

"I don't know what I'll do if things go too far," I stated.

"Is that a threat?" asked Evan.

"We'll see." I smiled while Evan looked at me with a grimace.

And yet, Aisha somehow interpreted that as me trying to woo Evan because she locked a cold glare on me. Not that it scared me.

Oh, this is such a pain.

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**"I'M** sorry my sister insisted on this little gathering."

*Then why don't you take your idiot sister and go home?*

In the end, it was me, Evan, Aisha, and, for some reason, her twin brother

Ismail who gathered for tea. Shaghad was resting in his room and not participating. He probably didn't want to. If he did, the twins would just pretend he wasn't there or tear his pride to shreds in front of a royal from another country.

"It was Prince Evan, not me, that Miss Aisha suggested this to," I said. "Please direct your apologies to him."

Aisha was entirely facing Evan, prattling at him in an unending stream. He was listening with his usual public smile.

And Ismail was talking to me like he didn't want his sister to outdo him.

"Lady Selena, are you close with His Highness?" he asked.

"We've known each other for some time now."

"Have there been talks of marriage?"

*Don't come at me with an incredibly probing question like that. Who I marry has nothing to do with you,* I thought. "That decision is entirely up to my parents."

"Is it? You have no personal wishes? I know a lady would want a man with a certain level of status. Though, you are an only child. Does that mean your husband would marry into your family instead?"

In noble society, women lived off the purse strings of men. That was why noble ladies tried to marry a man with the best qualities they could find. They couldn't survive on their own. But that was only for normal noble ladies. It had nothing to do with me.

I had the skills necessary for surviving on my own, as well as significant savings since I'd make quite a bit of money on the jobs I did for Rick. I wouldn't be struggling to feed myself even if I was chased out of my home.

"Hm, well, I haven't really heard anything on the subject from my parents," I said.

Ismail beamed excessively at me.

*What in the world is this about?*

Tiegel, standing at the ready behind me, didn't seem to like Ismail very much when he did that. I could feel his hostile aura. Though, no one else noticed since his expression was as blank as ever.

Evan was also in a bit of a bad mood.

In my experience, tea parties generally were not peaceful events. They were filled with savagery, though they still were the playgrounds of noble girls. The hostility of a noble girl who'd never known blood was as intimidating as a puppy barking.

Today's tea party, however, had both Evan and Tiegel, who had experienced battle, and their mood was ever so steadily but surely worsening. I sipped my tea as I thought about how one person at least was going to lose blood at this event.

"Are you interested? In marriage?" asked Ismail.

"Master Ismail, don't you think that's a bit private of a question to ask a lady you've only just met?" said Evan, interrupting.

Ismail was surprised at that, but his smile only deepened. "My apologies. I've been approached quite a lot as well."

"It makes sense, considering your age. But there is quite some distance between our two countries." Evan was harshly telling Ismail to look for a marriage partner in his own country.

Rick had contacted me right after I took on this task and gave me this information:

"The Alaban twins are on dangerous ground, and, on top of that, their mother isn't that high in rank. I mean, she's a viscount's daughter. She's not defending them from anything. That's why no one wants a relationship with them that would lead to marriage, despite their good looks. Especially considering they might anger the current king if they make a wrong move. Both they and their mother are treated like bad luck totems in the palace and noble society. No one wants to touch them. That's why it's so hard for them to find powerful support through marriage in their own country. They'll be looking for that during their studies in Astra, most likely."

Rick was the king's nephew and head of the assassins' guild, so I trusted his information to be accurate. Information Rick gathered on other countries also made its way to the king's ears. As an obvious result, it was safe to assume Evan, the crown prince, had also been given that information since he was ordered to look after these students from Rienbul.

"I do agree our two kingdoms are somewhat distant," said Ismail, "but they're not so far that it'd be impossible to travel between them. And it's not like the countries don't already have a relationship."

Ismail's response to Evan was calm, despite the fact that Evan was telling him to find a marriage partner in his own country while knowing it would be impossible.

"You're right. There have been connections between our countries. Amongst the royalty," said Evan with a smile.

Ismail smiled back the same way, but his eyes flashed with unconcealable hostility.

I assumed this would devolve into even more of a back-and-forth, but a new incursion came from an unexpected source. Well, she had looked annoyed for a while now, but I would have thought she could tell this wasn't the sort of thing she should interrupt.

"Prince Evan, you don't need to entertain my brother the whole time. Talk to me. Lady Selena is here to speak with my brother. Right, Lady Selena?" said Aisha.

"If that's what His Highness commands," I replied.

"...You're not going to listen to my request?" she asked.

"My allegiance is to Astra."

I wasn't required to take orders from the granddaughter of a viscount from Rienbul. It didn't matter if she lived in the royal palace or had royal blood; she was still only a viscount's granddaughter. The current king didn't recognize her as an official child of her father, and she also wasn't accepted as an illegitimate child.

“I don’t know how you behaved in your country, but this is Astra,” I said. “Do not forget that I am of a duke’s family. I would also recommend you carefully consider things before you act, such as the fact that the arm you are clinging to without permission belongs to the crown prince of this kingdom.”

“Jealousy is a horrible thing, Lady Selena.”

*Why is this happening?* “I have no reason to be jealous.”

There was nothing between Evan and me. Even if something did develop, there wouldn’t be any reason for me to be jealous.

If someone annoyed me, I could just kill them. I’m in a position where I could kill any of those girls at any time.

# Chapter Three: You May Be Superior in Your Delusions, but Not in Real Life

## Side View: Aisha

“OH, dear, I’m so sorry. My hand slipped.”

The girl who soiled my gown with tea broke out in screeching laughter, and the people around her joined in.

“Though, I think it might suit you better that way,” she said. “Someone like you shouldn’t be wearing a gown like that, but the tea brings it down to your level. You should thank me.”

Are you saying a dirty dress is suitable for me? Are you trying to say I’m a stain on the royal family? A mere offspring of a viscount’s household.

My father is royalty. Not like your pitiful father.

“I expected a lot from this party when I heard it would be a gathering of ladies. It seems I was wrong to,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“To think the attendees don’t even know tea etiquette. Everyone knows these are common manners, regardless of rank. If the people here don’t know that, I worry I mistakenly came to a commoners’ tea party. If so, that would explain why I don’t really fit in.”

“How dare you call me a commoner, you lowly girl who doesn’t know her place!”

“What kind of person are you that you’d ever equate *us* to those filthy commoners?”

*All this chirping is so annoying. At least birds are cute. There is nothing cute about these ugly sows. Though, maybe they could follow me around and make me look even better in comparison.*

“Are you trying to claim something as ill-mannered as spilling tea is appropriate of a lady?” I said. “I hate to say this, but perhaps you should find a new etiquette tutor. I could introduce you to mine if you like. My father hired her.”

“Prince Raheem?”

“Yes. I’m sure my tutor will turn you into a wonderful noble lady in no time.”

All etiquette tutors employed by royalty were top-class. I was telling this girl more elegantly that she was a third-rate noble because her tutor was third-rate. Her face turned red, and she ran away.

“You should be more careful who you pick a fight with,” I murmured.

I am a princess. I am not the sort of person a daughter of a count should speak to so lightly.

“This place is filled with nothing but idiots. It’s tired me out. I think I’ll go somewhere to be alone.”

I escaped the boring tea party and went for a stroll through the garden. I’d meant it to help improve my mood, but today was not my day. I bumped into that gloomy Shaghad out in the garden.

“Why are you here?” I demanded.

“I was invited.”

“What?! And, what, you just decided to waltz in? Ha, what an idiot! That invitation was only sent to you out of courtesy since you’re prince in name. Aren’t you embarrassed to just come like nothing’s wrong?”

He frustrates me. How in the world could this dim-witted, empty-headed boy be my half-brother? More importantly, why does grandfather only care about him?

He’s not actually thinking of making this idiot his successor, is he?

Please don’t. He’s an embarrassment to the royal family just by existing.

“Can’t you just stay put in the palace? You’re nothing more than the royal family’s baggage, anyway,” I said.

“.....”

“Say something, would you!” I shouted at him, but he still didn’t reply.

I’m the angry one. I’m the one who’s better. But he still seems to be looking down on me, which really irks me.

“I think I understand why your mother abandoned you,” I said. “Who needs an unlovable child like you?”

“Urk.” He grimaced slightly.

Huh. So, that’s the face he makes when I bring up his mother? It’s gross. Like he has some sort of mommy complex.

“She’d probably still be living in the royal palace if you’d never been born,” I went on. “My mother’s so gracious she would have let her off with a position as a servant who stayed in some corner somewhere. She would have been valued as a servant, but she can’t even do that because you were born. It’s *all* your fault. It’s your fault she left the palace, your fault she couldn’t be happy, and your fault she had to choose some path that’ll probably end with her dead in a ditch somewhere. Things would be better if you’d never been born.”

I smiled, but even after saying all that, Shaghad still didn’t reply. His face was bright red, though, his balled hands shaking, which was enough to satisfy me.

“You’ll be unhappy because you don’t know your place,” I sneered.

*I think it’s time to go back. This tea party is boring, and I met this disgusting person here.*

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“**SHE’S** only in a viscount’s household and still acts like some princess or something.”

“Does she not know her place? That she’s just a stain on the royal palace’s floor?”

“And her behavior towards Prince Shaghad is just incredible.”

“As a girl of a viscount’s house, she’s the same rank as us servants working in the palace, and she still acts like that.”



“I know. Why do we have to show respect to someone of the same rank? I’m always dissatisfied with this nonsense.”

“Whenever she acts all high and mighty, I just want to shout, ‘Who do you think you are?!’”

They must have not thought anyone was there. The servants in the palace openly spoke ill of me.

They think we’re the same rank? It’s so tiring being surrounded by idiots all the time. How could I be in the same position as these laborers? I’ve never served someone, I’ve never worked, I’ve never lacked money. Because I was chosen.

“You. All of you. You’re fired,” I said, showing myself. Their faces went pale, and they immediately lost their steam as they desperately turned to pleading.

That’s better. The palace doesn’t need anyone so incompetent that they only understand their place once they’ve been removed from their position. If they end up lost in the end because of that, it’s not my fault. It has nothing to do with me.

I am not just a girl from a viscount’s household! I am a princess of this kingdom! It’s about time I let everyone know exactly what will happen if they clash with someone like me.

I know there is nothing that could shake my standing. My father loves me. I am not Shaghad.

It is true that the current king, my grandfather, seems more interested in Shaghad, but he’s an old, feeble-minded man with not much life left in him. It doesn’t matter if Shaghad has someone like him as a benefactor.

And the king might even realize how lovely I am and change his mind at some point.

And so, I spent my days like a princess.

One day, our grandfather called me and my brother into his study to tell us we would be studying abroad in Astra with Shaghad. I knew my brother and I were born to be royalty!

I didn't like that we'd be going with Shaghad, but he did have royal blood, even if he was what he was. You couldn't really do anything about the fact that Grandfather had to make a show of treating him the same as us. I conceded on the issue because I'm such a kind-hearted person.

"Welcome to Astra. I am Evan, the first prince. This is Lady Selena, daughter of Duke Violette."

And then we made it to Astra. Their crown prince was handsome enough to be allowed to stand at my side. Though, there was this girl who was a bit of an obstacle.

Selena Violette. Even I, the most beautiful woman in Rienbul, couldn't help but be enchanted by her. She is a bewitching beauty. And that kind of pisses me off.

But I don't need to worry about that. It doesn't matter how beautiful she is; she's just a noble. She can't compete with me, a princess. And I am a beauty of a different variety. There's no reason my looks shouldn't work just as well here in Astra as in Rienbul.

I will steal Evan from this girl. My brother will become the king of Rienbul, and I'll become the queen consort of Astra. What a wonderful future.

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**IMMEDIATELY** after arriving in Astra, I began to seduce Prince Evan.

"Aisha, don't you think you're coming on a bit strong?" said my brother. Rather than returning to his own room after tea with the crown prince, he followed me. Maybe he wanted to talk to me about something.

"In what way?" I asked.

"Every way."

"I expected him to reject my request to be my escort. That was just to get him to agree to my invitation to have tea. I don't see anything wrong with it."

My brother was a worrywart. I understood wanting to be careful because we were in a different country, but our time here was limited since we were just studying abroad. We didn't have time to take things slow.

“People treat us like members of a viscount’s family, but our father is still royalty,” I argued. “We have his blood in our veins. That means they can’t treat us poorly without risk. It’s fine if I’m a little aggressive.”

My only concern at the moment was that girl, Selena Violette. She seemed dangerous. I got the impression she wasn’t the same as the idiot girls I dealt with in Rienbul. Though, I couldn’t exactly say what was different about her.

“Besides, I need to know what type of man Prince Evan is. I’d like you to just turn a blind eye to some of my pushiness,” I said.

I’d tried clinging to Prince Evan’s arm and pressing my chest against him, but his reaction was entirely gentlemanly. He didn’t forcefully remove me, but he also didn’t even glance at my cleavage.

Any inexperienced man would look in that direction if I pushed my chest against him.

“Can you seduce him?” asked Ismail.

“I don’t have a battle plan yet, but I’ll find one soon. Don’t worry. You know how good I am.”

All the idiot men who were our allies back in Rienbul were men I’d seduced. All men are idiots. Well, not my brother, of course.

No matter how repulsive a man claims I am, the moment I press against him and fawn over him, he becomes much more forgiving. After that, I just need to fulfill his desires for conquest and sex.

How repulsive.

“I will conquer Prince Evan,” I said. “And then we’ll get back at everyone who ever mocked us.”

“Yes, we will. You will be the next queen consort of Astra, and I’ll be the next king of Rienbul.”

“Exactly, brother.”

We will claw our way up. I won’t let them call us repulsive. I won’t let them say our mere existence is a sin. I will make them acknowledge us. All of them, all those who mocked us. And then I’ll make them kneel before us. I’ll make them

understand they were the fools all along. How comical they'll look.

I gently touched the lapis lazuli ring on my left hand. It was a gift from my brother. He always wore an earring with a gem cut in the same style from the same stone.

Lapis lazuli gives trials and rewards those who overcome them with blessings.

We will overcome this trial.

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**IN** the end, my brother was my escort to the evening party held to welcome us. Prince Evan refused to escort me when I asked at tea, and I did as he said this time. Being too demanding could backfire.

Noblemen liked women who were weak, reliant, and submissive. Princes were likely the same.

The first dance of the night was, of course, with my escort, my brother. I swayed my hips and accentuated my breasts as I danced. It was easy for someone as knowledgeable in the ways of attraction to tempt an inexperienced nobleman.

It could be a hassle sometimes when a useless domineering man approached, but I just needed to have the more useful men get rid of him.

I checked my surroundings as I danced with my brother, giving sidelong glances and smiles to the red-faced boys looking at me. Well, my chest. Their red faces turned even redder, and several even rushed out of the hall.

How easy!

"I'd prefer it if you didn't go all-out on sexuality when in front of me, your brother," said Ismail.

"Oh, am I tempting you, too?"

"Of course not."

I chuckled. "It wouldn't be so bad if you were tempted. I would dote on you."

That joke-filled time between us was quickly over, though, and next, I had to work on the idiot boys. I picked a few marks while I danced with Ismail. I'd start

with the lowest ranking among them. While I worked him, I'd keep an eye on the higher-ranking nobles as I plied the first one, seeing how they reacted and what they thought. If things looked doable, I'd do it. If not, I'd write that one off.

Unlike in Rienbul, my only ally here was my brother. I couldn't take too much of a risk on the higher-ranking nobles since so many here thought of me as nothing more than a viscount's granddaughter.

I went to a table holding alcoholic drinks as I figured out my targets. It was there that I decided on my first mark.

But I couldn't act right away. First, I'd pick up a drink, then wait alone by a wall, acting drunk. The alcohol made it easier for inexperienced men to approach me because it gave them the excuse of pretending they were looking out for a defenseless lady who drank too much.

Oh, how tedious.

"Miss Alaban, please don't drink that. It has alcohol in it."

"Lady Selena?"

*I took it ON PURPOSE!*

Selena Violette snatched away the alcohol I intentionally picked up, stopping me from drinking it.

She really cannot take a hint! It's not like I can't tell the difference between juice and alcohol. What an idiotic mistake.

Not that I'd ever tell her that.

"Oh, you're right," I said. "Thank you for letting me know."

"It's all right. It's my duty."

Duty?

Selena Violette, the girl set to inherit the title of Duke Violette. You and I have surely lived completely opposite lives. Everyone accepts you. No one points fingers at your back.

I watched as she walked away. "...You don't detest me, do you?" I murmured.

Most high-ranking noble ladies like her hated my and my brother's lineage. They acted like they'd be tainted just by coming near us, but I didn't get that impression from Selena Violette.

Which might mean she just doesn't care about us. Like we're not even worth that.

"U-Um."

As I was thinking about that, one of the boys I made eye contact with while dancing approached of his own accord. His cheeks were red as he drummed up the courage to talk to me, which told me everything.

What a cute little thing.

He didn't even notice me lick my lips as he fell victim to me.

I didn't feel guilty taking advantage of his innocence. After all, he only thought of me as someone perfect for having a little fun with. That's just how men are.

They approach me to fulfill their desires, but when things get inconvenient for them, they bring up my birth, wail pitifully, and try to convince everyone that they're in the right. They really are the most worthless of living creatures.

## Chapter Four: Weapons for Killing and Weapons for Not Killing

**“TAKE** a look. I got you that thing you wanted.”

The day after the evening party, where we welcomed the students from Rienbul, Tiegel and I went to visit Rick.

Duke Rick Oswald, nephew to the king of Astra and head of the dark guild that acted as the shadow agency for the kingdom, eliminating any who would harm the country.

There was something I asked Rick to get for me right after I met the students from Rienbul.

“What is it?” asked Tiegel, looking quizzically at the object Sia brought on a tray.

“A metal folding fan,” I said.

“A metal fan?”

I took the fan from the tray and opened it to show Tiegel. “As the name implies, it’s a folding fan made of metal. It’s a defensive weapon for when I’m somewhere I can’t bring weapons.”

“Hm? But you always have your assassin’s weapons on you. When you see the prince, at last night’s party, everywhere.”

He was probably trying to ask why I’d need something like this after having all that on me. He was right that normally I wouldn’t need it, but this time...

“Well, I’m not supposed to kill the little brats, am I?” I said.







I smiled, and Rick grimaced. Sia was expressionless as always but let out a quiet sigh. Tiegel just blinked at me.

“If I have something sharp, I might accidentally kill them,” I explained. “But if I hold back, the most I could do with this is knock them out or give them a lump on their head.”

Well, I could kill them by causing internal bleeding of the brain.

“I see. It’s not for attacking. It’s actually the opposite. It’s a weapon to not kill someone with,” said Tiegel.

“Exactly.”

The fan with a butterfly and flowers on it was black, so it wasn’t immediately obvious it was metal.

“Oh, and I have a present for you,” said Rick. “Sia.”

“One moment.” Sia brought something else. It was one of the weapons Rick developed. He called it a “gun.”

I’d tried one during a mission once before. It was so loud everyone would know where I was, and it took time to reload the bullets, making it unsuited for assassination.

“I improved it based on your report,” he said.

“It’s smaller than before,” I observed.

“Yep. I call it a ‘miniature gun.’”

*So, the name’s the same?*

I picked it up to find it was much lighter than the one he gave me before. This one could be easily concealed on my person. The previous one always created a conspicuous bulge wherever I tried to hide it in my clothes, meaning I couldn’t use it for assassinations. Which was unfortunate because it was capable of doing so much damage.

“And one more thing,” said Rick as he took a ring from his pocket. It had two crossing loops of different blues with a diamond set in the center. “The stone in the center is a magic stone.”

A magic stone... Stones holding all sorts of magic were said to have been created by the people of times long past and were incredibly rare and valuable as the methods for refining them were lost.

They looked exactly like any other gemstone, so it wasn't uncommon for people to conceal their existence by pretending they were gems. This ring's magic stone also looked like a normal diamond at first glance.

"This ring has magic for silencing. This will solve the loudness issue," said Rick.

I appreciated it, but I'd only just got him to get this metal fan for me. With the gun, I'd have to be extra careful not to kill those nuisances from Rienbul.

"You're in charge of defending royalty on this mission," he continued. "It will be more dangerous than anything you've faced before. We need to make sure you're fully equipped."

Defending royalty?

*"I will not allow you to take him."*

*"I will go down with you, if need be, to protect him."*

The last person I tried to kill in my former life was the country's crown prince. The knight defending him took me down with him. We both died. How ironic was it that I'd be defending a prince in this life?

I took the gun and bullets from Sia and slipped them into my clothes. I also picked up the ring from Rick's hand and slid it on my finger.

Tiegel stared at me while I did.

"What?" I asked.

"It's nothing."

"Huh?"

Tiegel's eyes jerked away, and Rick chortled.

*I have no idea what that was about, but...whatever.*

"Tiegel, let's go home. Starting tomorrow, we're going to be very busy," I said, and Tiegel nodded.

“Be careful,” said Rick. “The insignificant ones can cause the most trouble.”

“I know,” I said.

I’ve seen enough of those fools for a lifetime. People who don’t understand their lack of strength and continue a pointless and distasteful struggle. In my past life, I saw it in the slums. In my current life, I see it in noble society.

The residents of the slums and noble society are all the same: they don’t understand the concept of waiting for their time to come, instead flailing pathetically until the very end, where, sometimes, they take themselves out in some massive inferno.

That’s why you couldn’t let your guard down with them.

They are the ugliest and most troublesome people on the planet, those insignificant people.

“Then all’s good,” said Rick.

I have to protect a prince who doesn’t truly understand that fact while dealing with two of those insignificant people. And I’m not even a knight who’s sworn an oath or even a bodyguard. I’m just an assassin.

+++

**STARTING** today, Shaghad, Ismail, and Aisha will attend the same academy for nobles Evan and I attend.

Just as the palace ordered me to, I was helping Evan take care of and keep an eye on the three of them. Ismail and Aisha were working hard at making connections, likely because their standing was so unstable in their own country. The high-ranking nobles, however, weren’t actively engaging with them since it wasn’t certain what would become of the twins’ standing in the future. They could even be a lethal poison for our country.

The low-ranking nobles, on the other hand, treated the twins as something special simply because they came from the Rienbul royal palace. They were approaching the pair, probably thinking they could be profitable to them somehow.

While all these people might fall under the umbrella of “nobility,” there was a

significant discrepancy between what information a high-ranking and low-ranking noble could get, and the young lords and ladies from families who weren't that involved with politics were unfamiliar with the game.

This discrepancy between the nobles was one of Astra's problems that worried Evan.

I did, however, think it was a good enough decision on their part when they chose to put distance between themselves and Shaghad even though he was royalty. Even if they couldn't get much information or were inexperienced with politics, they could see how the three from Rienbul were acting and sense something from the attitude of the higher-ranking Astra nobles.

Actually, quite a few low-ranking nobles were watching from a distance and waiting to approach.

The fools currying up to the twins right now didn't have enough space in their heads to think about what was best for their country. In other words, it wouldn't matter if I killed them if it came down to it.

*I'll add them to my list.*

While the twins were actively making connections, Shaghad seemed nearly invisible, like he was trying to fade into the background. He might be the sole heir to the throne recognized as royalty, but his position also wasn't stable.

It was obvious what Shaghad's father would do to him if something happened to the current king. Shaghad needed those social connections to avoid the worst that would be coming for him, but I didn't sense any intentions of building that from Shaghad.

Not that it has anything to do with me. I just need to do the duty I've been saddled with.

But still...

I looked again towards Ismail and Aisha. The first thing that struck my eyes was their flamboyant clothing. The Academy didn't have any uniforms, so students were free to dress as they wished, but it was good manners to wear something easy to move in. I'd told them that in advance. Shaghad was actually in simple clothing that was already at the Academy.

But the twins, well, they had on clothes that wouldn't be at all out of place at a ball.

"Have they never heard the saying 'dress for the occasion?'" I muttered.

That was another reason why their high-ranking classmates were shunning them. I just hoped they didn't do anything more extreme.

I didn't normally care about conflicts among our classmates, but I wasn't entirely uninvolved this time. I didn't want to have more problems to deal with, but I also would *not* fail my mission.

If they did something, I would probably have to eliminate them.

"Selena," said Aisha as she came over to me with several low-ranking nobles in tow. Did she already form an entourage?

"I may have been assigned to look after you while you're here, Aisha," I said, "but that doesn't mean we're so close that you can refer to me without a proper title. What are you thinking calling a high-ranking noble like me by just their name?"

"Oh, I don't see anything wrong with it." She smiled sweetly.

I did have to acknowledge she was the daughter of a woman who captured royalty. Her smile was powerful enough to make the boys nearby blush.

She could become an assassin specializing in honeytrap techniques.

"I heard you don't have any friends because you have a horrible personality," said Aisha. "But I'll let you be my friend."

*Can I please kill her?*

"No, thank you," I said.

She looked shocked, like she never imagined I'd refuse. "Why not?"

"Because it doesn't benefit me."

"Oh, I see now. You're an idiot."

One special characteristic of idiots is that they don't realize they're idiots, which lets them look down on others.

“Excuse *me*? You rude little— Urk!” said Scarlanette, barging into the conversation from nearby, but I stepped on her foot to silence her. I didn’t do it that hard, but she glared at me with tears in her eyes. I just ignored it, though. It wasn’t something I needed to concern myself with.

Lady Scarlanette Jordan, daughter of Count Jordan. She’d become attached to me for some reason ever since I fought monsters in front of her at the Festival of Hunting.

Aisha must not have been satisfied with my response because she continued to argue. “I have the blood of Rienbul royalty in my veins.”

“That’s right, Lady Selena. Aren’t you being rude, considering she has royal blood?” said someone else.

“Maybe you should reconsider your arrogant attitude,” said another.

The members of the peanut gallery commenting must have been the boys she entranced at the evening ball. I’d stopped her from using alcohol as a tool for drawing in men, but she just did it some other way in the end. She was well-versed in those techniques, it seemed.

That didn’t, however, mean she could be suspected of being obsessed with boys. Just looking at her, it was easy to see that she loathed the boys who fell for her temptations. She didn’t trust them at all. All she did was read them and use them. Like a honeytrap assassin.

In the end, men who fell for that were usually the sort who acted like women were inferior, and their attitudes towards her would probably flip if the situation changed.

Well. Not that it matters.

What is with this ranting entourage of hers? Do they really think they’re protecting this foreigner from me?

That’s obviously not true. You’re all just tools to help her feel superior that she’ll use when she wants, then toss aside.

The relationship isn’t equal since she doesn’t even see you as human.

“What are you smiling about?!”

“What’s so funny?”

“How rude.”

There they go, howling because they’re trembling with fear, like a baby rabbit before a wolf.

I stood and whispered into the ear of the boy who seemed most central to the entourage. “Don’t howl so much. You’re only declaring yourself the prey.”

“What the?”

“It would be so easy to slip into the dark of night and prey on you.”

“I-Is that a threat?”

“A threat?” I chuckled, and the noble boy gave me a courageous glare.

That was the one thing from my former life that impressed me a little about noble children. They could be weak, they could be prey, but they still act like they’re the powerful ones. They brandish an authority ineffective on assassins and act like they are superior. That innocence, to the point of foolishness, keeps them from seeing the difference in power between them and their opponent, which is just exasperating.

“No, it’s not a threat. It’s a certain future where I will come for you.”

“Eek!”

*He starts trembling now?*

“Could you not bully my friends?” interrupted Aisha.

“Lady Aisha!” The boy looked at her with pleading eyes.

A glance made it seem like the entourage was protecting Aisha, but that wasn’t the case. It was just an act, a play to cast her as the kind lady who saves her friends while making me the evil villain bullying lower-ranked nobles.

Ugh. What a pain. If this conversation continues any longer, I’ll just fill up with rage.

“Miss Aisha Alaban,” I said. “You may be a student from another country, but that does not mean you’ve gone up in rank. I recommend you carefully review who you’re speaking to.”



“How scary. Are you threatening me?” she said as she clung to the arm of the closest noble boy, pressing her chest against him.

He blushed but still glared at me, perhaps trying to maintain his dignity. Not that it worked at all. The other noble boys looked enviously at the one Aisha clung to, but they stood in my way to protect her.

Even if I didn’t do anything, it seemed likely that there would be a fight to the death over her. And she wouldn’t even end up belonging to anyone if that did happen. She wasn’t an object to be owned, after all.

But she didn’t think of them as anything more than objects to be discarded once they were no longer useful. Just like how I was well-used once back in the slums, called by a number rather than a name.

Realizing that made this ridiculous encounter feel a bit nostalgic in a way.

Human emotions are so curious.

“I don’t know how things are back in Rienbul, but here in Astra, a duke ranks higher than a viscount,” I said. “You should have studied up on other countries if you were going to study abroad, Miss Aisha Alaban.”

“Lady Selena,” said Ismail, who had been watching the event unfold along with the gawkers. He stepped in front of Aisha as if to protect her.

It doesn’t matter who comes, though. I’ll just kill them. Not physically, though, unfortunately.

“I apologize for my sister’s rude behavior,” he said. “I’m sure she’s just flustered from being in an unfamiliar environment in a foreign land while being under the pressure of foreign diplomacy for the first time. It would be great news to bring back to our home country if we could say we built a positive relationship with someone as honorable as the daughter of House Violette. Could you find it in your heart to forgive her?”

His concerned smile caused several ladies to swoon. Incredibly powerful for just a smile.

“Lady Selena?” he repeated as he cocked his head and looked at me. He was surely trying to woo me.

“I forgive her,” I said. “It is the first day, after all.”

“Thank you.”

“.....”

Ismail smiled, which was enough to draw overjoyed and aggravating shrieks from the surroundings. Among the pink-cheeked ladies were some noble boys, too. Apparently, Ismail’s seduction worked on the same sex as well.

“Tiegel,” I said.

“My apologies.”

All I did was say his name, but it was enough for him to understand I was ordering him to rein in his hostile aura. I could almost see drooping ears and a tail on him as his head sank.

I looked towards Evan, who was watching the scene from a distance.

*...Why are you putting off such a hostile aura, too? I’m the one resisting the urge to kill them.*

*...I’m really not allowed to kill them, am I?*

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“**YOU** worms deserve ten thousand deaths for standing against Lady Selena.” Two red eyes glowed in the darkness. “It’s difficult enough allowing you to even speak to her, and you dare oppose her? I will show maggots like you your place.”

“Aaaaaaah!”

Men’s screams echoed in the dark.

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“**TIEGEL**, did you hear? A red-eyed ghost appeared in the noble quarters last night and attacked several young noblemen.”

“A red-eyed ghost?”

“Yes. They claim its eyes were as red as blood. None of the attacked noblemen suffered serious injuries, so they’ll be fine but are incredibly

frightened. What a ridiculous story. Ghosts?”

Though, I thought, it was interesting that everyone attacked were boys Aisha had bewitched. And they were only the ones who stood up against me yesterday.

Maybe it was a coincidence, or Aisha decided she couldn't use them and cut them loose? No, I doubt that. It's too soon after what happened. And it wouldn't be a ghost who took them out.

It would be a different story if the victims became ghosts themselves. It smells strongly of coincidence to me.

“Whatever this ghost is, they probably just mistook something else for a ghost,” I said. “You don't often see eyes that color. Though, if someone else has red eyes like you, Tiegel, I'd like to meet them.”

“I'm also curious.”

## Chapter Five: Humans Are the most Arrogant of Beasts, Which Is Why They Are Strong

“.....”

Aisha's entourage stood in front of me. They seemed to be enjoying a good chat.

Initially, her entourage was only boys, but in the blink of an eye, noble girls were mixed in, if only the lower-ranking ones.

It seemed they had plans to use Aisha to move closer to the noble boys she'd bewitched. There were sons of counts among Aisha's bewitched boys, which meant Aisha wasn't an enemy for these girls hoping to marry up in rank; she was someone worth currying up to so they could use her.

Aisha was aware of their intentions. That meant she was letting herself be used by others to achieve her own goals.

She's a cunning woman.

But unlike her, all the girls around her were cloistered ladies who'd never tasted filthy water. They were no match for me.

“They don't know their place,” I said.

“What do you mean, Lady Selena?” asked Scarlanette, who was, for some reason, walking at my side. I ignored her and kept going.

It was obvious from how the ladies in Aisha's entourage kept glancing at me that they were planning something.

If you're going to set a trap for me, do it in a way I won't see coming. Living in a world so cut off from danger must have made them honestly believe they could dig a pit in front of their prey, and it would wander right in without noticing. Nobles are so dumb. That would never happen.

Even a rabbit kit would bite a lion if it meant surviving. And I'm not a rabbit

kit.

In this case, the stupid rabbit kits were approaching the lion with the intention of eating it. So dumb.

As I walked and contemplated that, one of the low-ranking noble girls stuck her leg out in front of me. It was probably meant to trip and, therefore, embarrass me.

Without hesitation, I stomped on her foot.

“Ack!”

“Lady Mina! Are you all right?”

It must have hurt since I put all my weight onto the heel of my high-heeled shoe. It might even have broken the smaller bones of her foot.

The girl crumpled to the ground in pain, and Aisha put on a concerned expression and went over to her. I ignored the rest of her shocked entourage and quickly kept moving.

“That’s satisfying,” said Scarlanette, giving Aisha and her entourage a disdainful look. “I can’t believe they tried something so juvenile.”

“Lady Selena,” said Aisha, locking her eyes on me while she went to the girl. “Even if it wasn’t on purpose, you should apologize when you step on someone’s foot. I don’t care how high-ranking you are; I cannot let this slide. I demand you apologize.”

“How dare— Urg!” Scarlanette was about to lay into Aisha, but I clamped a hand over her mouth. Her mouth kept moving as she tried to get me to tell Aisha off, but it wasn’t clear exactly what she said. You know, since I was covering her mouth.

If this were a scene in a tale, I would be the evil noble lady brandishing her status, perfectly happy to injure lower-ranking nobles, and Aisha would be the courageous heroine who stands up for her friends.

Though, this heroine’s heart wasn’t as beautiful as the heroines’ in the stories.

Not surprising, of course. The real world isn’t like the one in the stories, either. It’s full of filth.

“What an amusing thing to say, Miss Alaban,” I said. “You make it sound like I harmed that crouching fool over there.”

“You did.”

“There’s nothing worse than playing dumb.”

“It doesn’t matter if your father is a duke; you can’t get away with violence. How can you not understand that?”

*This buzzing fly is so annoying.*

And what I did doesn’t even constitute violence. You don’t know anything about violence, do you?

“All I did was walk by your group,” I said.

“You stepped on her foot. As you can see, she’s in pain,” said Aisha. Unlike the girls in her entourage, she was working to keep her emotions under control. Good job for not shouting. For as calm as she was, her yammering entourage just looked all the uglier.

She wasn’t just trying to paint me the cruel noble girl; she was looking down on these girls who approached her for their own benefit while using them as a backdrop to make her look better.

It’s such a shame she and I have ended up enemies just because she’s a student from Rienbul. If she joined the dark guild, I’m sure she’d make a very useful tool.

“Well, if I think of how she was moving and the direction I was moving in, I can’t see how I could’ve stepped on her foot if she hadn’t stuck her leg out in that unnatural fashion,” I said.

“Eep!” The noble girl Aisha called Mina paled just because I turned my eyes towards her.

*It’s not like I’m going to do anything to someone as insignificant as you, I thought. What a rude girl.*

“What were you thinking, getting in the way of a high-ranking noble?” I asked.

“.....”

“If I were royalty, you could be punished for that.”

“.....”

Mina trembled, unable to say anything. I realized the other flies had gone quiet, too.

“But Miss Alaban says I stepped on your foot,” I continued.

“...I...”

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you. Could you say that again?”

“I-I’m sorry. I was mistaken. Y-You didn’t step on my foot.”

“Oh. Of course not. Right, Miss Alaban?”

“I’m sorry, Lady Selena,” said Aisha. “It seems I was mistaken. I assumed you did something because she screamed as you were passing by. And I’d only just been told certain rumors about you.” She looked at the girls in her entourage.

“That’s no good. It would’ve been better if you’d taken those unverified rumors with a grain of salt rather than suspect me,” I said.

The ladies in her entourage told her those malicious rumors, and this whole incident was caused by low-ranking nobles trying to humiliate me. Aisha successfully let everyone around her know this, as well as the fact that she had just been caught up in it.

And there was one more person there to speak:

“Huh, guess it’s really not her fault.”

Oh, Scarlanette. I never thought of you as smart, but it seems you are actually a moron. I can’t blame the onlookers who stopped to watch partway as the event unfolded, but you’ve been here watching up close. How could you come to that conclusion? It makes me want to cut your head open and see what’s inside.

“It’s only to be expected,” I said. “Plenty of busybodies here will give you all sorts of information out of the goodness of their hearts since you only just arrived. It must be difficult to sift through it all. Do be more careful in the future. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

I'd received information that Aisha had made several advances on Evan but hadn't succeeded as she'd hoped. After that, her target shifted to me for a reason I couldn't fathom. She had all sorts of schemes to lower my public image.

Not that lowering my image would have any impact on Evan at all.

I felt Aisha's gaze on my back and heard the buzz of her entourage behind me as I walked away.

"Agh! Don't just stop like that all of a sudden, Lady Selena. What are you doing?" Scarlanette banged her head into my back because she was so distracted by Aisha that she didn't notice me stop. "Oh, isn't that Prince Shaghad?" she asked with a look of curiosity as she followed my gaze. "Why is he alone?"

Scarlanette probably had it in her head that royals were always surrounded by their friends and guards. Evan and his brother Heinrich were always like that. Shaghad, on the other hand, was always alone, which must be a rare sight for her.

Though, while you might say he was alone, he wasn't really. Tiegel was acting as his guard, hiding so no one noticed him. He noticed me and nodded his head in a bow of greeting.

"Hm? Isn't that..." said Scarlanette, looking towards Ismail and his entourage.

*What, can you not do anything without your herd?* I said, insulting him in my mind before I could stop myself.

"What are they doing?!" shrieked Scarlanette as Ismail and his entourage attacked Shaghad.

There was no one else around. It was an area of the path where not many people walked, and that's why their true nature reared its ugly head.

"We can't let them do this!" Scarlanette moved to help, but I grabbed her arm, covered her mouth, and pushed her against the wall as she tried to shout.

"Watch in silence," I said.

I imagined she wanted to say something like, "I can't believe this! Why?!" but



all I heard were muffled sounds because I had my hand over her mouth.

Tiegel, who was meant to be guarding Shaghad, didn't show himself, likely because he understood what I was trying to do. I kept an eye on Shaghad while I held Scarlanette against the wall. I doubted they would kill him, but I'd need to step in and stop them if it looked like they were going to seriously injure him.

"He's like a doll..." I whispered.

He didn't resist. He didn't even seem interested in resisting. That allowed Ismail and his cronies to act like that. Ismail's entourage were low-ranking members of the nobility. The people below would devour even royalty if they were that weak.

I saw it several times in my previous life. No matter how much high society focused on status, there must be some sort of rule that said the weak-minded and poorly defended were fair game for insults and violence, just like Shaghad now. They're as barbaric as assassins.

Ismail and his group tormented Shaghad until they had their fill, then left, laughing at the battered prince.

"Gasp!"

I let go of Scarlanette's mouth once everyone was gone. She took a deep breath of fresh air after having her mouth blocked for so long, then glared at me.

"Why did you just watch as they beat him like that? They can't be permitted to do that sort of thing."

"Whose permission do they need then?"

"What? No, I..."

Did she think they needed permission even though she didn't know whose permission they needed? What a weird person. Well, she used to be that ridiculous girl who went up against me despite being weak.

"A-Anyway, it wasn't right of you to not step in and do something," she said.

"Why?"

“Why? Because...it’s not right!”

“Who decides what’s right and what’s wrong?”

“Urk.”

Again, she can’t answer. Is it that she knows the answer but doesn’t know the logic that leads to it? I thought people answered questions by using reason, though.

“It doesn’t matter if it wasn’t right, anyway,” I said.

“Why?”

“Life isn’t about how rightly you live. It’s about how well you do. Or at least, that’s how you nobles have survived all this time, isn’t it?”

“...You say that like you’re not a noble.”

*Crap.*

I got dragged along by my emotions from my last life. Maybe it was because I never really resonated with the noble environment and lifestyle that I still felt odd thinking of myself as a noble. It was going to expose my true nature someday. I needed to get a hold of myself.

“You’re right, Lady Selena,” said Scarlanette. “Nobles have survived like that. But I want to live my life as correctly as I can. You taught me that.”

“I did?” I didn’t remember ever teaching anyone such an unseemly way of living.

“At the Festival of Hunting. You saved me. Even though I said such horrible things about you because you were in my way to becoming princess consort. You still saved me.”

“.....”

It wasn’t like that. I wasn’t trying to save her. I just had an enemy in my face, and I eliminated it. She just happened to be behind me at the time. That’s all. There’s no deep meaning there.

“...You don’t need to thank me,” I said. “I wasn’t trying to save you. I just killed the enemy in front of me. It was just a side product that doing so saved

you, too.”

“Lady Selena, are you a *tsundere*?”

“A...tsundere?”

How in the world did she get to that conclusion? I cannot keep up with nobles’ powers of reasoning. They leap to something barely even tangential far too often. It was tiring just to talk to them.

“I mean, the option to run was there for you,” said Scarlanette. “With your skill, you could have retreated while dealing with the monsters. You could have even used me as a distraction while you ran. If you really prioritized your own life, wouldn’t that have been the right choice?”

“.....”

“But you didn’t do that. Because—”

“Be quiet.”

I feel like I’m being turned into something I’m not. It’s not a pleasant feeling. It’s incredibly unpleasant.

“I did what I did just now because there are considerations around letting these students come from Rienbul,” I said. “Besides, Prince Shaghad Rienbul is a weakling with no intention of baring his fangs against his enemies. I am not required to interfere unnecessarily or put in effort for someone like that.”

Scarlanette didn’t say anything else. I started walking again, but I didn’t sense her move to join me.

But her eyes did bore into my back the whole time. Why was it so uncomfortable?

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### **Side View: Scarlanette**

**SELENA VIOLETTE**, the only child of Duke Violette.

The Violettes don’t actively engage with the social scene and don’t serve in court, meaning they’re not the highest-ranking of the ducal families. But it was no exaggeration to say their economic power was the economic power of Astra

with as many industries as they were involved in.

I've met Duke and Duchess Violette several times. The duke has a gentle smile and mild manner, but he also seems cunning, like a successful merchant would be. His wife is a real-life good person. I had no trouble believing she would adopt a commoner girl who wandered into their mansion.

I never expected much from the daughter of someone like that, even if she was the daughter of a duke.

But I was wrong. How could someone that kind give birth to someone so cold? Lady Selena Violette is so much the opposite of Duchess Violette that it makes me realize some mysteries in this world can never be explained. She cares so little about other people to the point of being cruel.

But I had to revise that opinion, too, after the Festival of Hunting.

Monsters were rushing right at me. My knees went out beneath me. I'd never seen a monster before, and I couldn't move.

All my friends who were always with me ran, abandoning me. I learned popularity showed its true colors in times like that and expected to die.

But I was saved by none other than Selena Violette. She couldn't have done that if she truly didn't care about others. Especially for someone hostile towards her like I had been.

I adjusted my opinion of her to that of someone who is easily misunderstood but actually deeply caring.

But today, the same girl who saved my life ignored Prince Shaghad as he was being attacked. She said she wasn't required to save him with a coldness that said she'd already tossed him aside.

I tried arguing back, not understanding her, but she cut the conversation with two knife-like words: "Be quiet."

She looked away, her expression as blank as always, but I saw what looked like unease and fear in her eyes. Does she not even know the reason behind her actions?

"Selena Violette, what sort of environment were you raised in?" I murmured.

She would have grown up surrounded by love, living with those kind parents. Why does she seem so abnormal, so twisted?

I think there's a darkness I can't even fathom deep within Selena Violette.

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"**THEY** did a good job," I said. I was with Tiegel atop a tree, looking down at the work below us.

Just like the day before, Ismail and his thugs attacked Shaghad Rienbul. He never once resisted. He just curled up and protected himself.

There's nothing you can protect without resisting, though.

"The members of Ismail Alaban's entourage are Astra nobles, yes?" asked Tiegel.

"Yes. It seems low-ranking nobles are more fixated on the draw of the feast they can have today rather than the suffering that awaits them in the future."

"Is this for the best? Our mission is to protect Prince Shaghad."

"They're not threatening his life. And protecting him isn't our only mission."

"You mean having the Alaban twins cause a problem?"

"Yes."

"They'll drag down our own nobles with them."

He must mean the low-ranking nobles attacking a valued guest from another country right in front of our eyes. "No one will complain if we throw away things we don't need."

I don't like it.

Unlike Ismail, Shaghad did notice Tiegel and me watching. As a royal, he would have learned self-defense. He should be decently strong. Proof of that was that he moved to soften the blows from Ismail and his thugs in a way they never noticed, making it so he got out with nothing more than minor injuries.

And yet, he allowed those weaklings to entirely dominate him.

It looked in every way like he'd given up, and that was unpleasant to see.

Just like yesterday, Ismail and his group left after satisfying themselves with a certain amount of beating.

“I’m struggling to understand,” I said after dropping down from the tree once I was sure there was absolutely no one else in the area. Shaghad wasn’t surprised. He already knew that I knew that he’d noticed me. “Why don’t you resist? What reason do you have for resigning yourself to being weak?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re strong.”

“Not as strong as you.”

“Maybe not. I have more experience in actual combat.” Especially considering my previous life experience. “But you have more potential than Ismail. If you really tried, forcing him under your control would be easy. Why haven’t you worked to make that happen?”

He sat up at my question and looked at me with a self-denigrating smile. “And what then? What do I do once he’s under my control?”

What an odd question. He’s a prince. His path is laid out for him, paved and made safe, with not a stone to stumble on. He just needs to walk it. It’ll probably continue all the way to the end of his life.

“No one needs me,” he said.

Ah, I forgot that. Unlike me, people who live on the light side of society are a certain breed that can’t live without a place or purpose. I heard in my past life about them in a different part of society, but it never had anything to do with me, and I didn’t care, so I forgot about it up until this moment. I had the vague thought of how inconvenient it was for one of those light-dwellers if they needed more than just food and shelter to survive.

“Even my mother abandoned me,” continued Shaghad.

If I remembered correctly, Princess Consort Shahrnaz left the royal palace when Shaghad was six. It made perfect sense that she would leave him if she were escaping. The royalty and other nobles wouldn’t allow her to run with a child with royal blood. They might even kill the mother to bring the son back.

It's standard practice for survival to eliminate whatever puts you in danger.

Even if she were a commoner, it'd be a toss of a coin on whether or not she'd take her child with her. There were only so many places a woman could work, and it would be hard to raise a child alone. That's why many children were thrown into the slums in my previous world.

"Do you hate your mother for abandoning you?" I asked.

"...I don't know."

Maybe his feelings didn't go all the way to hatred, but there was anger.

"I just wanted her to take me with her."

"Meaning, you wanted her to sacrifice herself for you?"

He frowned, not understanding what I meant. He might be stronger than Ismail, but he was still weak from an adult's perspective.

"Only those with strength and luck can choose a future of happiness," I said. "So, your mother chose. For a future of her own happiness. You think that was wrong? You're saying a mother should sacrifice herself for her child, choosing an unhappy future for herself if it's better for her child? You would force that decision on her? That's arrogant."

"I would never want her to be unhappy!"

*Now you're actually coming at me with your real feelings.* "So, what did you plan to do if your mother took you with her? What can you do? Could you work as a child? It'd be fine if you could just exist with her, but you're alive, meaning you'd need food. You would sponge money she didn't have off her even though you couldn't work?"

"I..."

There were no words he could continue with. He was prioritizing his own feelings, unable to see anything of the situation his mother was forced into.

"Your mother just made her decision to leave you behind."

"Urk."

"You just need to make your decision."

“What?”

“What are you going to do about your mother who abandoned you? Will you leave her be? Will you find her and repay her for the unhappiness she put on you? It’s the prerogative of the strong to interfere with other’s lives and decide what happens next for them.”

Shaghad didn’t respond. But, unlike before, he seemed to be thinking about something.



## Chapter Six: The Beast Sharpens Its Fangs

### Side View: Shaghad

“OH, is that Prince Shaghad?”

My father, his lover Anita, and their illegitimate children Ismail and Aisha lived in the royal palace. My grandfather was busy every day with his duties as king. He didn't see the quarrels in the palace and couldn't publicly act on them anyway due to his position. It was in those unguarded moments that Anita would find me.

“What are you doing in a place like this, Prince Shaghad?” She smiled affectionately, but there was derision in her eyes. “What a poor little prince. You've suffered so much because of the princess consort's crimes.”

As she spoke, she gripped my shoulder so hard her nails bit me. There was no one there to help.

Ismail and Aisha were called illegitimate children within the royal palace, but many nobles whispered rumors I was a child of my mother's affair. If I really had been the product of infidelity, Ismail and Aisha would have higher legitimacy as they had royal blood from our father.

If that were the case, then Anita would become the next queen consort as the woman my father was infatuated with. No one could do anything then because it was possibly true.

“It's all right, Prince Shaghad. It doesn't matter who your parents are; I see you as my child,” cooed Anita.

“.....”

“I am Raheem's wife, after all. Even if it's not necessarily the truth, you are, in a way, Raheem's child. It's only right that I, his wife, would treat you as my own. Poor Prince Shaghad, abandoned by your mother...”

Her smile deepened when she saw me stiffen.

“Though, if you didn’t exist, she wouldn’t have been run out of the royal palace. It was you who forced her into a corner. After all, it’s because of you everyone found out about her infidelity. That shameless Princess Shahrnaz. You did nothing wrong; you just came into this world, yet she pushed everything onto you and left the palace without you.”

Then she said, “It’s all your fault for being born. You must be punished,” and she dragged me into an empty room and stomped on my back, looking down on me in amusement as I groaned in pain.

No one helped me. No one reported it to the king, my grandfather. After all, I still didn’t even know who I should align myself with.

I didn’t say anything to my grandfather either. I was too pathetic. I couldn’t even say anything back to Anita because part of me doubted my own birth. I didn’t want to show my grandfather how weak I was for not trusting my mother.

“Shaghad, come practice swordplay with me.”

After Anita’s torture, it was time for Ismail and Aisha’s.

“They say Ismail is talented with the sword. You could have him teach you, Prince Shaghad. Then you’ll understand how you’re too big for your britches when people say you’re the next king,” said Aisha with a giggle.

“What a good idea,” said Ismail, then he dragged me off to the training grounds.

“Urk!”

“What’s wrong? Just blocking my strikes isn’t good practice.”

His sword swung mercilessly at me, landing hard, causing my hands and arms to go numb simply by blocking it, stealing away my sense of touch.

“Agh!”

His sword seemed likely to send me flying if my focus slipped at all. I put all my attention into it, but Ismail grinned, and then I felt the kick to my gut.

Kicking during sword practice was not something you normally did. It was sort of against the knight code of ethics. But this wasn’t true sword practice. This

was just for fun.

Aisha laughed from the sidelines as I doubled over.

“Stand up. This isn’t over yet,” said Ismail.

Something bad must have happened to them. A lot of nobles made snide remarks to them because of their position and birth. I had to keep getting beaten until they felt better.

What in the world did I do? Is this all my fault?

My mother left because I was born, saying, “I want to be happy,” as she did.

Does that mean she can’t be happy with me there? I don’t understand. But that’s what she decided. That’s why she left me behind, to be happy.

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*“YOU just need to make your decision,” she’d told me. Her saintly aura of purity implied a reality whose cruelty was the opposite of mercy. “It’s the prerogative of the strong to interfere with other’s lives and decide what happens next for them.”*

I took out the ruby brooch, the national treasure my grandfather gave me, and reflected on her words.

Lady Selena Violette. When I first met her, I was shocked by her beauty and the coldness in her eyes. And I thought, *Ah, she’s the angel of death sent from the heavens to kill me.* The chill and gloom I saw in the depths of her eyes wouldn’t let me think anything else.

Prince Evan told me she was my guard, but honestly, I didn’t believe him. I assumed there was some sort of agreement between my father and Astra’s king that would end with me finally disposed of. Eliminated.

And I didn’t care.

Every single day, my half siblings and their gangs or my stepmother would attack me physically and verbally, and I’d had enough.

I never wanted to be king. Ismail wanted the throne, and Father wanted him to have it, too. He was royal, if only half. It wouldn’t be impossible for him to

take the throne.

One day, Ismail said to me, “Your mother might be higher ranking than mine, but so what? She abandoned you and ran off with some man. Your mother’s a slut,” and kicked me in the gut. His friends from class laughed at me as I gasped for air, then Ismail told them to beat me, and they did.

It didn’t matter if it was my home country or a foreign land. It was the same everywhere. I belonged nowhere.

“Who cares if you’re the son of the princess consort! You’re just an orphan abandoned by your mother! No one loves you; no one wants you!” shouted Ismail, and I couldn’t argue. Everything he said was right.

My eyes met a pair of cobalt blue eyes atop a tree. There was no sympathy in those eyes. They just looked down at me without emotion.

Who is she?

Something about her was different from any other noble. No one tried to be close to her despite her being a high-ranking noble, nor did they curry up to her.

There were only two types of people around her: those who instinctually sensed her danger and tried to eliminate her or those who were wise enough to keep their distance. Though, there was one exception.

But those two types of people had something in common: neither could take their eyes off her. Perhaps there was just something about her, something abnormal, or perhaps she intentionally emitted an aura, but people had to take notice of her.

“You’re not royalty; you’re a lowly orphan,” sneered Ismail, showering me with vitriol. “Your mother ran off with a man, meaning we can’t even trust that you have royal blood in your veins. Grandfather only treats you as the heir to the throne to save face for the royal family. Because he pities you. Inside, he despises you. How stupid do you have to be to not realize it, and how long are you going to act all high and mighty in my face? Just go away already!”

He had too much pride, and it wouldn’t let him accept people treating him like a lover’s child despite having royal blood.

So often, I heard his mother telling him he was the true heir to the throne.

It wasn't like his mother truly loved our father, though. What she wanted was the position of queen consort. And she wanted to obtain the highest possible status and authority by placing her son on the throne.

*Ah, I see.*

Once I'd thought about that, I understood what Selena had meant when she said, "Only those with strength and luck can choose a future of happiness."

Even Ismail, who'd won over these low-ranking nobles and was now beating me, was weak in the eyes of his parents. Children are weak. They're so weak they can't complain when adults manipulate them and turn their lives into a mess.

And thinking that made me pity Ismail and Aisha. They came into this world on the whims of adults, then were forced to live in the royal palace, which could only be called hell, and manipulated by the shackles that are their royal blood.

They went after the throne despite being illegitimate children to make their mother's wish for the highest status come true, subjected to scorn and looks of derision as they lived in the palace just because their father wanted to continue living with the children he had with the woman he loved.

They can't say no because they're weak. They act like they want what they're after, but they're just obeying their parents. Their only option is to tolerate the situation. They are weak, and I am weak.

Then, is she strong?

Selena Violette is like a solitary beast no one attempts to approach. Would a day come when someone made her theirs?

"I find that hard to imagine..." I whispered.

She might make someone else hers, but I have a feeling she would never belong to anyone.

†††

**"THERE'S** a lot of them."

“He said it was too much of a hassle to investigate and eliminate them in advance, so he’s leaving them all to us. Apparently, they’re also having troubles because they have to shore up their defenses as well,” said Tiegel. Thinking of the person he was likely talking about made some real hostile aura slip out of me as I thought about how much I wanted to kill him.

“...Things will only get more complicated if you kill him,” warned Tiegel.

“I know. And even I’d have a hard time taking on Rick.”

The moon beautifully illuminated the night castle. Tiegel and I were witness to a mad dance unsuited to the majesty of the place yet also completely suited to the place, considering the nature of a castle.

Corpses lay at our feet. Blood leapt through the air, dying me the same color.

You could say this was the most beautiful sight in the world.

They were assassins sent by Ismail and Aisha’s parents to kill Shaghad. While they may be the twins’ parents, Raheem was also Shaghad’s father. He was trying to kill his own son.

“Raheem is a prince, but not really, right?” asked Tiegel.

“He was removed from the line of succession, but he is still royalty. That hasn’t changed the fact that he’s the son of the current king. Publicly, the king’s reason for letting him stay in the palace was fatherly love and sympathy. But Rick said it was really because there would be less damage and a smaller impact if he kept Raheem where he could see him, manipulating him in the palm of his hand until he destroys himself, rather than if he let him go somewhere else and do something he shouldn’t.”

“Resulting in us being overworked.”

There was fatigue in Tiegel’s voice, which wasn’t surprising. We’d been eliminating assassins every night for days in a row. Then, during the day, we were Shaghad’s guards.

Maybe Rick mistook Tiegel and me for some sort of weapons that couldn’t die.

“How is the miniature gun feeling?” asked Tiegel.

“Not bad. Though I have mixed feelings about it when I consider the possibility it was repayment for the work Rick overloads on us like he is now.”

I pulled the trigger and killed an enemy a good distance away while slicing down another enemy right in front of me with my favorite dagger.

Before, I could only fight in close range, but this gun let me handle mid-range combat as well. That shortened battle times even when there were many opponents. Even so, the fatigue was starting to build up.

“I never killed this many people in my last life...” I murmured.

“What was that, Lady Selena?”

“Nothing.”

Of course I hadn't. I was an assassin in my last life. I was generally targeting just one person at a time. My job this time, though, was defending, which meant eliminating all enemies.

I never knew defenders killed more than assassins.

That knight who took me down with him, did he learn his skills for killing through facing this sort of situation over and over again, all just to protect a ruler?

“Dammit, there's only two of them,” said one of the surviving assassins.

“And one's a girl. Why are we having such a hard time against them?!” said another, insulting us. These third-rate assassins failed to evaluate their opponents' strength because they had an overwhelming advantage in numbers.

Compared to the country I lived in in my previous life, the assassins in Astra and Rienbul were both rather unskilled.

I guess that's just how peaceful it is here.

“We're in a different league,” I said and aimed my gun at one man. He looked at me in terror. He couldn't even fight back when faced with the fear of death.

I looked at him, exasperated at how he feared death despite being an assassin, and pulled the trigger.

“Shit, steal that girl's weapon!”

“That’s impossible! It doesn’t make any sound; we can’t even see it. The wounds it leaves are tiny, but...but...I blink, and everyone’s dead!”

*Fear of the unknown, hm?*

“Tiegel, do you know what makes monsters frightening?”

“Hm? I suppose it’s that we don’t understand them?”

“Exactly. Monsters are unknown, and therefore, they’re frightening.”

Tiegel looked at the assassins, who were in chaos over their fear of this unknown weapon called a “gun.”

“Meaning, that weapon is a sort of monster to them?”

“It is. If that’s the case, I wonder how they see me, the person using this monster.”

I pointed my gun and pulled the trigger even at those who lost all drive to fight and were, therefore, not even enemies. I kept pulling the trigger until all their bodies lay on the ground.

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***SHIT, this is such a pain in the ass.***

I used words like that as a matter of course in my previous life, but I couldn’t now. It didn’t matter what I was on the inside; I was now the daughter of a duke.

I swallowed them back with a smile. An assassin should always avoid making the foolish mistake of dropping the role they were given, no matter what situation they found themselves in.

And, yes, I am a first-rate assassin. I am proud of that fact, and I had my professional pride to maintain as well.

“Prince Shaghad, what was that?”

I must be tired. I’m just hearing things. I must be.

Yes, I’m sure of it. Could you take what you said back? Tell me it was just a momentary whim?



"I want you to teach me," he said.

I am begging you. Don't give me any more work.

"I'm a mere noble girl. I don't believe I could teach you anything, Your Highness."

"I need you."

For some reason, Tiegel jerked behind me in reaction to something. I focused my senses on the surrounding area, but no one was there other than the three of us. What in the world did he react to? I looked at him, but he didn't say anything. It must not have been a big deal, then.

The bigger problem was *him*.

"You are not a mere noble girl," said Shaghad. "You're stronger than any knight I know."

Knights aren't like assassins. You really can't compare them.

"I need skills to survive, skills to fight," he continued.

"If you're simply seeking strength, perhaps you could ask Prince Evan for his help?" I suggested. "He should be able to introduce you to an excellent tutor."

And Evan wouldn't have a reason to refuse since it would be good to have Rienbul owe Astra.

What Astra was wary of was the current king of Rienbul dying and an incompetent king taking his place while things were the way they were. Fool kings didn't just damage their own country; they dragged surrounding countries into their mess as well, causing rot inside and out.

I saw countries collapse like that in my past life.

It was just the nature of a country to be at risk of collapsing at the slightest thing, no matter how powerful a country it was. That's why Astra was working with Rienbul.

"What I want is not a knight's strength," said Shaghad.

His eyes locked on me, and I felt a shudder run down my spine.

From the cold? Fear? No, neither of those. It was anticipation. Anticipation of

a spice that would liven up my everyday life that had fallen into a rut.

“I can use a sword,” he said. “I’m confident in my skills as my grandfather had me taught by teachers he personally employs. But it’s not enough to survive. There’s a limit to what you can do with a knightly fighting style. I want to learn. I want you to teach me how to fight like an assassin, what you can’t learn from a knight.”

Tiegel started to move, but I held up a hand to stop him.

I looked at Shaghad. He looked straight back into my eyes. I approached him, but he didn’t cower or run. I touched his cheek and moved closer. I was so close I would brush his lips if I moved any closer. So close he could hear my whisper. Even though there was no one near, I was being extra cautious. And this way was more likely to shake him up, drawing out his true feelings.

“Assuming you’re not a complete idiot,” I said, “you would have had some questions when a noble girl was assigned as your guard and perhaps considered what it meant for the future. Did you ever consider the fact that I might be an assassin sent to kill you? If I were, I might kill you in this so-called training. Did you consider that?”

“I-I did.”

There was something almost cute and age-appropriate about how his face turned bright red all the way to his ears as he avoided meeting my eyes. He was so thrown off kilter that I felt less annoyed about having to deal with yet another annoying task.

“B-But I want to take that risk,” he said. “I don’t know who’s my ally and who’s my enemy. I have no idea where my enemies might be hiding, so I need to confirm with my own eyes who I can trust rather than rely on someone else to arrange something for me. I don’t know if you’re truly my guard, but I also don’t think you’re an assassin sent by my father and Lady Anita. Your aura is similar to the assassins I’ve dealt with before, but far sharper, colder. And your hostility has never been directed at me. And, most importantly, you’re far stronger than them.”

I see. So long as he’s incapable of reading minds, Shaghad can’t trust anyone assigned to him by someone else, whether it’s by Evan, Astra’s king, or

Shaghad's own grandfather. The best strategy, after all, is to betray someone whose trust you've gained.

That's why he used all the experience and instincts he'd developed through surviving all these attempts on his life to determine that I was not his enemy, at least not right now. And he wanted my strength.

*"Humans betray. You must not trust them without good reason. All you can trust are the skills you've honed."*

For the first time in a long time, I remembered something the person who taught me my assassin skills regularly told me in my previous life. Perhaps I saw something of myself when I first met him in Shaghad.

I wonder if my teacher felt how I feel right now. When he was drunk, he used to always say polishing a diamond in the rough gave a thrill different from assassinating. Apparently, I was his pride and joy when he'd made me into a full-fledged assassin.

His hands sent me plunging into darkness, and now I would be doing the same thing, it seemed. And to a prince.

*"It doesn't matter the reason; every person who learns how to kill someday falls into the murky depths."* That was also something he said. It continued: *"But we don't have any other path. People can't live an upstanding life in this rotten world. Everyone can fall, deep, deep, to the very bottom."*

Maybe this boy should fall, too, just like a slum child despite being a prince.

"That could be amusing," I murmured.

"Hm?"

"All right. As you wish. I'll teach you."

"Thank you! Uh, ahem." He cleared his throat, perhaps self-conscious about celebrating because of the happiness that hit him. Then he held a hand out to me. "Thank you, Master Selena."

"Just Selena is fine."

"Of course, Selena."

There were two things I wanted to see: how he would change once he'd learned the art of killing and what those who thought he was weak looked like when he crushed them.

I never thought I was interested in other people, so this feeling bubbling up in me was new. That's what made me agree to teach Shaghad the assassin's trade.

I didn't want others to learn of his training, so we agreed to meet in the dead of night on a mountain I'd previously used for training, and then we parted ways.

"Do you have any objections?" I asked Tiegel once Shaghad was gone. He'd been silent the entire time Shaghad and I were talking, and his expression didn't change, but he must not have been interested in hiding his displeasure because I felt it in his eyes as they bore into my back.

I looked at him, but he turned his entire face away to break eye contact and avoid my gaze. "I couldn't possibly have any complaints about something you've decided, my lady."

So he said, but he didn't seem satisfied. "If he can handle things, then we'll have an easier time on our nightly guard duties," I said.

"It's not that much of a burden. It's...a precious time the two of us spend together."

I didn't catch that last part, but I knew Tiegel loved his work. He was a surviving member of the war tribes. He didn't have good opinions of his people, though, and had an aversion to killing when I first met him. But he loved his killing work now.

I guess you really can't fight your blood.

Tiegel seemed to force down his feelings of displeasure and gave a sigh of acceptance before fishing something out of his pocket.

"What's this?" I asked as he showed me a long spike the same red as his eyes with a butterfly decoration on one end.

"If I may," he said, then put it into my hair. "It's called a *kanzashi*; it's a type of hairpin from another country. I found it in the market the other day. The tip is

pointed, so you should be able to use it if it comes down to it.”

“You’re telling me to stab people?”

“Yes. It would be hard to kill them with it, but you could at least frighten them. I started thinking when Lord Rick gave you the metal fan about what other sort of items would be all right to take in somewhere where weapons were limited since we would be in a lot of those places on this mission.”

“And so, you bought this hairpin?”

“Yes.”

Why are they all giving me deadly weapons? Am I the only one worrying about what’ll happen if I accidentally use them on our guests? I left the daggers behind, which I usually have on me, to avoid that exact situation. And yet...

“Deadly weapons...” I murmured.

“My lady?”

It seemed Tiegel still didn’t understand what a life really was. “Tiegel, remember this: I don’t need swords or daggers or even that gun Rick made to kill people. A pen is enough.”

“A...*pen*? The sort you write with?”

“Yes, that sort of pen. Just one. That’s enough.” I touched his neck where his carotid was. His body moved slightly in reaction, perhaps from the instinctual fear living creatures have for that. “Here, Tiegel. I can stab the pen here.”

He laid his hand over mine as if checking where it was. “And they would die? With just that?”

“Yes, they would die. People regularly die in a way that makes others ask, ‘With just that?’”

And yet, some moron somewhere prattled on about how lives have weight. I’m sick of that claim. If lives really had weight, they couldn’t be taken so easily.

“I can kill with just a single pen,” I said.

“If that’s so, Lady Selena, would you kill me someday?” He took the hand I held to his neck and kissed it. “I will most likely die by someone’s hand

someday. People who have killed many generally do. If I'm meant to be killed, I want it to be by you."







I killed people in my previous life as well. And while I am a noble in this life, I'm also an assassin. So Tiegel was right. I would find myself down that same path.

"If the time comes, please kill me," he said. "And if the time ever comes for you, please let me be the one to kill you. I don't want you to be killed by anyone else. If we kill each other, we will be engraved more deeply in each other's souls."

"What in the world are you saying?"

What a weird thing to say. Tiegel just smiled at me and my exasperation.

"Ah!"

"Ah?"

"That is inappropriate!" shouted a red-faced Evan as he rushed over to us and tore Tiegel and me apart. "I'm a little, no, not just little, I'm, I'm quite shocked you two have that sort of relationship, but..."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"But if it means you're happy, Selena, I suppose I could try...though I'm really not sure if I could, but I would do my best to support your relationship. But, I mean, I know there's no one around, but we are at the Academy."

"Evan, what are you on about?" I asked.

His bright red face and incoherent babbling made him look nothing like his usual cordial crown prince self.

"Wh-What do you mean what? I mean, you never know who's watching in a place like this."

Wait, did he see my conversation with Shaghad? If he did, he might find out what I really am. What do I do? Kill him? It probably isn't a good idea to kill the crown prince, is it?

I have a connection with Rick, and Rick runs the shadow side of the country. Someday, Evan will be in a position to use Rick, meaning, sooner or later, he's going to find out. So, it's not a problem if he finds out now?

No, wait. Why am I trying to find a reason *not* to kill Evan? You kill witnesses. That's an unbreakable rule of assassination.

So...I do kill him?

"Your Highness," said Tiegel, "I did not kiss Lady Selena."

"What? Really?"

"What made you think we kissed?" I asked. Based on Evan's reaction to what Tiegel said, Evan's behavior hadn't been an act. Half of me was exasperated at learning Evan was under some false assumption, while the other half of me was relieved.

"Well, you were touching and very close," said Evan.

"Even if we were having those sorts of relations, we wouldn't do that in a place like this," said Tiegel.

"A-And I wouldn't let you have those sorts of relations!"

Tiegel sometimes teased Evan like that. He didn't do it with just anyone, only Evan. They must get along well.

"How long are the two of you going to flirt?" I asked.

"We are not flirting!"

"We are not flirting."

*See, they're in sync.*

"Let's get back to class," I said.

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**ONCE** darkness blanketed the world, I began training Shaghad as promised.

I first had him fight Tiegel so I could get a feel for his strength. I, of course, told Tiegel in advance to hold back.

Based on his fight with Tiegel, Shaghad was already fairly strong. It was easy to see he'd been trained well.

"You'd be nothing to sniff at if you were a knight," I said.

I wasn't a knight, but I was well aware of how knights fought, thanks to my

employment in my previous life. It was such a pretty way of fighting that it made me want to ask if knights were common throughout the world.

They announced their name, then won through sheer technique without using any tricks. That was why people made fun of them for having such a “pretty” fighting style.

It didn’t matter if you were attacking or defending; it all ended at the same place: with your enemy dead.

Even though they stained their own hands with others’ blood, they touted their mentality of chivalry and boasted that they were more noble beings. How ridiculous is that?

“Chivalry, hm?” I murmured.

I could tell just by fighting that last knight in my previous life that he’d escaped Death’s clutches several times; that’s how good he was. He didn’t just swing his sword like a knight; he fought without scruples. That’s what fighting is, in the end.

Shaghad was entirely focused on Tiegel, so I hid myself and attacked him from behind. He stumbled forward when I whacked him on the side of the head with my metal fan. Then, Tiegel knocked him over with a merciless kick.

I had noticed in the previous exchange of blows that Tiegel was holding back like I’d told him to, but he was still merciless. He seemed to hate Shaghad, though they hadn’t interacted enough for him to have any reason to hate him.

Sometimes, there was just a physiological something that made people not click. Maybe Shaghad was like that for Tiegel.

“Don’t focus on just one enemy,” I said. “No idiots are going to challenge you one by one when you’re against several opponents. Even if you only see one enemy, there’s a chance they have allies hiding somewhere. Be wary of all your surroundings. Hone your senses. If you can’t do that, if that is lacking, you will not just lose; you will die.”

“I understand.”

I apparently cut the corner of his mouth when I hit him. He wiped away the

stream of blood with his sleeve, then raised his sword again.

*He's got guts, but I don't know how long that'll last.*

"Continue, Tiegel."

"Yes, my lady."

They began to fight again. Tiegel was a hard opponent for Shaghad since he only knew a knight's way of fighting. Tiegel used daggers like me. He slashed with the dagger in his right hand. If Shaghad blocked that, Tiegel still had the other dagger in his left. By the time Shaghad blocked the first dagger, the other was already where it could kill him.

The goal wasn't murder, of course. This was just training, and Tiegel wouldn't kill Shaghad. Even if Shaghad was mentally aware of that, people began to feel fear when someone continuously struck their weak spots. Fear made you freeze up, and that made you die.

"Do not fear death. The first to die are the ones who fear," I said.

He was hearing what I said but couldn't do anything about it right away. All I could do was have him conquer it on his own.

I'd ordered Tiegel to prioritize going for the spots that would cause instant death. He was doing that and letting off a hostile aura so sharp it put even me on edge. It was essentially the real thing.

Wait. Is it the real thing?

*Tiegel, you can't kill him. You understand that, right?*

"You dodged that? Well..." said Tiegel.

Shaghad was slowly learning to handle Tiegel's attacks from both hands with their random timing. But even though Shaghad blocked the attacks from both his hands, Tiegel wasn't flustered. He calmly swept Shaghad's legs from underneath him.

Shaghad landed on the ground, his eyes wide as he failed to understand what had just happened.

"This isn't practice. This is a real fight," I said. "Someone who comes to take

another person's life won't fight by the rules like a knight will. Even if they're holding a sword, that doesn't mean the killing blow will come from that sword. Be wary of everything. Suspect everything. Now, stand up. We don't have time for you to take a break."

"Yes, Selena."

Shaghad fought Tiegel over and over, each time ending up on the ground with a blade at his throat. Dirt and sweat coated his clothes and face.

"Again."

"Yes, Selena."

His breathing was fast. He was probably already at the limits of his endurance. He was falling more often over his own feet.

"Again."

"Yes, Selena."

He stood on trembling legs, barely able to hold his sword up towards Tiegel. Tiegel's breathing was barely elevated.

I didn't think he would ever be able to beat Tiegel, but if he could stand his ground against him, then he should be able to handle the assassins in this area without problem. He might be at risk of losing if someone particularly skilled came along, though.

"There's no point in continuing," I said.

Shaghad tried to stand, but he was drained. There was no strength in his legs to the point he couldn't force his knees off the ground.

"You are dead the moment you fall or let go of your sword. We'll continue the same training tomorrow at the same time."

Shaghad didn't even have the strength to reply, so, as his guard, I couldn't very well leave him there. I had Tiegel carry him back to the palace.

"They keep coming, and yet, they never learn," I said after we made sure to finish off the newly sent assassins we found when we dropped Shaghad off.

The next day, Shaghad came to the same place at the same time. Yesterday's

training was so harsh I suspected he might not come.

“You’ve got guts for a pampered prince,” I said. Not that that means we’ll go easy on you. “We’ll do the same as yesterday. Tiegel, begin.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Even though the training from yesterday was harsh, it didn’t mean Shaghad would be dramatically better in one day, so the results were the same.

“Don’t let your breathing get out of control. Always focus on keeping it steady. Your attacks will be easier to anticipate if your breathing is out of control. Those who come to kill you won’t let that opportunity slip by.”

“I understand.”

I threw pebbles at Shaghad from his blind spots as he fought Tiegel. When one hit its mark on his temple, his attention shifted away from Tiegel for just a moment, and Tiegel took advantage of that.

“Agh!”

Tiegel landed a kick in Shaghad’s gut. Quite hard, too. Shaghad flew backward to slam to the ground back first.

*Tiegel...you really are merciless.*

“Don’t be overly reliant on your sense of vision. You don’t know where an attack will come from. Pay attention to the signs of others at all times. Your enemy won’t always be in front of you, and they won’t always be so kind as to show themselves. And it won’t be so easy to tell they’re going to attack you like in training.”

I moved towards Shaghad as he stood, walking naturally like someone just passing by. Just as I was about to walk past him, I put a dagger to his throat.

“Urk.”

“This is a real assassination. Killers pretend to be harmless passersby to get close, and then they kill. Assassins won’t always be adults, either.”

“What?”

“There are child assassins of a tender age. You find it hard to believe? It’s not

uncommon. The penniless, abandoned children have no other way to survive. But you'll still have to make a decision to survive. Do not have mercy. Your death is certain the moment you do."

I put my dagger away and moved to where I had a good view of their fight.

"Prince Shaghad, you are not aiming to defeat; you are aiming to kill. And what stands in front of you is not an enemy; it is a human being. You survive by killing people. That is victory in a real fight. If you want to live, you kill. If you don't want to die, then don't hesitate. Kill and live. That is the path you've chosen."

*It was the decision you made when you asked me to teach you to survive.*

"Be prepared to kill. Be prepared to survive. Cowards who aren't ready to do that die a pitiful and disgraceful death. Now, again."

Shaghad fought Tiegel again. His movements were stiffer than before. Maybe what I said troubled him.

It was true, though. Realizing it only in your first real fight was too late. If you did learn it in your first fight, you couldn't make decisions as you would normally because you would feel shaken and hesitant. That was basically asking for your opponent to kill you.

Assassins do not hesitate. It doesn't matter if they're dealing with an adult, a child, or even a baby. If you're told to kill them, you do. It isn't about being good or evil. It's just that you'll die if you fail your mission.

If you didn't kill your target, the organization would kill you. Failure was not an option.

"Do not hesitate. Go with intent to kill."

"Urgh."

Even though his movements were stiff, and he couldn't hide that my words had shaken him, he didn't stop fighting. He stood against Tiegel time and time again, lost each time, and ended up covered in bruises and scrapes.

His face and clothes were coated in dirt, but he still kept standing because he would die if he didn't.

After spending days and days at it, Shaghad got to a point where, even though you couldn't say he fought as Tiegel's equal, he could stand against him for a long time.

"Let's move on to the next training type. You'll work on honing your ability to detect others. I'm going to blindfold you with this." I wrapped a black cloth around his head, blocking his vision. "Travel to the base of the mountain like this. Once you can reach the bottom smoothly, we'll move on."

Tiegel and I hid ourselves and followed him to make sure nothing unexpected happened, but we did nothing but watch as long as his life wasn't in danger.

The number of Shaghad's wounds grew as he stumbled on rocks, fell, and ran face-first into branches. It took him three hours to descend the mountain we used as his training grounds.

"Starting tomorrow, you'll go up the mountain blindfolded as well, then back down. You'll continue to repeat that. Once you reach our training spot, you'll fight Tiegel. I'll leave you to find time for sleep."

"...Yes, Selena."

Losing your vision causes significant stress. A mere road inflicts terror, fraying your nerves. Shaghad would be drained, but we'd be in trouble if that was enough to make him give in.

No matter how tired you are, you can't rest during a real fight.

You can't survive if you don't hone your nerves under every possible situation, making yourself capable of handling any attack. Assassins are killing professionals. Concealing themselves is the most basic of basics. All the assassins sent after him so far have been third-rate, but there's no telling when a skilled one might come, and he could not handle that.

He needs to improve his endurance, focus, and perception of hidden threats. Then, he'll be able to handle any situation. That's what this training is for.

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## **Side View: Shaghad**

"URK."



This Tiegel boy held back as Selena ordered him to, but the power I could feel as our blades crossed was merciless. One careless moment, and I was likely to drop my sword, but my hand grew tired and numb as I continued to block his blades head-on.

On top of that, his killer's aura directed at me was the real thing, and, to be entirely honest, it was terrifying. That aura was far more powerful than anything I felt from the assassins Anita or my father sent at me.

"Did I do something to make you hate me?" I asked.

"I loathe anyone who grows close to her without care. Don't think I hate you in particular," he replied.

Was that supposed to make me happy?

I glanced ever so briefly in Selena's direction, and Tiegel's dagger grazed my neck at my carotid artery. Without a doubt, he would have cut it if I hadn't dodged.

I had no idea what he was thinking. He was expressionless to the point of appearing disinterested, but underneath were emotions so extreme they couldn't be touched without the utmost care.

This person in front of me almost seemed like he wasn't human.

"You're like a wounded beast," I said.

Just like Selena, who resembled a skilled assassin more than a noble girl, this attendant of hers didn't suit his position because of the aura around him and his feelings towards his mistress.

What interesting people. I wanted to learn more about them.

"Urg."

I became focused entirely on my fight with Tiegel, which was when Selena approached out of nowhere and struck me. And quite a strong hit it was.

"Don't focus on just one enemy," she said. "No idiots are going to challenge you one by one when you're against several opponents. Even if you only see one enemy, there's a chance they have allies hiding somewhere. Be wary of all your surroundings. Hone your senses. If you can't do that, if that is lacking, you

will not just lose. You will die.”

“I understand.”

I had to handle Selena’s attacks, which could come at any moment while fending off Tiegel. Honestly, it was harsh. It drained me physically, of course, but more so mentally.

If I continued to be on guard for attacks from Selena, I would lack awareness towards Tiegel and get struck by him. These two were skilled assassins, incomparable to any of the ones my father sent at me. If they were sent to kill me, I would die instantly, unable to do anything. I couldn’t be more grateful they weren’t my enemies.

“Agh.”

Tiegel used weapons assassins might use. I had no idea what direction his attacks might come from, so they hit me several times. I did evade a few times, though largely out of sheer luck.

“This isn’t practice. This is a real fight,” she said. “Someone who comes to take another person’s life won’t fight by the rules like a knight will. Even if they’re holding a sword, that doesn’t mean the killing blow will come from that sword. Be wary of everything. Suspect everything. Now, stand up. We don’t have time for you to take a break.”

“Yes, Selena.”

I took her warnings to heart as I challenged Tiegel again.

“You can’t win using the pretty fighting style of a knight. Your opponent intends to take your life. They’ll use any method. What you see is not guaranteed to be true.”

She was well versed in all things assassination: their fighting style and way of thinking. It was almost like she was an assassin herself.

It was odd enough that a noble girl could fight this well.

I’d received information that she was a candidate for Prince Evan’s future bride and that the king of Astra liked her. She was certainly in a position that put a target on her own back for assassination.

Noble blood is considered precious, but nothing has less value than the life of a noble since it could be taken so easily by things like ambition and justice.

Did that mean Selena couldn't have survived this long if she weren't this strong? That thought made it hard for me to envy her and her strength.

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**“THIS** is grueling.”

At night, I had training with Selena and Tiegel. And quite the merciless training it was. During the day, I had classes. I wasn't getting nearly enough sleep, preventing me from fully restoring my physical and mental strength.

“Training at school, too?” I murmured.

“Today, we'll be training through duels,” said the teacher.

The classes integrated a certain amount of sword training to ensure we could defend ourselves.

I was hoping to take a break to recover my strength before my training with Selena.

“Shall we begin, Prince Shaghad?”

“Of course, Ismail.”

Ismail always stepped up to be my sparring partner at times like these because he could tease and embarrass me.

A small amount of injury wouldn't, and couldn't, become an issue if inflicted during a spar. If it did become a problem, the injured person would be laughed at for causing a fuss over something so minor.

“Ready, begin!” called the teacher, and Ismail immediately stepped forward. His approach was swift. A normal student would be too slow to react and be flung backward.

“Heh, you blocked that?” he said.

If Selena hadn't trained me, and I hadn't spent every night fighting Tiegel, I wasn't sure if I'd have been able to block that attack.

“You're pretty uppity for a reject,” said Ismail.

Our upper body strength still wasn't equal. If I kept blocking like this, I'd lose the contest of strength.

*"Don't block. Deflect. You won't get anywhere using strength against an opponent stronger than you!"*

Selana's words echoed in my mind, and I did as they told me to, deflecting Ismail's sword. He looked shocked when I did. He lost his balance and tipped forward when I deflected his attack, and I struck back, but despite his lack of balance, he flipped the trajectory of his blade and blocked my attack.

"Looks like you've gotten a bit better," he said. "But you can't win against me. I'm the one who will be king."

"Ack."

My blade bounced back, and Ismail's next attack came.

*I have to get my footing. Calm down, don't panic.*

"Agh!"

In the end, I lost that match when I was flung backward, though I wasn't injured since I deflected rather than blocked Ismail's attack.

The loss stung, but part of me was happy. It was visible proof that my work each night was bearing fruit.

"It seems my efforts are not in vain."

Despite finishing the class's training, Ismail hadn't had his fill. I'd have preferred to preserve my strength for Selena's training or even recover it if possible, but it wasn't. Ismail and his gang captured me.

"Hey, reject."

He obviously had a hard time swallowing our close fight earlier, but I realized by his next words that something else bothered him more:

"I thought I saw you getting friendly with Lady Selena earlier."

Ismail had his eyes on Selena. She was a beauty, of course, but her pedigree was nothing to sniff at either. Her parents didn't have much social weight since they weren't actively engaged in the social sphere. Still, House Violette was

engaged with a breadth of industries that gave them significant financial power, and the duke had strong connections outside Astra.

Selena was a necessary tool for improving his standing since Ismail had royal blood but wasn't treated as royalty. She was a trophy to make himself look better.

Though, someone like Ismail couldn't ever handle Selena, and I was sure her terrifying guard dog would never allow him near her, either. That attendant was on the lookout for any opportunity to close his jaws on my neck and kill me just because she was training me, after all.

"Lady Selena is a kind lady," said Ismail. "She just feels sorry for a failure like you."

"Exactly!" chimed one of his gang.

"We're not even certain you have royal blood. You can't handle a duke's family," said another.

*Selena? Kind?*

I couldn't help but laugh since it was so off the mark.

"What's so funny?" Ismail said, the furrow in his brow growing deeper.

"I was just thinking you're acting like you know her so well even though she's barely let you near her," I said.

"Argh!" Ismail's face went beet red when I hit that sore spot, and he raised his fist.

*Oh look, he's going to punch me,* I thought as I watched his fist swing towards my cheek. It all seemed to move in slow motion, thanks to my nightly training.

The fist with all Ismail's strength behind it must have made me cut something inside my mouth because a small amount of blood leaked out of my lips and nose. It hurt, but that was it. The attacks from Selena and Tiegel hurt far worse. They were seriously merciless.

I grabbed Ismail's fist as he went to swing at me again. I decided I was only going to take one hit. Ismail was dumbfounded when I avoided his attack for the first time ever since I'd always just taken them.

"It'd be best if you didn't treat royalty so lightly. Someone from a mere viscount's family like you could lose their head for harming royalty like me," I said.

"Pff. F-Father would never allow that."

"That's such an odd thing to say, Ismail. Are you claiming your father, who is not the king, has the authority to pardon someone from an execution?"

"He's your father too." He didn't look very well. This was the first time ever he'd feared me.

"I couldn't care less about a fool who went against the king and was removed from the line of succession," I said.

"What?!"

And he probably didn't think of me as his son, either. He abandoned me first. He tossed me aside because he didn't need me, and now I'm simply returning the favor. There was no reason that logic wouldn't hold.

I'm not such a child anymore that I'll continue seeking love from those who don't love me.

"And, for your information, Selena does not pity me," I said.

"Did you just call her Selena?"

"Is it odd that a prince and a duke's daughter would be on friendly enough terms to refer to each other without titles?" I smiled, though I was also concealing my fear since I could feel the animosity coming from Tiegel. I knew he was hiding in the shadows somewhere as my guard.

*He is...my guard, right? Not an assassin sent to kill me?*

I seriously questioned that sometimes. And Selena impressed me by keeping such a thing at her side and using it so well.

"Selena doesn't pity me, and she doesn't pity you," I said. We were nothing more than pebbles on the path to her. "So, you should stop trying to draw out her sympathy using your situation. It's a bad strategy."

I turned my back on Ismail, who stood there, his clenched fists shaking from

rage, and walked away.

I had to deal with her that night, so I wanted to save my energy as best I could.

“We’ll be taking tomorrow night off from training,” she told me once we finished training the day I had my altercation with Ismail.

I paused. “All right.”

Rather than be happy that I could have a day off from the harsh training, I felt uneasy that I would return to my former weak self after just one night off and sad that I wouldn’t be able to see her.

*I think I might be falling hard.*

I was jealous of Tiegel because he was always with her, not that you could even torture me into admitting it. I still wanted to live.

The night of the next day came, and it was the time I would normally be out training with Selena. I was having a hard time falling asleep, probably because my body had become so used to the other routine, and I started wondering what Selena was doing at that moment.

That’s when I heard the sound on the balcony.

I was stiff with nerves as I picked up the sword I brought to bed with me and moved closer to the balcony. I detected several people there.

But how? No assassins had come for me ever since I’d come to Astra. Why would they come only on the day I had off from training with Selena? Could it possibly have gotten out that I was training with her? Was that why she said we were taking tonight off?

If so, I felt bad. This had nothing to do with her.

“Gah!”

“Shit, why’s he awake?”

“Kill him, now!”

I’d hid behind the curtains and waited until they came in and I could confirm they were assassins, then I swung and stabbed at them without hesitation. They

were shaken and couldn't coordinate amongst themselves as I relentlessly attacked, not giving them a moment to breathe.

Even I was surprised at how calm I was.

*"Even skilled assassins are not knights. Their main work is eliminating their target without ever being detected. Many of them are unskilled in head-to-head combat. The battle is half-won if you can engage them in that combat. Do not let your guard down, and do not give your opponent time to make decisions, and you will win."*

That's what Selena taught me. I didn't quite understand when she said it, but it made sense now that I was fighting them. Though, I could only process the information because I'd had her training.

"They didn't say anything about him being this strong," said one.

Who paid them, Anita? Or Father? They were stronger than assassins I'd encountered before. Not long ago, they would have killed me for sure. They were corpses now, though, and wouldn't answer any of my questions.

"There were a few dangerous moments, but you get a passing mark since you defeated them," came a voice.

"...Selena."

She entered the room with Tiegel as if they'd been waiting for me to finish off the assassins. With her were men dressed in all black who silently began carrying out the bodies of the assassins I'd killed. They even changed out the blood-soaked rug with a new one, cleaning it all away like it never happened.

*What is actually happening?*

"Did you send those assassins, Selena?" I asked.

"Don't say such scandalous things. I would never use assassins as pathetic as them."

Meaning, if she hired an assassin, they'd be even better? I nearly died.

"Previously, I had been eliminating all the assassins sent after you. I simply didn't tonight. I wanted you to gain more experience in real-life combat," she explained.



“...Experience in real-life combat,” I repeated.

“It doesn’t matter what you can do in training; if you can’t handle combat, there’s no point. Starting tomorrow, we’ll focus on real combat. You’ll handle all the assassins we’ve been holding back on your own. It shouldn’t be an issue. They’re all worthless assassins hired by your father. It’s a good thing he’s so poor.”

She laughed, surprising me because I couldn’t see anything funny about this. She was cute when she did. I wished she would laugh more.

“If your father had more money, he could have sent more skilled assassins. They would have easily killed you,” she said.

“.....”

Though what she said wasn’t cute, which was typical Selena.

And, starting tomorrow, the teaching materials she was preparing for me were other people’s lives. She treated a life as casually as she might a stone by the side of the road, throwing them away as easily. I felt slightly frightened at how she didn’t even hesitate to do so.

Would she throw away my life as casually someday? Her own?

“Selena isn’t very suited to being a teacher, is she...” I murmured.

## Chapter Seven: No One Lives Forever

“**YOU** seem to be in a good mood, Selena.”

“As I planned, I’m going to have Shaghad handle all the visitors from Rienbul on his own starting tomorrow,” I said to Rick, who was waiting for me in my room after I returned from Shaghad’s first real-life combat experience after training.

“It’s your job to protect him. You sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’ll keep an eye on him so he doesn’t die.”

“Nothing’s certain, though. You know that better than anyone.”

“*Dare mo eien in ikirarenai*,” I said in the language from my past life.

“What’s that?”

“Something someone I used to know would say.”

What was it again? Lyrics of that song my teacher in my past life used to sing? Well, he used to say it sarcastically sometimes before killing his target or someone he didn’t like.

“Not a language I’ve heard before,” said Rick.

*Of course not. It doesn’t exist in this world.*

“What’s it mean?”

“No one lives forever.”

It was a good night. I opened the window, and the breeze pleasantly caressed my cheek. I liked nights where you could see the moon, but my favorites were nights of a new moon. I liked it when all that bothersome light was eliminated from the world.

“And if that’s the case, it doesn’t matter where you die,” I said. “Besides, if he’s killed by assassins this weak, he doesn’t deserve to be king.”

Rick's eyes were sharp. My current mission was of the utmost importance amongst the King's orders. Maybe Rick couldn't determine how much he could trust me to handle this.

It wasn't like I felt even the tiniest scrap of loyalty. I wasn't cut out for serving a king; it wasn't in me. I'd kill anyone if someone ordered me to. Just as before, I was still an assassin.

"It's not like his life is more valuable. Everyone is equally worthless," I said.

"That's not something you should say while smiling," said Rick, going back to his normal self after deciding there was no point in lecturing me. "If no one lives forever, then, yeah, it doesn't make that big a difference when and where someone dies. Except that the wrong when and where can lead to a bigger hassle for the rest of us. I have no idea what whim made you agree to train Prince Shaghad, but don't go overboard."

He slipped out the window and left.

"Will you be going to bed?" asked Tiegel.

"Yes. I have class tomorrow."

"I'll help you get ready."

He undid my hair and removed my hairpin. I was surprised by how gentle his hands were, considering his exceptional combat abilities as someone of a war tribe that he used during his duties.

I thought of Shaghad Rienbul, my first-ever protege. I was happier than I thought I would be to see someone I trained use what they gained. Did my teacher feel the same way?

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," said Tiegel.

"I do?"

"Yes."

*Enjoying? Hm. I'm experiencing all sorts of things for the first time in this life.*

"It makes me happy to see you enjoy yourself," he said.

"Does it?"

“Yes.”

I looked at Tiegel’s reflection in the mirror and was brought back to the cell, where I picked him up. What would I have done with him before I was reincarnated? Thrown him aside for being weak, probably. It wouldn’t even occur to me to take him with me. I probably wasn’t even capable of that thought process back then. That that whim happened, could happen, showed how much more capacity I had now.

It was the same with Shaghad.

I never used to care what happened to others. If someone had come to me and asked me to train them because they were weak, to teach them how to fight because they wanted to be strong, I would’ve just snorted at them with laughter.

“I’ve changed quite a lot,” I murmured.

“What was that, my lady?”

“Nothing.”

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“**GOOD** morning, Lady Violette.”

“...Good morning, Master Alaban.”

Ismail didn’t seem to enjoy being called by his surname. Or, rather, it was the “master” and not “prince.” If it bothered him that much, he could just not respond to it each time.

“Please, just call me Ismail,” he said.

Though, he looked like he didn’t want everyone around to realize he was so hung up on his blood and standing. What a tedious personality.

It doesn’t matter whose blood you have in your veins; if you win, you can silence your opponents and rewrite things so you’re in the right. There’s no need to be so hung up on things.

The only people who did that were the ones who were aware they were so weak they could never be the winners. Meaning that Ismail was one of those

people.

“Boy toys are everywhere,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to cause trouble for our guests from another country by causing inappropriate rumors.”

“...I appreciate your concern.”

For him, having those rumors would be a huge win. He had been making passes at other noble ladies, but the reactions hadn’t been very positive.

Of course they hadn’t. All the high-ranking noble girls he was targeting already had fiancés or were in the running to marry Evan. Even if they were to step out of those arrangements, no noble would want to have a relationship with someone like Ismail, whose position was unstable and whose very existence was a powder keg due to his royal blood.

“By the way, Lady Violette, I’ve noticed you seem to have grown quite close with Prince Shaghad. Has something happened?” asked Ismail.

“As the daughter of a duke and candidate to marry Prince Evan, I am in a somewhat similar position to Prince Shaghad if you’ll excuse me for comparing myself to royalty. That perhaps allows us to be more open with our concerns with each other. Besides, considering his status, there could be no ridiculous rumors that he’d become my boy toy, meaning there is no issue with us being friendly.”

Two types of men became boy toys: the first aimed to destroy the woman by spreading inappropriate rumors, while the second was what was called a “sugar baby,” a lower-ranking man who was financially supported by a higher-ranking woman.

If you put what I said previously and what I said just now together, I told Ismail: “I have no intention of becoming your sugar momma, and you and Shaghad are in different positions. Wake up.”

Though he only had the status of his viscount family, Ismail had some twisted pride over the royal blood in his veins, meaning he would find being treated as a sugar baby an insult hard to endure.

I imagine he wanted to scream at me for insulting royalty.

I'd received information from Rick on Ismail's personality that said he was quick to lash out at people and things that displeased him in his home country, but he couldn't do that now. This wasn't his home country.

While the king there didn't acknowledge Ismail's blood, it seemed Ismail's royal blood made him act haughty, and he went quite hard at the high-ranking nobility. But if he did that in another country, it would be his head rolling on the ground, not the other person's. It didn't matter how much royal blood he had; in terms of rank, he was no more than the grandson of a viscount.

"I don't want you to see me as a toy," he said. "I want you to see me as a beast."

Of course, even though he understood his position, he wasn't going to forget to flaunt his masculinity at me.

"You're not the only beast, Master Ismail," said Evan as he came from behind and stepped between Ismail and me. It was a rather rude thing to do, but Ismail could only frown, considering who Evan was. "All men are beasts. And you, in particular, seem to find it hard to be a gentleman."

For some reason, after he said that, Evan took a lock of my hair and kissed it as if in show for Ismail.

Squeals erupted from the noble girls nearby who had nothing to do with this situation, though I felt their hostility turn towards me at the same time.

Looks like I have to deal with even more annoying things.

Evan likely did that as nothing more than a show in the same way I was taking jabs at Ismail, but I wished he'd chosen a different method. One that didn't involve me, if possible.

I casually slapped Evan's hand away. He seemed to expect it, though, because he just shrugged and smiled in frustration.

"Gooood morning, Prince Evan!"

And then things got louder.

Aisha came running up, loudly calling as she did, and then clung to Evan's arm. Instantly, the hostility from the nearby noble girls turned towards her.

“How unladylike, speaking that loudly,” muttered one.

“Look. How dare she touch someone of the opposite sex like that who’s not her fiancé. When did this turn into a brothel?” said another.

“I don’t even want to look. It will sully my eyes.”

“The mere granddaughter of a viscount, too. She should know her place. This is what makes her an uncultured lower rank.”

We could hear their conversations, but Aisha didn’t seem to care. In fact, she had a full-faced smile of pride as she pressed her chest against Evan’s arm.

She seemed to mistake the Academy for a brothel. Though, she would never be a prostitute. At least not a high-class prostitute.

Most nobles looked down on prostitutes, but those women couldn’t survive if they weren’t quick-witted. They needed manners and culture to survive in the world because they could easily lose their job or even life if they offended a noble client.

Aisha, on the other hand, wasn’t aware of her status and standing. She was overly confident she could get any man to fall for her, and so was touching Evan, a royal, without permission. But if Evan got angry at her for insulting a royal, she could lose her head. That was what this society built on status was about. That world order was everywhere except Rienbul, where she was wrongfully defended.

“Miss Alaban, could you please let go?” Evan asked.

“Oh, but I wanted to be with you more,” she said, clinging even tighter to his arm.

*She’s basically crushing her breasts against his arm. Well done.*

Any normal man would at least be blushing at this point, but I looked at Evan, and he just had his usual cool smile.

“Miss Alaban, you are not my fiancée, nor are you in the running to be my fiancée,” he said, implying that she shouldn’t touch him so casually, but she still didn’t change her behavior.

She started cozying up to him more, making me wonder if she had a death

wish.

“Don’t say such lonely things. I want to get to know you better, Prince Evan.”

“There are others you should be getting to know better rather than me.”

“I do want to be better friends with Lady Violette, but—”

A burst of laughter escaped me at her utterly off-the-mark response.

“What is so funny?” asked Aisha.

Beside me, as I laughed, Evan was exasperated. With Aisha, of course.

But Aisha’s attention was on me, meaning she didn’t notice his exasperation or realize what caused it.

“Should I congratulate you for your laudable wish of becoming my friend?” I asked. “I’m not sure what it’s like in your country, Miss Viscount’s granddaughter, but here in Astra, people generally interact with those of the same status. There are friendships that surpass the boundaries of status, but even then, people always know their place.”

“It’s wrong to discriminate by status,” said Aisha. “If that’s how it was done, Prince Evan would always be alone, never able to make friends since he’s royalty. And that would be sad.”

Criticizing status was one step away from criticizing the monarchy. Saying that was like loudly declaring you had intentions to commit treason. On top of that, it would be hard for Aisha to play it off as a lack of education since she only had the status of a member of a viscount’s family despite her royal blood, which the royal family didn’t acknowledge.

She obviously didn’t intend that statement to be taken like that. She didn’t have the brains to. It wasn’t like she truly wished to abolish status discrimination. Of course she wouldn’t. I’d heard that in her own country and even in Astra, she took advantage of the royal family’s authority to act with arrogance. It was laughable to think someone like that would say it’s wrong to discriminate based on status.

“That’s not for you to decide,” I said.

In the end, she was just trying to show herself as a good person, not obsessed



with status, but it was the wrong move. If she were a high enough ranking noble, people might let it slide and take it the way she hoped, but being from a viscount's family meant she just came off as a girl lacking in manners and culture whose head was filled with dreams.

You'd think her first strategy would be to avoid angering high-ranking nobles rather than trying to marry Evan as quickly as she could just so she could have his protection.

"Jealousy is so ugly," she said. "Prince Evan, Lady Violette is scary."

The other noble girls around grew even more hostile as Aisha said that and clung to Evan. For better or worse, she had a knack for getting others worked up.

"Jealousy?" I said, laughing so hard I had to hold my sides. It was probably the first time I'd laughed so hard. I laughed so much tears spilled from my eyes.

"It's rude to laugh," said Aisha.

What an annoying girl. It's all right to kill her if she insists on throwing cold water on people when they're enjoying themselves, right?

*Oh, yes, I got this ready just for situations like this.*

I took out my metal fan, lightly tapped her on the shoulder with it, then gently ran it along her neck over her carotid artery.

A stanza from a poem floated in my mind as I did:

*And as she passed me by*

*She became bloodied before my eye*

*In this daylight illusion*

What was that? Oh, yes, it was in a book my teacher loved to read. He read books from all different countries written in all different languages. That one was from a collection of poems from a country east of where I lived in my previous world. He really did love that book.

"Wh-What?" said Aisha.

I don't know what emotions the author felt when they wrote that, but I'm

certain they weren't entirely right in the head. Or at least, the average person around them wouldn't have thought so.

The same could be said about my teacher since he loved reading such a book.

And perhaps, right now, my eyes looked just as wild as theirs did. Aisha looked frightened even though I wasn't putting out a killer's aura.

"I am not jealous of a weakling as frightened as a rabbit kit. The only thing I feel for someone soft in the head who doesn't know their own lack of power and yaps at every single person they see like some tiny dog is the pity I feel for fools," I said.

Not that I felt something as kind as pity. What I *actually* felt was a desire to eliminate all these annoying people.

"Be careful, Aisha Alaban. You may have gotten away with your barbaric ways in Rienbul. People may not have called you out or sneered at you even though you acted like an idiot, but this is not Rienbul. And the person in front of you is not the daughter of a baron. He is the crown prince of Astra."

Oh, those eyes, like she wanted to cry, "And so what?"

Even after I said that, she obviously still believed she was in a stronger position just because she was the daughter of a prince. She was here simply because there was nothing you could say to her to make her see.

"It is very easy to erase one girl from a viscount's family," I said. "So, watch your tongue."

I smiled, and, for some reason, the gawkers around us blushed and broke into a buzz. I didn't understand why since they couldn't hear what we were talking about.

I took my eyes off Aisha to see what was going on, but Evan cleared his throat as if to stop me. "Sometimes, I think you might be some sort of enchantress," he said.

Why did he feel the need to say that? All I did was smile.

But Evan didn't seem inclined to explain. He instead urged me into the academy building, leaving behind Aisha, who stood there with fists trembling

with rage.

Now, what will her next move be?

“Do you think you may have goaded her a bit too much?” asked Evan as he glanced backward towards Aisha. He wasn’t looking just at her, though, but also at the other noble girls.

He knew what effect his status and appearance had on the people around him and had likely predicted the noble girls nearby would do something to Aisha after how much she tried to cozy up to him.

He also knew Aisha wasn’t the sort of person to listen to warnings from others. He didn’t stop me from goading her because he anticipated how it would make her feel and what it would make her do. In fact, by acting so familiar with me, he was showing Aisha that the only person special to him was me.

Which was a real pain for me.

“I don’t see any problem with it,” I said. “If she does anything, she’ll reap what she sowed.”

I laughed at her for being a weak fool, unaware of her own weakness, brandishing her nonexistent might as she pretended she was strong, but I didn’t pity her.

There’s no such thing as a kind world, after all.

“The weak are fated to be culled by the strong,” I said. The fault was on the weak for not having enough strength to survive. The only thing they should resent was their own incompetence.

“You think so?” said Evan, looking straight into my eyes. His eyes said he knew of people’s foolishness, greed, and ugliness, and he still wanted to—felt obligated to—save as many as he could.

Those eyes were arrogant and made me uncomfortable.

*“Noblesse oblige,”* he said.

Oh, there are no words I hate more in this world.

“What of it?” I asked, looking right back into his eyes. “Are you saying the weak should be saved?”

The obligation of the nobility? That was something the nobility imposed on themselves. You could call it a symbol of their arrogance.

“I believe if you have the power to save them, you should. Royals and nobles have that power,” he said.

“But we can’t possibly save them all. Then, who decides who gets saved and who doesn’t? Are the nobles and royals meant to select those they happen to like and save them? How arrogant.”

If that’s the case, I must have slipped through the cracks of that selection process in my last life, leaving me with no other path but one of gloom. There were no other options.

*“I will go down with you, if need be, to protect him.”*

Well then, what about him? That knight that killed me in my previous life. In some ways, you resemble him, Evan. Does that mean he was one of the chosen ones? Was that why he threw his life away for someone else?

Is that why people help others? So the ones they helped will do things like that for them?

What actually was the difference between me and that knight? I don’t think we were all that different.

Though he and I lived in different worlds, we walked different paths. The only thing we had in common was where we ended. And if that’s the case, then I’m fine if I wasn’t one of those chosen ones. I’m not going to use my life for someone else.

Even now, I am an assassin, through and through.

“You’re right, Selena. We can’t save them all. There will come a time when we’re forced to choose. Actually, we’re always choosing, just like you say. I don’t believe I can save everyone. But that can’t mean abandoning them all is fine, either. I don’t want to create a country that cruel.”

“Of course, because you’re so kind.”

“Selena... I even want to save you.”

I wonder what my expression was when he said that. I think I might have smiled, nearly laughed. I mean, Evan says such funny things.

I have no regrets about the path I chose, even if it was the only option. I was the one who chose. It didn't matter how many times I was reborn or how many times I was forced to choose; I'm sure I'd make the same choice.

“You saved me,” said Tiegel, standing silently behind me as my attendant. I'd killed the person who kept him as a slave, took him home to my mansion, and made him become an assassin like me.

“I didn't save you,” I said.

“I know. I know that's not what you intended.”

It was a whim. I just did for him what my teacher in my previous life did for me. If that's saving someone, both my teacher and I are very arrogant.

“But still,” continued Tiegel, “I can be by your side now because you chose me then. I'm glad you chose me, my lady.”

He smiled gently, and there were squeals from the female students watching us from a distance, even though they couldn't hear our conversation.

That sound seemed to jolt Evan back to the present because he smiled awkwardly and said, “Perhaps we shouldn't have this discussion at the Academy,” ending the conversation there.

## Chapter Eight: Those Who Throw Stones at Others Don't Notice the Traps

### Side View: Aisha

**MY** teeth ground together, and an unpleasant feeling filled my heart.

Oh, Selena Violette. Nothing more than a duke's daughter, but you insult me, daughter of a prince?

"Lady Selena is so beautiful," said Ismail.

"What?!" I demanded. My twin brother's eyes were completely clouded over. He'd totally forgotten his role. "What about *her* is beautiful? Is it her cold demeanor and lack of any adorable features that made a tiny smile from her completely fool you? Are you an idiot?"

"What did you say?!"

Men. Maybe she does have decent style, and her face, fine, I'll admit, is not horrible to look at. But that's all I'll give her.

"Go and find yourself a girl with better standing to be your guardian! Someone better than that bottom-of-the-pecking-order duke's daughter! All the friends you're hanging out with are low-ranking nobles!" I shouted at him.

"You might think she's low in the pecking order, but that's just because her family's social standing isn't apparent because they aren't active in the social sphere, but they have enough money to make your eyes pop. And she's smart enough, despite their standing, to end up on the shortlist for the crown prince's fiancée. It's entirely possible she could increase House Violette's standing in the future."

Ismail passionately argued that his engaging with Selena Violette was not a waste of time. He'd have a better time if he stopped caring about that girl, who might not end up what he hoped, and snatched up a noble girl from some idiotic but powerful family, who he could train to do as he said.

Idiot girls who love talking bad about the people around them go crazy if you just compliment them a bit, even if they're not all that cute.

"Who cares about money," I said. "They're shameless for acting like some merchant family despite being nobles. That's why people make fun of her and say she's only a noble in name."

The friends I made since coming to Astra talked badly about Selena Violette regularly.

I can't believe she's being made fun of by even low-ranking nobles.

How could someone as incompetent as her get such a high rank when someone as capable as me only gets the status of a viscount's house? The blood that flows through my veins is nobler. The world is so unfair.

"Aisha, you've just been complaining about how I'm doing things, but have you taken a look in the mirror? Don't talk about others when you're surrounded by low-ranking nobles, too. You swore before we came to Astra you would get the crown prince to fall for you, but have you actually?"

"Urk."

"No matter how you look at it, it's obvious he's head over heels for Lady Selena."

"Be quiet! I'll have him enchanted by my allure in no time! I will be the queen consort of Astra."

"Do your best. I still have a chance of being king of Rienbul, being a man, but your best options are becoming queen consort of another country or marrying a noble of Rienbul."

"I know!"

Men have it so good. High status is handed to them on a silver platter just by being male, even if they're incompetent. I'm the only one here who has to work hard because I'm female. Why am I the only one who has to work so hard? Why? Why me?

Still angry, I went into the academy building. Everyone's eyes were on me as I strode quickly down the hall.

They looked like they were talking about me as they watched. They were probably saying horrible things. I couldn't hear, but I knew. It was the same back in Rienbul. Worthless. They're all worthless trash.

"Good morning, Lady Aisha."

Several noble girls rushed over to me when I stepped into the classroom.

They are all foxes borrowing the menace of a tiger. Incompetents, just currying favor with me, the tiger. But I need them since I have so few pawns at my disposal.

Astra is a large country with a long history, and it's utterly filled with morons. They can't even tell who they should be kissing up to. It would be difficult being the queen consort of a country like this. I guess I care too much about the little things.

"Good morning," I said.

"Did something happen, Lady Aisha? You don't seem to be in a good mood," said one of the girls as she laid a hand against her cheek and cocked her head in concern while the others jumped on that same boat and put on expressions of worry.

"I was actually with Lady Violette before coming inside," I said.

"Oh, Lady Violette?"

"Yes."

I frowned, making myself look as sad as I could. The girls' eyes gleamed as brightly as a fish's after being given water. Selena was quite hated, it seemed. Not entirely unexpected, though. She did have a horrible personality. They wouldn't hate her so much if she had a nice personality like me.

It doesn't matter how high-ranking a noble girl is if there's something wrong with her personality. I wish Ismail would open his eyes and stop bothering himself with that floozy.

I mean, she always has that boy at her service; I don't know if he's an attendant or what. That scar on his face is unfortunate, though. He would've been handsome. If he didn't have that, I would've been happy to have some fun



with him.

“Lady Selena doesn’t seem to like how close I’ve become with Prince Evan,” I said.

“Did she say something horrible to you?”

I smiled vaguely in response to the girls trying to draw information out of me. With that, they could jump to conclusions and spread rumors. But I never said anything, though, meaning they were responsible for imagining and spreading whatever stories they told.

It’s a huge help that idiots are so easy to manipulate.

I was certain Selena’s evil deeds would spread like wildfire by the next day through these girls’ loose lips. If all went well, she’d no longer be on the list to marry the crown prince.

Ahaha! How pathetic. This is what a mere noble girl gets when she clashes with me, a higher being with royal blood. I will crush you, Selena Violette.

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### **Side View: Sia**

I normally stayed in the dark guild since they value my disguise skills so much, but Rick told me to infiltrate the Academy and make my way into Aisha Alaban’s entourage.

I’ve talked to her more than most people since I’m in her group, but my feelings about her are the same. Oh, nothing makes people act like fools more than an obsession with blood and power.

Miss Aisha Alaban—a member of the viscount house of Alaban; a pitiful noble-born girl who, despite her status, carried the grand blood of royals inside her. She should never have been given something she wasn’t worthy of.

Royal blood is poison to a girl of a lower noble family like her. She hasn’t realized that the blood she values so highly is a toxin. It slowly circulates in her body, eating away at her life and spreading.

She should have been aware of her place and behaved. She would have survived a bit longer if she had. As things are, her life is like the light of a candle

before the wind.

Aisha and Ismail Alaban. Your lives are like a thorn in the royal family's side. They continue to sully their blood and are under constant attention since those who would hurt the royal family could find value in using you at any time.

But just being born isn't a crime. Perhaps they were consigned to oblivion for being the pitiful children forced to bear the crimes of their parents, but they went too far in trying to glean others' sympathy. That's why they'll receive none and instead be wiped away from anyone's memory.

The king of Rienbul only let them live to use them to sniff out those with ill intentions toward the crown. And perhaps because they could be used as teaching material for Prince Shaghad. But no other reason.

It may be cruel, but that's the world royals and nobles live in.

I sometimes wonder if they clothe themselves in such beautiful outfits because they know exactly how ugly they are and are trying to cover it up.

Well, not that I care about the beauty of the souls of the people around me. I just do what Rick orders me to and report back to him.

"I think you're more suited than Lady Violette to be Prince Evan's fiancée," I said, and Aisha made a face that said, "Of course I am."

She didn't see from the others' reactions that they thought that was taking things a bit far. She only ever saw what she wanted to see, only heard the words she wanted to hear. What convenient eyes and ears.

"I think so, too," said another girl. "You have royal blood, after all, Lady Aisha."

"And you live in the royal palace in Rienbul," said another.

They were girls sent from the guild, just like me. Once they started agreeing with me, the clueless low-ranking noble girls started rethinking their positions until they agreed.

There was only so much information a low-ranking noble could get, so it wasn't their fault they didn't fully understand Aisha Alaban's position. And, in that situation, it would've been better for them not to get so greedy and just

behave. If they hadn't, they wouldn't get dragged into this mess and eventually eliminated.

Though, we can only ask them to give in since their own carelessness caused it.

Maybe they thought it was all right to make fun of Lady Selena because she doesn't have a very good reputation, and House Violette doesn't have much social standing, but Lady Selena is not someone to take lightly. She doesn't care about social standing or other people, but is like a wild beast with sharpened fangs.

Maybe the girls instinctually sensed that because they were desperate to tell Aisha Alaban horrible things about her in an attempt to eliminate her.

It was amusing to watch low-ranking nobles kiss up to Aisha Alaban, though, since she was also low in the pecking order.

Anyway, I'll give Rick a report on all these so-called noble girls.

## Chapter Nine: The Cat and the Cornered Mouse

“A sword tournament?”

“Yes. It’s an event hosted by the academy. Most of the participants are hoping to become knights one day, but participation is open, meaning those pursuing an administrative role may also join. Royals always participate, and quite a large number of nobles also take part every year. There is always the possibility that the men will be conscripted if war comes, after all, and most have to learn a basic level of self-defense anyway.”

Though, the majority of them always lost to the people going after knighthood. There was a difference in how driven the two groups were since higher-ups from the Royal Knights came to watch the tournament. If they saw someone with potential, they might even scout them after the tournament.

Knights had a high standing in our country. Even some children of high-ranking nobles joined the Knights until they took on their parents’ titles and duties. Even after that, their status as a former knight provided a might they could wield in social interactions within high society.

I suppose it only makes sense those people would be more driven, considering that potential future.

On the other hand, the people not trying to become knights only had to do well enough so that they weren’t embarrassed. Usually, I would expect people to scream at them not to step up for this tournament with such a lack of conviction, but this country had been peaceful for far too long. Noble boys learned to handle a sword just in case war might come but seemed unable to imagine themselves on an actual battlefield. “Battle” and “death” were distant concepts. That weakened their sword arm.

“Perhaps you should join to test your skills,” I suggested to Shaghad.

He would have originally learned his sword skills from the best knights of the royal family. His foundational skills were good enough that he would rank

amongst the strongest participants, even those aiming for knighthood, and I added his counter-assassin training on top of that.

I don't know what sort of fervent warriors he'd be up against in the tournament, but, eh, he wouldn't die, at least. Probably.

"Your combat experience against those assassins is good, of course, but you should also practice like a knight sometimes, too," I continued.

There was no guarantee Shaghad's enemies would use an assassin on him. His expression momentarily stiffened when I pointed that out.

"Don't you want to know how far your sword skills will take you against knights?" I asked. A smile crept onto my face because I knew my plan was going well when I saw Shaghad's tiny nod. "Then it's decided. Oh, I heard your brother will be taking part as well."

"Ismail?"

"Yes. It's a perfect opportunity to crush him."

Ismail was probably trying to improve his social standing by doing well in the tournament. Things didn't seem to be going too well inside the Academy, after all. Perhaps he was just participating because he wanted something, anything, to trigger some change.

"Selena," said Shaghad. "This is just a tournament, yes? Meaning, we're not allowed to kill?"

"Who ordered you to kill someone? I won't stop you if you want to, but you normally assassinate somewhere with no onlookers in a way that no one will notice. It's not something you walk right out in front of an audience and do."

"....."

Considering his situation, it would be safest for Shaghad to hide how strong he truly was, but I would have him show it off. It would be humiliating for Ismail to be brought down a few pegs by someone he considered weak. I was happy to put Shaghad in some minor danger for that.

"You don't have to hold back, Shaghad. Beat Ismail with all your might," I said.

"...Because I won't kill him."

“.....”

*He keeps going on about killing this, killing that. It seems he really wants to kill Ismail that badly. Well, I guess I can understand that. His resentment towards Ismail would've just been growing this whole time.*

But my plan would fall apart if Shaghad killed Ismail during the tournament. Shaghad would be guilty of a crime, and I would have failed the mission Rick gave me. I needed Shaghad to hold back his blood lust, at least while he was in Astra. He could kill as much as he wanted once he got back to Rienbul.

I'll just have to casually stop him if he goes to kill him. I don't give a crap what happens to Ismail, but I *cannot* fail my mission.

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**THE** academy grounds bustled like a festival when the day of the tournament came around.

“There are more participants than usual,” I noted.

For some reason, Scarlanette Jordan was sitting beside me. “There are rumors the Knights are putting more effort into discovering new potential talent because of what happened at the Festival of Hunting,” she said.

“Selena,” came a call from below. I looked down to see Evan waving from the tournament grounds.

*Ah. I guess Evan's the representative from the royal family this year.*

The impression he gave was one of a slender boy who had never fought a day in his life, but he must have confidence in his skill since he went up against the monsters at the Festival of Hunting without hesitation. That would have been too reckless otherwise. Especially as that's not something you do as a royal.

“I see Prince Evan's taking part as well,” said Scarlanette as she returned Evan's wave. “Lady Selena, come on,” she said, then grabbed my hand and forced me to wave as well.

Evan looked happy, even though he would be able to see I was not waving of my own volition.

“I heard royals take lessons directly from the Captain of the Royal Knights

from a very young age,” said Scarlanette. “And I also heard Prince Evan is particularly skilled. He’s so good that the captain apparently said he’d want to take him as his own son if he weren’t royalty.”

“Mm-hm.”

“It’s starting!”

*Well then, Evan, show me what you got.*

Right, left, right, left... He continued with the exact same attacks for a while, following swordplay basics.

Eh, that’s not a problem in a fight between two knights, particularly in a tournament like this with your fellow knights. But Evan, if this were a battlefield and you were fighting an experienced knight, you would not win this way.

“Ah!”

And then Evan switched from his knight-like basics. Just as his sword bounced back from his opponent’s guard, it changed angles and swung towards his opponent. That student could anticipate that move specifically because all the attacks had been as practiced before, and he brought his sword up in response, but he couldn’t keep up with the surprise attack, and his sword flew from his hand.

“...He was just laying the groundwork,” I murmured.

Evan calmly pointed his sword at the other student who was left off balance, and the referee watching the match called, “And the winner is, Prince Evan!” ending the first match.

“Not bad,” I said.

“Prince Evan is amazing,” said Scarlanette with excitement. “He was so cool.”

Shrieks of delight rose from the noble girls in the spectator seats. Apparently, nobles and commoners were the same in that regard.

Evan raised his hand to the audience in response and bowed. For some reason, his eyes were on me when he raised his head again.

*You know, it was an entertaining enough match,* I thought and decided to give

him some applause, which put a smile of joy on his face. And that just made the shrieks of delight from all around grow louder. *I think my eardrums might split.*

The next match was between two students hoping to become knights. They fought as prettily as someone wanting knighthood. There didn't seem to be any of the type of strategy Evan used to catch his opponent off guard.

*How boring.*

The short student attacked, the brown-haired student guarded, then knocked the sword aside. Oh, look at that; the short one lost his balance, his flank is wide open. That'll decide the match.

"And the winner is, Inovon!"

As I expected, the brown-haired student won, and the stadium erupted into cheers when the referee called it.

"I was on the edge of my seat during that match!" exclaimed Scarlanette excitedly.

I turned my eyes towards the next match as I wondered what about that last one was exciting.

Deflect, guard, attack. Their movements were so regular I nearly had the urge to clap my hands in time with the beat.

"It's almost like they're waltzing," I observed.

"Huh, that's an interesting opinion," came a voice.

"Evan. Don't you have a match coming up?" I asked.

"There's some time until my next one. I came to watch as part of my break."

"Prince Evan, your match was incredible," said Scarlanette.

"Thank you, Lady Jordan."

As Evan sat next to me, a blade swung out at a speed so fast the average person behind us had no chance of seeing it. Evan seemed to have expected this attack, though, because he blocked the knife with the hilt of his sword.

"Tiegel. What is the meaning of this?" he asked.



“I was trying to eliminate an insect to protect Lady Selena.”

“Insects can be dangerous, what with all the diseases they can carry, and so I am impressed by your efforts to protect your lady. However, you were sloppy. I nearly died.”

“You are right, Your Highness, that insects can be dangerous. That’s why I felt there was a certain amount of sacrifice I must accept if I am to protect Lady Selena.”

*Why are these two so barbaric?* I thought. “Tiegel, just put that knife away. Things will get complicated if others see you.”

“...Yes, my lady.”

*He looks incredibly unhappy about that.*

“The next match has started!” said Scarlanette, so absorbed in watching the tournament she didn’t even see the altercation.

It was a good thing she didn’t. It could’ve turned into an uproar.

“You seem bored,” said Evan, looking at me for some reason rather than the match.

*Didn’t you come here to watch the match? Also, Tiegel, get your bloodthirsty aura under control. There are big wigs from the Knights here, they’ll notice.*

“This is the Academy’s headline event,” said Evan. “Look around you.”

I did as he said and saw Scarlanette next to me, her eyes so focused on the match that she didn’t even notice Evan and I having a conversation. The other students around us were throwing out cheers and jeers alike. It was like a festival.

“It’s just you,” said Evan. “You’re the only one who looks so bored watching the matches.”

These matches were like playtime for someone like me. It was more ridiculous to ask me to enjoy watching them.

“You anticipate it all, don’t you?” he said. “What attack is coming and when, how it’ll be defended. That’s what a fight is between knights, after all.”

“I’m not a knight.”

“I know,” he said, then a sad, lonely look came over him, like an abandoned puppy, and he murmured, “I don’t know why, but sometimes, I wonder if you’re not someone from the other side.”

“The other side” was a phrase used by the royals and those close to them to refer to those who operate in the shadows of society, the underbelly. It wasn’t quite a codeword, but normal people wouldn’t understand what it meant.

The right decision here was to play dumb.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

I’d lied more times than I could count. I concealed the fact that I was an assassin and grew closer to someone over a long time as a friend or even lover before killing them. I didn’t feel anything. I didn’t think anything of it. It was my job.

And now, I thought of myself as having skillfully become a noble girl.

So, why did my heart ache?

“You fought against monsters on the day of the Festival. No normal duke’s daughter could do what you did,” said Evan.

I didn’t say anything. He was right. If I had been born as nothing more than Selena Violette, I would have died that day.

9956. That was my name in my previous life. That was Selena Violette’s true identity.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?” Evan asked.

*If you knew my true identity and the fantastical events of being reborn with the memories of my previous life, what would you do, Evan?*

“Evan,” I said, “you shouldn’t recklessly force others’ secrets into the open. There’s no story where that ends well.”

“You’re right.” I readied myself for his next attack, but he stopped there. Instead, he asked, “What if you join the Royal Knights?”

“Me? A knight?”

“Sure. You’re plenty skilled.”

I’d spent so long killing people for money, and now he was suggesting I start killing people for my master and loyalty? I couldn’t imagine myself doing that.

And it definitely wasn’t in me to risk my life for someone else.

*“We were born alone, and we die alone. There is no one to sit at our deathbed with us and no one to lament our passing. That is the final punishment given to those of us who have long taken human lives.”*

My teacher, who had several other students other than me, had murmured that sadly when he learned of the death of one of those other students.

A punishment that people who continue to kill receive in their final moment?

“I did fight monsters at the Festival,” I said. “However, I wasn’t fighting to protect others. I was just fighting to eliminate whatever enemy stood in front of me.”

“That’s not what it looked like to me,” said Evan, but that was just because Scarlanette happened to be standing behind me at the time. It was the result of coincidence. “So, you have no intentions of joining the Knights?”

“It wouldn’t suit me.”

“I see.”

Once we reached that pause in our conversation, Scarlanette said, “Prince Shaghad is in the next match,” drawing our eyes back to the tournament grounds.

She also reminded me she was sitting next to me. I’d forgotten she even existed.

“It seems Prince Shaghad will be going against Master Alaban,” I said. Because I’d pulled strings to make it that way. “Let’s see what he can do.”

*Shaghad, things will not end well for you if you lose.*

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### **Side View: Shaghad**

I shuddered. What was that? Some horrible presence in the audience seats? It

was far more wicked than any of the assassins that had appeared night after night.

“What? You scared?” goaded Ismail with a condescending smile, misinterpreting my shudder as a reaction to him.

I didn’t feel like responding. I already knew what would happen if I did. No matter what I said, Ismail would see me as nothing but a weak dog barking at a threat. Which meant my best option was to use force to make him see.

The match started, and Ismail was the first to go on the offensive. His speed, power, and everything far surpassed anyone else in our age group. Everyone would have praised his martial prowess if he’d been born into a normal noble family or even as a true heir to the throne. He could have even made a fine knight.

But that was not the fate he was born to. His parents didn’t allow that. *He* didn’t allow that.

That’s why I will win against him today.

Right, then left, then left again. Defend, attack, defend. An attack from below.

I can anticipate it all: where the attacks come from, their timing, everything. It’s so clear to me I can almost hold it in my hands.

*“There is a form to all fighting styles taught to knights and royals or nobles who are trained by knights. A master knight experienced in real combat can handle the unexpected. But those lacking combat experience—such as new knights or those aiming to become knights—will fight using the basics. That makes them easy to deal with.”*

Selena was right. I could predict the next attack since he never deviated from the basics. But she also said not to let that take all my focus. People could exhibit growth far beyond what was expected when in the heat of battle. If that happened, she said I wouldn’t be able to win with the same strategy I used before.

I told her she was exaggerating by implying my life would be at risk in something like this competition, but she smiled and said, *“Any sword fight approached with sincerity is a fight to the death.”*

She also said Ismail would be coming at me with the intention of killing or, at the very least, maiming me.

I questioned if he really would do such a thing in a public event, but his blade gave me the answer as it grazed my cheek.

"I suppose Selena was right," I murmured. He was trying to remove me from the picture in what looked like an accident.

Maybe that's why Selena had said, *"Do not spare him a beating. Show him the difference between you two, and finally silence the fool who doesn't know his place."*

I could detect frustration and agitation from Ismail because my attacks weren't following a set pattern. That might have been what was causing his attacks to become simpler.

He who cannot remain calm on the battlefield loses. And a loss in battle is death.

That was why Selena insisted I always assume someone was trying to take my life; it didn't matter what sort of combat it was, even if it was a joke, even if I wasn't planning on risking my life in the fight, even if it was an event like this one today, I must continue to win.

That girl, I would have thought she'd been raised lacking nothing in a pampered world of butterflies and flowers.

"Dammit, Shaghad, you're just a fake royal," said Ismail, throwing insults as he continued to attack, though his breathing was ragged and his stance flawed.

When he hit, he hit hard, but I could minimize the load on my body by deflecting those attacks rather than defending against them. It was a fighting style Selena, a physically weak noble girl, found to survive combat. Only she could have taught me that. It wasn't a fighting style used by a strong knight.

I glanced toward Ismail's feet: I could tell where his next attack would come from if I could see where he shifted his center of gravity.

"You're not really much of anything," I said.

"What did you say?"

I was certain Selena was using me to injure Ismail's pride on a public stage, deflating his ego and making him easy to take down, and I wasn't going to hesitate because I didn't want to ruin her plans.

And so, I would give him bait to rise to.

"I thought you must be strong because you act so pompously despite your family only having the status of a viscount. But you're barely better than a fresh knight recruit," I said. "I'd heard Father hired the best knights to tutor you, but I guess this is all I can expect from a lowly viscount's offspring."

His attacks were becoming less refined the angrier he got.

If Selena were here, she'd land a kick in his gut right about now, and her kicks are merciless. I thought I was going to die the first time I experienced one.

She didn't care for her opponent's social standing when she fought.

"I had high hopes for you, what with all your bragging. I didn't expect it to all be posturing. Why don't we stop here before I rub salt in your wounded pride? This match is just unsightly at this point," I said.

"Be quiet, Shaghad! Your father abandoned you; your mother abandoned you; you're not needed by the royal family!"

When we were in Rienbul, it was standard for him to look at me with scorn and terrorize me where no one could see. His Majesty was the only person on my side after my mother left me behind, but I couldn't trust even him completely. Part of me always wondered when I would disappoint him and he would change his mind and abandon me, too.

That was why I could never say anything back when Ismail or Aisha insulted me. I didn't want my grandfather to learn they did that because he would see how pathetic I was for being so powerless. If he knew I was like that, he would be disappointed, he would hate me, and he was my only family.

And, while I wouldn't go so far as to say this sort of thing was a conversation, I did have these interactions with Ismail, and they showed me everything about him.

"Ismail, your sole pride in life is that Father loves you," I said.

Despite having royal blood, no one recognized it, and everyone laughed at him when he showed pride in it. That's why he would say things like, "I'm the one who Father loves. He has royal blood."

Ismail is weak, capable of nothing more than clinging to our father's love for him. I would never have realized it if I hadn't come to this country. If I hadn't met Selena.

I actually pity him. He's a victim, too.

He's jerked around at the whims of the adults around him, not unlike me. But that doesn't mean I will hold back. He is after my position, watching with eagle eyes for any opportunity to take me down.

If something happened to me or Grandfather, the next people with the most royal blood in them would be my father, whose place in the line of succession was removed, and then Ismail.

As long as that is true, we cannot coexist.

Even if Ismail had a change of heart and swore to never stand against me again, all his words and actions up to this point would render such a vow pointless because I couldn't trust him.

That means my only option is to eliminate him. To secure my own safety, of course, but more than that, I want to repay Selena for all the help she has given me.

I didn't want to force her into a dangerous situation because I hesitated. I must repay my debt, and I don't want her to lose faith in me.

Ismail, perhaps your life up until this point wouldn't have been so ravaged if you'd had someone who was to you what Selena is to me, or if your parents had been better people, or if the people around you and the environment you were placed in had been better. Perhaps we wouldn't need to kill each other, then.

I pity you. I do. But I will not hold back. I will crush you.

"Urk!"

I flicked aside Ismail's sword and swept his feet out from beneath him, sending him tumbling, where I placed the tip of my sword at his throat. I put the

intent to kill into that last move, showing him he would be dead now if this were not a tournament with an audience watching.

His face turned pale, but hatred lingered in his glaring eyes that wouldn't disappear.

"What does it feel like to lose to someone you thought below you?" I smiled at him. I believe it was sort of a sneer, actually, since I imitated the smile he normally used towards me. "No matter how proud you are of your blood, you are no match for me. I am royalty. You are a boy from a viscount's house. I acknowledge the effort you have put in, but we are not in the same league."

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***THAT** decides it, I thought. Well, not that I expected any other outcome.*

"Looks like he might be able to make it to the final match," said Evan beside me. He, too, was focused on Shaghad's match.

*I wonder what Aisha thinks?*

I found her immediately since I'd already checked where she was sitting. I could see shock in her at Ismail's loss, as well as some panic.

This was not the result they were hoping for during their studies here. They'd only been able to build connections with low-ranking nobles. Those nobles weren't going to be the backers they needed. Aisha also failed to charm Evan. I could understand why she might panic. Nothing was going well for her.

I think she might try something soon.

"Right, I should get going," said Evan.

"Another match?" I asked.

"Indeed."

"Good luck, Your Highness," said Scarlanette.

"Thank you, Lady Jordan."

Based on what I saw of Evan's abilities, he would have no problem making it to the final match. I'm looking forward to seeing how he'll fight against Shaghad.



## Side View: Ismail

“**No** matter how proud you are of your blood, you are no match for me. I am royalty. You are a boy from a viscount’s house. I acknowledge the effort you have put in, but we are not in the same league.”

*God dammit.*

“And the winner is, Prince Shaghad Rienbul!”

*God dammit.*

“Not the same league?”

*God dammit.*

“He’s a damn abandoned brat! He’s below me!”

I watched him walk away, telling me that he was royalty with his back to me. That he was different from me.

*“Ismail, no matter what anyone tells you, you are the crown prince. You will be king of this land. You and no one else are right for the throne.”*

That’s what my mother would say to me, her fingers gripping my arms so tight her nails dug in while she stared at me with bloodshot eyes. As she was trying to impress that fact into me, it was like she was trying to impress it into herself as well.

My mother chased away the princess consort, Shahrnaz, and married my father. That was why Aisha and I were mocked wherever we went for being children of an affair.

If I had power, if Shaghad didn’t exist, if Grandfather just accepted my parents’ marriage as legitimate, then we would never have had to suffer this way.

If only *he* didn’t exist.

I left the tournament grounds, grinding my teeth as I did.

“Brother, how could you lose?!” Aisha ran up to me and didn’t hold back her anger, but I didn’t hear anything. “Are you even listening to me?! Don’t ignore

me, answer me!”

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**THERE** was hate burning in Ismail’s eyes as he left the tournament grounds. His clenched jaw told me his loss to Shaghad was quite the insult to his pride.

I hadn’t directed Shaghad to insult Ismail, but it seemed Shaghad picked up on my intentions anyway and did a good job of whipping him into a frenzy. It’s a good thing Ismail was even simpler than I anticipated.

Next, we just wait to see what Ismail does. Rick can handle the reconnaissance for that. I just have to make sure Ismail can easily do what he is planning, whatever it is.

“I’ll prepare the stage for you, Ismail Alaban,” I murmured.

I will give you whatever you desire: people, weapons. I’ll set a perfect stage for you to dance on.

But that’s all I’ll do for you, Ismail. The rest you’ll have to do on your own. If you want to kill Shaghad and take his place, then *you* have to kill him. Let your will be what ends his life.

“And, Shaghad, the finale is about to begin.”

You seem to sympathize with Ismail, but, if you are lenient with him, I will cut you down and toss you aside. I have no need for those who allow defiance. Those people don’t want to dirty their hands, to take responsibility, to shoulder the sin, that’s why they let that defiance slide. But I will not put any more effort into an incompetent man incapable of fulfilling his role.

“Shaghad, do not disappoint me.”

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### **Side View: Evan**

I continued to win my matches with no major incident and made it to the top where, as expected, my opponent was Shaghad. My father told me Selena was training him, and this must be the fruits of that.

My father has a man in charge of the kingdom’s shadows and skilled in

information gathering. It irritates me that he knows more about Selena than I do, but right now, I need to focus on Shaghad.

“You’ve changed a lot in a short time,” I said.

“I met a good teacher.”

Selena, you really are an enchantress. Not that I can comment on others since I’ve already decided I’m fine with you lying to me.

“It makes me happy as crown prince of your allied nation that your coming to Astra has proven beneficial.”

Selena is beneficial to my country, as well. And even though Shaghad seemed to get my implication that I would not allow him to take Selena with him when he left Astra, his expression didn’t change.

It seems suppressing your emotions is one of your fortes.

“Thank you,” he said. “I did meet someone incredible. Someone strong, inspiring, and who could never be bound by another. I am fond of this person.”

Never bound by another? Is he trying to say the decision is hers?

If Selena doesn’t come to realize her own charms soon, I will have a lot of trouble. I don’t want even more competition. Even with the few who are interested at the moment, it’s essentially like taking on a life-or-death mission.

“Let the match begin!” cried the referee.

I dashed forward in time with that signal and attacked. Annoyingly, Shaghad easily guarded against it.

But first, we’ll gauge him, using some simple attacks to see what happens.

Based on what I saw of his matches during the tournament, he was quite skilled. Considering how he could anticipate all his opponents’ attacks, I couldn’t win with the style I learned from the knights.

“How about you try attacking rather than just defending?” I suggested. “If things continue like this, the match will be decided in no time.”

But he didn’t respond, refusing to rise to my bait. He was always calm, it seemed, and not only observing me. He watched to see where his opponent’s

center of gravity was. Selena must have drilled that into him in a short time. It wasn't a skill you could gain with an average level of effort.

During combat, your attention was always drawn towards your opponent's attacks; even if it wasn't a real fight or you knew your life wasn't in danger, there was an animalistic instinct that honed your attention onto attacks. Shaghad was holding back that instinct with the logic part of his mind.

He's not too bad. And Selena was certainly not your average person if she could teach him that. I want to learn more of her secrets, but she won't ever open her heart again to me if I do, will she?

"Lost in thought? You must be able to take more," said Shaghad as he turned to the offensive. The attacks themselves weren't that powerful. Muscle was the one thing you couldn't develop quickly with training. Not even Selena could do something about that.

And it made even more sense when you considered Shaghad was tormented by the people around him when the king wasn't looking. He was small in stature compared to others his age, which made me think people often even took his food away from him.

"I could say the same about you," I said. "You've changed a lot in a short time. Honestly, I didn't expect you to come this far."

"A gentleman must live up to a lady's expectations." The path his sword was on changed; it was coming from below now. "Well done guarding that."

That was an intentional move. Selena wouldn't teach him to change tracks like that in a way that was so easily read. Is he testing me? Baiting me without using words? This cowardly sheep has transformed into a predator. Selena, you have an effect on others, for better or worse.

"You really have done well to change this much in this short a time," I said. "Which means I don't need to hold back anymore. I'll be taking the win."

"Urk!"

I applied more pressure to my blade, forcing Shaghad to dig his feet into the ground to hold his lighter body as he was desperate to endure my attacks.

But stubbornness can't make up for a lack of muscle.

It was a simple matter of course that I could push him, forcing him off balance, then follow immediately with another attack that sent his sword flying from his hands.

"And the winner is, Prince Evan!"

"It was a good match," I said.

"Next time, I'll be the victor," said Shaghad.

The match ended with us praising each other's skill. In the end, I was the champion of the tournament, and Shaghad took second place.

## Chapter Ten: Occasionally, Some Days Are “Elegant”

**AS** I was a noble, it was important to live life like a noble. It wasn't like I could always be killing or torturing people.

Today was one of those days I lived elegantly as a noble. There was no class at the Academy, meaning I didn't need to be annoyed by irritating people or feel the urge to kill.

Or so I thought.

“Selena, how's school? Are you having fun?”

I'd forgotten my own home had someone who was a pain to deal with.

“Did you make any friends?”

*Why am I drinking tea with this person?* I gulped back the sigh that was about to come out, along with my tea.

“I've been so worried you might be lonely now that Rosemary isn't here anymore.”

And this refined, prattling woman is my mother, Amaryllis. It might sound nice when I say she's a saint among saints, but she's just a flower-brained fool who knows nothing of the world.

I had to maintain a friendly relationship with my mother since I was living as Selena Violette, meaning I had no choice but to have tea with her like this.

“You never invite friends to the house. I was worried your classmates might be excluding you. You're not being bullied or anything, are you?”

*Of course not. I'd kill anyone who bullied me.* “I'm not having any problems with class,” I said.

“Really? Well, that's good. Oh, yes! There are those students from abroad. I heard you've been asked to help them out. Do you think they could become your friends?”

Nope. "We have a fairly amicable relationship."

"Why don't you invite them over? Since they came all the way to Astra."

*I would rather kill them.* "They have so much to do already. They always seem busy."

They do seem busy with all their flirting and sucking up. It must be hard doing so much work to sell themselves when they're not even merchants.

"Oh, that's a shame. And it's so rare for you to make friends like that."

I never once called them friends. I didn't introduce them as my friends. Does Amaryllis think every person existing in the same space gets along? In my past life, I had people with me who ate from the same pot and experienced the same joys and sorrows.

I killed them all.

"It is what it is," I said. "They have their own things they want to accomplish while studying here. They can't spend all their time having fun."

They know the cruelty of the world more than you do. Right now, they're scrambling to survive. Particularly Ismail with his shattered pride after the tournament. What will you do, Ismail? Aisha's next up once I'm finished with him.

"What are they like?" asked Amaryllis.

*What are they like?*

I can't say they're so annoying that I want to kill them, can I? What do I say then?

"They're...pretty."

That should be fine. They aren't hard on the eyes, after all, and I have no other way of answering that question.

"Oh, really?" Amaryllis smiled happily at even that mess of an answer. What made her that happy?

I was certain that, before, Amaryllis put distance between us because she found me difficult to deal with. Perhaps she reconsidered things when my

adopted sister Rosemary was sent to the convent and decided she should become closer to her real child, so she started inviting me to have tea with her. Personally, though, I didn't see anything wrong with our relationship until now. I'd actually recommend it.

How could she ever think I was lonely because Rosemary was gone? Are there maggots eating her brain?

"Selena, I know you have today off from the Academy. Do you have any plans for later?" she asked.

"Nothing in particular."

"Oh. Well, then, would you like to go shopping?"

"With you?"

"Yes. Rosemary and I used to go together often, but you and I don't as much. You don't shop much, do you? What if we go every once in a while?"

I don't add more to my belongings because I think I'm perfectly fine as long as I have what I need and nothing more. And if you think about what will happen after you die, it's better to have less. Sorting through the belongings of the deceased is a pain.

I know that is because I was sometimes ordered by those above me in my past life to take care of the things left behind by my fellow assassins when they died. Generally, it wasn't so bad because they usually had few things, like me, but occasionally, I'd get some person with a hoarding habit. They would collect all sorts of things like they wanted something to fixate on. Handling what they left behind when they died was a pain.

"Let's do it, Selena, please?"

As tedious as it was, I needed to put on a show of having a positive relationship with my mother.

"All right, Mother."

My lady-in-waiting Marin would select and buy anything I needed, which meant I'd probably never chosen something to buy for myself other than my weapons.



“Oh, this is cute. I wonder if it would look good on you, Selena.”

I'd assumed we'd take a carriage to wherever we were going, but Amaryllis stepped out of the carriage at a random point and popped into whatever shop took her fancy to look around and see if there was anything good. It was more like how a commoner shopped than a noblewoman. Though, perhaps women of all classes go shopping in the same way.

I guess I still don't get nobles.

“It's nice, isn't it?” she said, holding a gem-studded necklace up to me to see if it would look good on me.

I looked, too, at my reflection in the mirror. I had no idea if it suited me or not because I wasn't interested. I don't have a sense of what is “cute.” Thinking something is cute has never kept me alive. But if Amaryllis said it was cute, then it probably was.

“It is. It's very cute,” I played along.

“I know, right?”

Amaryllis's smile told me that my reaction was the correct one.

She stepped outside the shop to see what was on display out there and see if anything else was nice, and as she did, a boy darted past her.

“Selena, is something wrong?” she asked me.

“I just remembered there's something I need to do. I'll be back soon, Mother. Would you mind waiting for me here in the shop?”

“Of course.”

“Tiegel, could you stay with Mother?” I requested.

“Will you be fine without me?” he asked.

“Yes. It shouldn't be an issue.”

“Then, yes, my lady. Please be careful.”

“I will.”

I left Tiegel behind to guard Amaryllis and went after the boy.

He was running up the main street. The way he weaved through the crowds made it obvious he was experienced at that sort of thing. Escaping through a bustling street was to disperse whoever may or may not be chasing him.

After continuing down the main street for a while, he turned onto a side street. It was unlike the busy street. One step into the gloom cast by the buildings felt like stepping into another world.

This was the world I had grown so familiar with in my past life, but it was one that most people on the main street never interacted with.

It was only one step away. Just one step. Yet it was so different.

The boy had handed the wallet he stole from Amaryllis to a seedy-looking man. As compensation, the man gave the boy a single copper coin, barely enough to buy a bread roll.

But the boy couldn't win in a fight against a grown man and so had no option but to accept the injustice. This world was one where the strong consumed the weak. The weak could do nothing but continue letting the strong exploit them.

"Hm, what is it, girl?" said the man.

Oh, yes, here, in this world, the strong consume the weak. This world allows them to.

"You wanna have a play with us?" he sneered. "Nice. I promise I'll take good care of ya." He licked his lips and grabbed my arm.

"Play? Don't make me laugh," I said. "You wouldn't even be able to handle playing with me."

"What was that?"

"You are weak. And the weak are for nothing more than being eaten by the strong."

First, I kicked his feet out from beneath him, easily throwing him off balance when I caught him off guard. Then I raised my foot and dropped my heel onto the back of his head, smashing his face into the ground and knocking him unconscious.

"Th-The bitch! You think you can take us!" shouted someone, and a throng of

shouting men rushed towards me.

This place was far from the main road. There was no one here other than vagrants and orphans. No one here was going to get involved in someone else's business. That was how that man could continue exploiting that boy without anyone criticizing him.

As the number of people on the ground increased by ones and twos, the men finally realized the person in front of them was not a weakling they could exploit.

"Hm, did I go a little too easy?" I murmured, noticing one of the men I thought I'd knocked out was still conscious, but he remained prone on the ground, too scared to even stand. He inched away like a worm, trying to put as much distance between us as he could.

There was no more of that might he'd had on display. His confidence born from the knowledge that he was strong was shattered, leaving behind nothing more than a worthless weakling prone on the ground.

It was so easy for the tables to turn like this.

The boy just watched, like he couldn't react to the far too unbelievable events unfolding before his eyes.

So, what should I do about him?

I decided to live this one day with the elegance of a noble lady. What would a noble lady—what would Amaryllis do with him? The answer was obvious.

I didn't want to deal with the hassle of him struggling, so I knocked him unconscious and then dropped him off at the orphanage Amaryllis funded. After taking back the wallet he'd stolen, I returned to Amaryllis.

"Did you finish your errand?" she asked.

"I did." I slipped the wallet back into her purse without her noticing.

It was exasperating that my own mother didn't notice when her wallet was stolen, but it was Amaryllis, after all. There wasn't much more I could expect.

After that, I accompanied her again as a noble's daughter while she shopped until she'd had her fill.

# Chapter Eleven: The Hero Who Flew Too Close to the Sun

## Side View: Ismail

**DAMMIT**, dammit, God dammit. Nothing is going right. I *need* to connect with influential nobles in this country so I'll be accepted as royalty and show everyone how incompetent Shaghad is, but...

"Dammit."

At this rate, I won't even be able to get back at all those in Rienbul who've made a fool of me, let alone have them accept me as royalty.

"I *will* be royalty."

And I will make those people pay for making a fool of me.

"I'm the one best suited for the throne."

Far more so than Shaghad.

"I have the more legitimate claim to the throne."

Because Father loves *me*.

"*Ismail, your sole pride in life is that Father loves you.*"

"Be quiet!"

Be quiet, be quiet, be quiet!

"I will be king! The crown belongs to *me*! Not him. Me! Me, Shaghad, do you hear me?!"

I swept everything off the table in rage. Objects thudded to the floor and broke, but I didn't care. I didn't have any space in my mind to care, which was also why I didn't notice.

"It's your fault for existing, Shaghad. This isn't my fault; it's yours. Everything is your fault, and I must execute you for your crimes. Yes, Shaghad."

It was why I didn't notice the eyes watching from the attic as I laughed.

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### **Side View: Rick**

**SIA** came back from watching Ismail, and I set her on my lap and stroked her hair. It was her reward for bringing me information.

"Looks like Ismail will make a serious move this time," I said.

Most of the assassins Ismail's parents hired had died at Selena's or Shaghad's hands. They surely were close to running low on their stock of assassins.

"I'll have to make things ready to give him the opportunity to kill Shaghad."

Evan would likely arrange the stage. It'd be more natural for him to invite Shaghad to something rather than Selena since he was royalty as well. It'd be easy for him to draw Shaghad to somewhere with few people.

"The stage will be set, and the actors readied, I suppose."

You could sympathize with Ismail when you consider the environment he grew up in. I did feel bad for him, but this was a fight for a throne. Ismail never had a claim to that throne, but there was no hiding that he had royal blood in his veins. That was probably how he was forced to take on a fate he could never escape.

Sometimes, I think royals are a cursed breed.

But maybe I'm letting myself get too emotional. All I do is do my best for the kingdom of Astra. Even if that best turns out to be the worst for someone else or some other country, I won't hold back.

I'm the nephew of the king of Astra and head of the kingdom's dark side, and I won't apologize for that, nor will I justify what I do. I just carry out the role given to me.

"Ismail, it's not assassins who will kill Shaghad. It's you. Kill him of your own will. And, Shaghad, it's not Selena or Tiegel who will kill Ismail. It's you. You kill him with your own will as well. Everything will be as you two will it to be."

And so, you two will bear the responsibility and sin of your actions.

“A picnic?”

“Yes.”

At the Academy, Evan invited Shaghad, Ismail, and Aisha to a picnic.

“I’d like to show you Astra’s natural beauty while you’re here. It would also be an opportunity to strengthen our bonds. What do you think?” he asked.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea!” cried Aisha, showing her approval before Shaghad could, despite him being of a higher station. She, of course, didn’t forget to cling to Evan’s arm, pressing her chest against him.

I was also going to this picnic.

“We’ve come all this way to Astra, after all,” said Aisha. “I want to be *closer* to you, Your Highness.”

Evan pulled his arm away from Aisha and casually took a step back. Aisha followed. She was getting more persistent. It showed how desperate she and Ismail were becoming, which meant they’d fall easily into Evan’s trap.

Once Ismail was finished, I’d turn my attention to Aisha.

“It’s a perfect idea, Your Highness,” said Ismail. “I am entirely on board.”

Ismail agreed to the picnic after Aisha, again. Did they still think they were above Shaghad?

On top of that, there was a gleam in Ismail’s eyes. There was none of the easy confidence from before. He instead had an undefined air of panic about him.

Rick’s information confirmed Ismail hired new assassins, and Rick already had evidence to prove it.

I felt eyes on me as I was thinking. When I looked up, my eyes met Shaghad’s. He didn’t say anything but seemed to have guessed what was going on. I gave him a smile, but his expression stiffened for some reason.

He cleared his throat to try and hide that, then agreed to Evan’s proposal.

**“LADY SELENA, look.”**

“.....”

“It’s a swan!”

“It’s not a swan, it’s a goose.”

“It’s so cute and chubby.”

“Are you insulting the goose?”

Other than Ismail (our target), Shaghad (Ismail’s target), and Aisha (our next target), the picnic was also attended by a few noble boys and girls who had nothing to do with anything. They were invited as camouflage, but I was surprised Scarlanette was among them.

When I asked Evan, he gave an answer I couldn’t comprehend: “She seems the rare sort of person who could actually become your friend. I think she should be valued.”

And, right now, I was in a rowboat she’d dragged me into.

Evan was on the shore surrounded by noble girls, Aisha among them, of course.

“Is the position of next queen consort really that enticing?” I murmured.

The girls kept trying to hold each other back as they battled to make themselves look better than all the others. Didn’t those girls get tired of always trying to ingratiate themselves with Evan?

A short distance from him were Shaghad, Ismail, and a few noble boys. Ismail was hiding his usual arrogance and being friendly with everyone, even Shaghad, which was perhaps for his plan.

“I think you’d make a good queen consort,” said Scarlanette, following my gaze as I ran my fingers through the water.

“I wouldn’t expect you to say that,” I remarked.

“You’re not interested?”

“No.”

“Not in Prince Evan, either?”

“.....”

“I don’t know what sort of life you’ve led, but I’m the daughter of a count. I’ve stood toe-to-toe with thick-skinned lionesses as we try to hold each other at bay, and it’s made me confident in my ability to read others. To me, it looks like you carry a fierce past that makes you not fit in as a noble or your mother’s daughter. Maybe that’s why you look so lonely sometimes.”

“Me? Lonely?”

“Yes. You didn’t know, did you? There are times when you look at us like we’re dazzling.”

Before I became an assassin in my past life, I would sometimes stand in the alleyways and look out at the main road. It was all so resplendent, like a different world cut off from my own.

But why?

If I took just one step, I could have been in that world, too.

So...why?

If I had taken that step forward, I would have been something *other* there, never accepted, even though I’d been born in the same country as the people there.

I had no parents; that was all that was different about me, about us, but that meant we had no choice but to live on the backstreets. We lived in a place where the weak were weeded out every day, and people fell to the ground dead like it was normal. It was not a safe place.

And that didn’t change after I became an assassin.

The amount of money I made from my assassin duties was plenty to go shopping on the main street, but my feet never took me there. I had no connection to that place.

Was I...envious?

“You’re mistaken,” I said.



“You think so?”

“And why do you think I’d make a good queen consort?”

“People who know pain can be kind towards others. And I know you’ll disagree, but your actions at the Festival saved me and several other nobles. It doesn’t matter what the reason is, but someone who can raise a sword against a threat can fight to protect the people important to them. That’s why I want you to be queen. Because you didn’t hesitate to fight. I also think someone who isn’t interested in the position is more trustworthy. They’re less likely to let the power go to their head.”

“...I won’t be queen.”

A former assassin becoming a queen? Impossible. It was impossible the moment I was reborn as a noble girl. I feel stifled as is. If I became queen, I’d be forced to take on even more responsibility and restrictions and be more than just stifled. I do not want that.

“Can I ask why?” questioned Scarlanette.

“Because I would likely crash to earth when my wings burned,” I stated.

Assassins don’t need the sun. Even if I was reborn into this pretty world and succeeded in dressing myself up, I could never change my core. I am an assassin. I would never become a proper, just person. I can’t.

One day, my flaws will come to light, and I’ll face judgment, either from Evan, who’ll be king by then, or by the people of Astra. Or by both.

Either way, a time will come when I’ll be found guilty.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” said Scarlanette, “but I have a feeling you’re overthinking things. If your wings burn, Prince Evan or I just need to catch you when you fall so you don’t crash. And if all of us lose our wings, then, well, at least we can fall together.”

She smiled an innocent smile. What a flower-brained noble girl.

“If you want to commit suicide, do it alone,” I retorted.

“Oh, come on, Lady Selena. Don’t be so cold.”

**“PRINCE SHAGHAD,”** said Ismail.

The picnic was coming to an end. We’d finished eating lunch, and everyone was doing whatever they liked when the time finally came.

“I’d like to speak with you for a moment. I need to apologize for what I’ve done. Could you accompany me? I’d like to speak alone, if possible.”

Ismail never once imagined that Evan, Tiegel (who was hiding), and I were paying close attention to what he did as he led Shaghad into the forest.

“What was it you wanted to talk about?” asked Shaghad.

“Do you think coming to this country was a mistake?” asked Ismail. “Coming here seems to have put you under some misconception. And I understand it; the prince of Astra treats you as an equal. That’s what’s made you think you’re a prince who can interact equally with the royals like him here.”

Ismail seemed like he’d lost his mind as he gave a distorted smile.

“I am a prince,” said Shaghad. “I am of equal standing with them. It’s no misconception of mine.”

“We have to correct this mistake.”

“What do you mean, Ismail?”

“Yes, we have to correct it. *I’m* the rightful ruler of Rienbul.”

“No. You’re the grandson of a viscount.”

“I will be king!”

There seemed to be no reasoning with him at this point.

“Kill this pretender to the throne!” he shouted. “Once you’re dead, I’ll finally have the lawful authority I was meant to have. I will take back my legitimacy. I am the rightful king!”

The assassins Ismail prepared for this moment surrounded Shaghad. Rick had told me beforehand that Ismail was sending assassins at Shaghad, but this...

“There are too many,” I said. “Damn that Rick. This is too many for him to

handle.”

Tiegel and I, who had been watching events unfold from the treetops, dropped to the ground in front of Shaghad.

“Selena! Tiegel!” he called.

“Lady Violette? Why are you here?” asked Ismail.

“Because this is all a stage that has been laid for you, Ismail Alaban.”

“A stage? Aha... *Aahahahahahaha!*” Ismail clutched his sides and laughed maniacally until tears came from his eyes. Once he’d had his fill, he looked at Shaghad with eyes filled with hatred and madness. “It’s always like this. You’re always the one being protected. You’re always the one who’s been acknowledged and loved. Why is it always *you*?!”

“What are you on about?” said Shaghad. “You’re the one loved by Father and your mother.”

It was only logical that Shaghad would sound confused by what Ismail said, which made him sound like he didn’t believe he was loved. In the words of the people of Rienbul, Ismail and Aisha were the product of true love or whatever, not born for a political strategy like Shaghad was. I’d heard the twins had been raised with their parents’ love.

“Love? Hah!” snorted Ismail. “Do you really think love exists, Shaghad? What a *gifted* mind you have. It pisses me off. I have no value if I can’t be a prince. Mother and Father won’t continue to love someone of no value. That’s why I have to prove my worth constantly.”

“When can you stop?” I asked.

Ismail smiled bitterly and said, “When I die.”

“I see. That sounds like hell.”

“It is.”

Ismail had no intentions of changing how he lived his life, which meant he and Shaghad couldn’t exist together. There was only one path to take, then.

*So, Shaghad, what will you do? It’s time to choose. Show us what you’ve got.*

“Kill him,” said Ismail, and the assassins obeyed, moving in for the kill.

I cut the throat of one of them with my dagger, then found my next target as the blood showered over me. At that moment, I forgot I was a noble’s daughter. I felt like I’d become nothing but an assassin again.

Tiegel and I bumped into each other back to back, and Shaghad was nearby as well, the three of us soaked in blood.

“Worn out yet, Shaghad?” I asked.

“No. I had an excellent teacher. I still have more in me.”

“Good. Tiegel, any problems?”

“No, my lady.”





They had an overwhelming advantage in numbers. We were only winning through skill.

“How can a puny noble girl fight like this?! No one said anything about that!” cried one of the assassins.

And here I thought the event at the Festival was famous. Didn’t you hear? Or maybe you just didn’t believe the stories. You shouldn’t insult your opponent just because you made no effort to learn about them.

“Lady Selena!” cried Tiegel as my dagger was struck out of my hands. He sounded panicked, but it wasn’t a problem.

“Not all of you are small fry, it seems,” I said. I pulled my hairpin out and jabbed it in my opponent’s eye. As they flinched and lost their footing, I kicked my dagger up and caught it. Next, I just had to do what I always did: use my dagger to slice their carotid.

“You gave this to me just for times like this, yes?” I said, twirling the hairpin as I cast Tiegel a glance. He looked relieved. “Looks like we’ve cleaned up most of this mess.”

All that was left was Ismail.

“Ismail,” said Shaghad, pointing his sword coated in the assassins’ blood at him.

Ismail’s face went pale, and his body trembled, but there was no unsightly sobbing or begging for mercy. His remaining shred of dignity probably kept him from doing that.

“Don’t think you’ve won, Shaghad,” he hissed. “I’m not the only one after you. You might kill everyone who comes for you and take your seat on your blood-soaked throne, but bloody kings are always overthrown someday. Even if I’m not the one to do it, someone else will.”

“And if I don’t have a shield to protect me at that point, it just means that’s all I amounted to.”

Shaghad removed Ismail’s head with his blade. It wasn’t wrong for a royal present at a scene to judge and carry out an execution for someone who

attempted to kill a royal. The law said as much.

As long as Ismail lived, he would continue to threaten Shaghad because he never was able to find a way to live other than that. Just like I could never find a life in my previous world where I wasn't an assassin.

"It looks like things are done here," said Evan, stepping out of the shadows. He watched everything so he could act as a witness. He ordered Ismail's body removed, then told the other nobles present at the picnic that he'd gone home because he wasn't feeling well. He would keep both Ismail's death and the plan that led to it a secret.

It was Evan's job to decide how to wrap everything up.

"He who flies too close to the sun will plummet when the wax in his wings melts," I murmured.

Ismail, did you understand that and still want to fly close to the sun? And is the sun Shaghad, or being king?

"What drivels," I said. "Tiegel, let's go home."

"Yes, my lady."

I followed Ismail's body from the corner of my eye as it was moved.

There are still things to do, and I have no interest in some weakling who died here.



## Chapter Twelve: The Path She Chose

### Side View: Aisha

**“WHAT** do you mean?! Do a better job searching!”

My brother would never return to Rienbul without letting me know, especially not at a critical time like this. Our success or failure here would determine our standing.

“There was nothing out of the ordinary until yesterday, but you’re saying he all of a sudden was so unwell he had to return to Rienbul? That can’t be right.” I touched the lapis lazuli ring he’d given me, trying to eliminate the unease squirming in my heart.

“I understand, my lady, but we only know what we’ve been told,” said the lady-in-waiting sent to tell me Ismail returned to Rienbul, and I glared at her. I didn’t like how cocky she was acting despite being just a servant. She looked down on me because I was born out of wedlock.

I don’t like it. I don’t like any of this!

“It’s a plot against me! Wait...a plot? Could it be...” I trailed off.

“My lady!” cried the lady-in-waiting, trying to stop me, but I ignored her and ran to find Shaghad.

That bastard. This couldn’t be anyone else’s doing.

“Shaghad! What did you do to Ismail? He was perfectly healthy up until yesterday. It’s hard to believe his health suddenly failed him, not unless you did something,” I demanded. The nerve of him to elegantly enjoy a cup of tea despite having just done something to my brother!

“It’s not uncommon for people to feel unwell when they travel to an unfamiliar country,” he said calmly. “Particularly when their attentions are diverted.”

“How dare you. Do you think Father will stand idly by if you did something to Ismail?” I snorted with laughter at him in my anger.

“What could he do? You, the granddaughter of a viscount, have barged into my room without permission and insulted me by addressing me without my title. Do you really think Father would protect you even when you do that?”

“Of course. Because, unlike you, he loves me.”

“It seems Ismail was more aware of reality than you. Maybe you try your best not to see it,” he said.

“What are you mumbling about?”

“Nothing important. You’re allowed to believe whatever you want. Go ahead and believe love will solve everything.”

“Urgh.”

How dare he smile. Not long ago, he was terrified of Ismail and incapable of doing anything.

What can Shaghad even do? The only person on his side is our grandfather, and he’ll grow old and die someday. And Father would inevitably become king when Shaghad lost Grandfather.

After all, we don’t even know for certain that Shaghad has royal blood in his veins, while Father is, without a doubt, the son of the king. When he becomes king, he’ll chase Shaghad out of the palace.

Wait. I don’t need to wait until that happens. If Prince Evan falls in love with me, I’ll be the next queen consort of Astra. Then, I can use Astra’s might to get rid of the arrogant boy.

There’s no need for me to deal with him anymore. I have to find Prince Evan and capture his heart.

I left Shaghad’s room to look for Prince Evan. “Now, where is he?” I murmured.

“Oh, look. It’s Prince Evan and Lady Violette,” said a maid carrying a basket of laundry, her cheeks pink as she and another maid giggled and peered out a window. “Those two are like a beautiful painting together.”

*What's beautiful about her? She's average. I'm more beautiful. The blood in my veins is nobler than hers.*

"I know Prince Evan hasn't chosen a fiancée yet, but it's going to be Lady Violette, don't you think?"

"She is the lady he's closest to at the moment."

*You've got to be kidding me. Are these two idiots? I'm the one who will be the next queen of Astra. What do they even see in that vixen? She's just the daughter of a duke.*

"She is. But, you know, Miss Alaban, that granddaughter of Viscount Alaban, has really been on the offensive."

*Yes, I have. Unlike her, I'm putting in effort. I'm a better match for Prince Evan than some girl who makes no effort and has nothing but her status.*

"Yeah, but she's just a viscount's granddaughter."

*What?! Do they think I'll allow maids to mock me like that?*

"Though, she does sort of have royal blood, doesn't she?"

"Not that's officially recognized. His Highness could never marry a girl born out of wedlock. Besides, she pales in comparison to Lady Violette in terms of manners and education."

"That is true. She's just like that crude commoner who strutted around."

*Why do I have to listen to them saying such things?*

"Oh, but what if Miss Alaban got the crystal?"

*The what? Crystal?*

"You mean the jewel only the queen consort can wear? There is that rumor that whoever wears it will become the queen, no matter what their status is."

"Yes, that's the one. They say the crystal is a magic stone, and it selects the queen of Astra, right? So, if the crystal chooses you, then your rank doesn't matter."

"It's in the queen's chambers, isn't it?"

*Anyone can become queen if they have that? I can be queen without bothering to seduce Prince Evan?*

If that were true, I could be the person to protect my brother. I could support him so he could become king, and we'd get revenge on all those people who made fools of us. And if he was currently in trouble, I could save him if only I got my hands on that crystal.

*I need that crystal to save Ismail. Hold on, brother. I'm coming to save you.*

I headed towards the queen's chambers to find the crystal. It was the furthest of the royal's private rooms in the palace and heavily guarded, so I carefully avoided being spotted as I continued down the hall.

"Huh, this is easy," I said, wondering if they didn't actually care all that much about the queen. Maybe that was just what it was like being queen since Shaghad's mother was also unloved by our father and eventually chased out of the palace.

Well, it would be different for someone as beautiful as me, of course.

"There are too many rooms; I don't know which one's the queen's... Why does a palace have to have all these unnecessary rooms? Guess I have no choice but to open every door, starting from one end."

But, you know, there really isn't anyone down here. Isn't it odd that I didn't run into anyone at all? No, stop it. I can't go back. Not when I've come this far. I can't waste time when I don't know what's going on with Ismail. I have to keep going.

"The pressure's on me to pull something off now that Ismail's failed. Ugh, I don't know what happened, but I'm going to have to give Ismail a piece of my mind when we get back and make sure he knows how hard I've been working. Oh, this could be the room."

I opened a door to find a room far bigger than even mine and Ismail's rooms back in Rienbul combined. The furniture was high quality and classy as well.

This had to be it. The biggest indicator was the necklace carefully stored in a glass case. That had to be the crystal. It matched the description that the maids mentioned earlier. I was certain that was it.

“The one chosen by the crystal becomes queen,” I murmured as I gulped, anticipation and unease warring inside me. “What happens to someone who isn’t chosen when they touch it? Nope, you’re not getting anywhere being a coward like that, Aisha. I *will* be chosen. I will be the next queen of Astra.”

And once I had Astra as my ally, I would return to Rienbul.

I readied myself, picked up the necklace, and placed it around my neck.

“It’s...not doing anything.”

The crystal just hung there. Which meant... I mean, it meant it worked, right?

“I’m the next queen of Astra.”

*Me!*

“Arrest that thief!” came a shout.

“What?”

Simultaneously, I heard Prince Evan’s voice, and guards came into the room, grabbed me, and pushed me to the floor.

“What are you doing? Unhand me!” I shouted. “Do you think you can get away with this? I’m the next queen of Astra!”

*I’ll have all their heads removed for disrespecting royalty.*

“You’re just a thief,” said Evan. “You could never be the queen of Astra.”

“But, the crystal—”

“Isn’t for selecting the queen. It was a gift from the current king to the queen as a symbol of their marriage, nothing more.”

“...You’re lying,” I said. I didn’t understand what was going on.

“It’s the truth. The crystal is a magic stone, but it neutralizes all poisons. It doesn’t have any ability to choose a queen. It’s not like you can have a rock picking a country’s queen, anyway.”

“But, the maids, their rumor...”

“Oh. That. It was all made up.”

“M-Made up...?”

Wait, what? What's going to happen to me? What's going to happen to my brother? Who's going to save him? He's waiting for me to save him.

What do I do? What can I do? How do I get out of this?

"Didn't you think it was odd you easily got in here even though a palace is usually heavily guarded?" Evan pointed out.

It was all a trap.

"Why would you do something so horrible?" I asked.

"You made your choice, Miss Alaban. You could have chosen not to come here, but you didn't. This outcome is the result of your choice. I will immediately submit a formal complaint regarding your actions to your home country. You'll await a decision in your own land. Get her out of here."

"You won't get away with this. You won't! When I get back, it's my father and mother who will be sending a formal complaint. I have royal blood in me! You tricked me and treated me like a criminal, and you won't get away with it."

That's right, I couldn't let it end like this. If nothing else, I had to save my brother.

They threw me in a cell. I thought maybe I'd find Ismail down there, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Where are you, brother?" I whispered.

Please don't tell me he's dead. He can't be. He's alive, I know it. He's waiting somewhere for me to save him.

"Don't go breaking now, Aisha," I said to myself. "Your brother needs you. There's no one to save him but you."

And once I'd decided that, there was only one thing to do: break out. There was only one guard, a man, and the key would be the one hanging from his belt. I pulled down the neckline of my dress and sat, bringing up the hem of my skirts so my thighs were visible.

"Guard," I called.

"What?" he said, turning around like dealing with me was a pain, but his face

went bright red when he saw me.

What an easy mark.

“You know, I am just so bored right now. Would you like to keep me company?” I invited, tilting my head and smiling slightly.

The guard gulped.

“Come on, it can’t hurt, can it? I just want a little time with you.”

“W-Well, if you insist,” he said finally, his expression softening into a vulgar grin.

He entered my cell. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressed my chest against him, then scratched his neck.

That was enough to change the guard from a man happily fondling my breasts to a corpse foaming at the mouth.

“There’s no guarantee I’m unarmed just because I’m a woman,” I sneered.

“Poisoned nails? Hm. It seems Lady Selena was right. You do have talent,” came a voice.

“Who’s there?!”

I looked around, searching for the third person despite the fact I’d been certain the only people in the dungeon were me and the guard. I squinted into the darkness and glanced around but found nothing.

But I’d recognized the voice. It was a girl’s voice.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Aisha Alaban. My name is Sia. I was sent to deliver an invitation to you,” said the voice as a girl appeared.

“An invitation?” The girl had pure white hair and red eyes. The lack of emotions on her face made me feel like I was interacting with inanimate porcelain, but she gave a very different impression from Selena. “I’ll pass on your invitation.”

“You don’t have that option.”

“What?”

The girl who called herself Sia rushed at me, moving faster than my eye could see, and her fist crunched into my gut.

“Agh, gah, you, bitch,” I grunted before blacking out. The next time I opened my eyes, I was no longer in the dungeon. I was in a room.

“Ah, you’re awake.”

“Who are you...?”

They carried me off while I was unconscious. This couldn’t be worse. This wasn’t about saving my brother anymore. I needed to figure out what these people wanted and find some way out of this situation. Or...could I use them to help Ismail?

“Nice to meet you. My name’s Rick Oswald.”

“Who?”

“You don’t recognize my name? Well, I know you have royal blood, but you are still just the granddaughter of a viscount. Guess I can’t ask too much.”

What he said could be taken as an insult, but he was just stating the truth, not trying to make fun of me or insult me. I could tell by looking into his eyes. They were different from those of the people who’d insulted me before.

“I’m the nephew of the king of Astra. Also, the head of the dark guild.”

“Are you...going to kill me?”

I’d heard from my father that countries have what’s known as a dark side controlled directly by the king that goes back generations. He said they were the people who handled bloody matters for their country, their king. In some countries, that organization was led by a royal. I never imagined Astra would be one of them.

I can’t escape. He’s the real deal. I couldn’t even take on Sia, and she’s standing right beside him. They’ll kill me, and no one will ever know I’m dead.

What do I do? Oh, what do I do?

Brother, help me.

“Sia,” said Rick.



“Of course. Here,” she said, handing me a small box.

“What? Are you telling me to finish myself off?” I asked.

“Look in the box,” said Rick.

*It's probably going to be a vial of poison.*

There were books that said some royalty take poison in situations like this, ending themselves. My teacher told me it was to protect their dignity, but honestly, I always thought they were idiots. I couldn't understand how dignity could be more important than life.

“B-Brother...” I gasped, opening the box I thought contained a vial of poison to find a lapis lazuli earring. It matched my ring. It was made from one lapis lazuli cut in two. I couldn't mistake it. There was no doubt in my mind this was Ismail's earring.

“Agh! What did you do?! What did you do to my brother? Did you kill him?!”

I pushed Sia aside and grabbed Rick by the collar. He seemed to expect that reaction. He looked at me with composed eyes that showed no surprise. They were so cold. I felt like my heart would freeze if he kept looking at me.

“Your brother lost a duel with Shaghad and was killed. The two of you have shown contempt for and tried to kill Shaghad several times. I'm sure you did that while being aware that you could be killed or lose each other, right? You have no right to be angry with this outcome.”

“Shut up! What do you know?! You know nothing!”

He couldn't understand; he wasn't born and raised with people constantly pointing fingers at his back.

“Misfortune doesn't justify killing and doesn't give you the right to look down on others. I sympathize with you; I do. You did nothing but be born, and you two were forced to take on this fate, forced to take the cursed blood of royalty in your veins. I understand. You're still just a child. You didn't have the power necessary to go against your parents' orders. This is just the way the world is.”

As Rick spoke, laying out the truth for what it was without any emotion, I finally came to see the reality I'd turned away from for so long.

“This world isn’t kind. It’s not going to sympathize with the life you were given. It’s not soft; it doesn’t care what situation you two were placed in. The world is emotionless. Callous. It just keeps on going, and this is the result.”

They say the lapis lazuli is a stone that gives trials and good fortune to those who overcome them.

I didn’t take it seriously. I didn’t believe it. It was just a charm, something to make us feel better. But that hope was always there in a corner of my heart. That a future of good fortunes would come to us, even though chasing away, scorning, and killing people could never lead to a happy future.

Some part of me always knew we’d fail, but I had no choice but to cling to that hope I shouldn’t have had in the first place and keep on going.

What was a weakling with no way to resist supposed to do?

“After the formal complaint was sent to Rienbul, your parents insisted you and Ismail did everything on your own, and they had nothing to do with it,” said Rick.

I wasn’t surprised. I may have insisted my parents wouldn’t sit by and let people get away with things, but it was a bluff. I knew in my heart that my brother and I were nothing more than disposable tools for my father and mother to fulfill their greedy desires.

“You are also going to be disowned by House Alaban for your serious crimes,” continued Rick.

All I had was my brother. All he had was me. It was that way from the moment we were born.

“Don’t you hate it?” he asked.

*It makes sense for someone to be killed for attempting to murder or steal from royalty,* I thought, like it wasn’t me who was facing that. That’s when Rick said in a voice like the devil’s whisper, “Selena told me about you. She said you seemed useful, and my guild is always lacking in skilled members.”

*What do you plan to make me do, Rick Oswald?*

What use do I still have? Someone who was abandoned by their parents and

good for nothing more than having fingers pointed at my back?

“If you continue as you are, you will end up dead. Don’t you hate the idea of dying after doing nothing but being used by the adults?” he said.

“And, what? I should be used by you instead? What’s the difference between that and being used by them?”

“The fact that you’re being used is the same. I’m just giving you a choice. Though, if you refuse, you will die.”

“That’s the same as saying I don’t have a choice.”

Actually, no. In Rienbul, I wasn’t even given the choice of dying. In that way, this was much better. And Rick was right. I didn’t want to die after having all the blame put on me and Ismail. My parents abandoned me. If they said they didn’t need me, I could do the same and say I didn’t need them.

“I don’t want things to stay like this. I want to give them what they deserve,” I said.

“Good. I can help you with that if you work for me.”

“All right. Then I’ll happily join forces with you.”

*This is good, brother.*

I picked up the one thing I had left of him, his earring, and put it in my ear. From that moment on, I would be one with him. Together, we would get our revenge.

“Welcome to the dark guild, Aisha. We’re happy to have you.”

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### **Side View from Rienbul: Anita**

“**ANITA** Alaban and Prince Raheem, you are under arrest for the attempted assassination of Prince Shaghad.”

“What?”

Just as I was thinking our hall was rather noisy for this early in the morning, knights burst into our marital bedchambers.

“What do you think you’re doing?! Let me go!” I cried.

“Hey, I’m a prince! You won’t get away with this! Gah!” shouted Raheem.

We were both naked. Of course. We’d spent the night together as a man and woman who love each other. But the knights didn’t seem to care as they dragged us from our bed.

I couldn’t get anything out other than outrage at these knights and their tyrannical handling of the woman who would one day be the mother of the king.

“Prince Raheem, His Majesty has given the order to arrest you,” said one of the knights.

“What? Father has? That can’t possibly be true.”

“Exactly! Don’t spout such nonsense!” I added.

This had to be some scheme by the women who were jealous of me. Not long ago, someone was complaining about how I bedded her husband. It was his fault for falling for my charms and her fault for her inability to keep her man.

Women. They immediately blame beautiful women no matter what happens. They’re disgusting creatures.

“Other crimes are being laid against you two, and we have all the evidence we need,” said the knight. “Save your excuses for court, where you can give them to His Majesty and the judge. We knights are only responsible for investigating crimes and arresting the criminals, not listening to a suspect’s excuses.”

Despite me being a lady, the knights did not act gentlemanly at all as they marched me away and put me in a cell that saw barely any sunlight and was filled with the smell of mold.

“*What* do you think you’re doing?” I called. “I am a noble!”

“And I’m royalty! Why must I be held in this dungeon?”

Rienbul had separate dungeons for commoners, nobles, and royalty. I might be a noble lady, but I was the wife of Prince Raheem, meaning it wouldn’t be odd for me to go into the dungeon for royalty. Yet, for some reason, the two of us were put in the one for commoners.

Raheem and I insisted on our lawfully given rights, but it was like the knights weren't even listening. They ignored us and left.

I can't believe it.

Now that this has happened, I will make sure I become the mother of the king, no matter what it takes. And when I do, I'll execute all the knights involved, the ones who threw us in here and the ones who barged into our quarters.

"Mother, Father," came a voice.

"Aisha?"

"Aisha?!"

Something about her had changed in the time I hadn't seen her, but there was no mistaking my daughter, the one who had been studying in Astra, was in front of my eyes. My worthless daughter, who failed to assassinate Shaghad, establish connections with influential nobles to secure our footing, or capture Astra's prince.

I had thought her useless, but it seemed she'd come to save us. At least she could be useful when it came down to it. If she hadn't been, giving birth to her would've been a waste.

"Oh, my wonderful daughter. Hurry up, get us out of here," I said.

I didn't have time to be picky about my methods for escape. I needed to kill Rashid and Shaghad somehow and steal the throne.

"I think you might be under the wrong impression," said Aisha. "I'm not here to save you."

"What? Then what are you here for?" I asked.

"Ismail's dead."

"And?"

It's not like I cared about a useless son who failed to assassinate Shaghad. I was more concerned about getting out of this moldy dungeon as quickly as possible. How could Aisha not understand that? Clearly, she wasn't as

intelligent as me.

She was like Raheem in that way. His stupidity let him believe I loved no one but him. That allowed me to attain my status as a woman of the royal palace, and for that, I'm grateful, I suppose.

"Mother, don't you think it's unfair that only Ismail and I had to die?"

"What are you saying, Aisha?" demanded Raheem. "None of that matters; just get us out of here right now!"

"Listen to your father, Aisha," I said. "Stop prattling on about this nonsense, and hurry!"

"It doesn't matter?" she said. "You're right. It doesn't matter at all. How stupid we were. Brother, you were a fool. We were both fools."

There was a gloomy light in Aisha's eyes. I'd never seen that expression on her before. She was always such a good girl who listened to everything I said. What in the world happened?

"You abandoned us first," she went on. "Which means there's nothing wrong with us abandoning the two of you. There's nothing wrong with tossing aside what isn't useful, right?"

She smiled sweetly, but it sent a shiver down my spine. There was madness in that smile.

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**"GIVE** me the report again."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Anita Alaban and Prince Raheem were found dead in the dungeon."

"And it wasn't suicide?"

"No, Your Majesty. We suspect the killer was someone outside the palace staff, but we've been unable to find any clues. They died with expressions of terror like they'd seen some sort of monster. There are some amongst the knights who believe Anita Alaban and Prince Raheem actually killed former Princess Consort Shahrnaz, and her ghost returned to curse and kill them."

It was only natural that a rumor like that would spread since few people knew Shahrnaz was still alive, especially when you considered Anita's and Raheem's expressions were so horrifying they caused the knights to turn away. And they were no strangers to seeing dead bodies.

"It is a serious failure that your prisoners were killed while in custody," I said.

"Yes, Your Majesty. My sincerest apologies."

"In order to prevent any further chaos and, more importantly, to protect the dignity of the royal family, we will publicly announce they were executed. It is clear from the investigations that the two were corrupt, after all. Make it appear we held a trial."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

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"**MISS AISHA** of House Alaban was meant to be extradited to her own country where she would be put to trial, but her whereabouts are currently unknown."

The issues surrounding Ismail had been resolved, and Shaghad was meant to return to Rienbul the next day when Evan called me to the royal palace and updated me on what happened to Aisha.

"Did House Alaban act before that could happen?" I asked.

"There is that suspicion, but it seems not," said Evan. "I think this is one of those situations where only the gods know what really happened."

"You make it sound like she was spirited away," I said.

"That's how unexplainable a lot of this is."

"I see."

Though, I knew Aisha was in Astra. She began working for Rick because of the depths of hatred inside her. I imagined she was currently being trained as a honey trap assassin, which she showed promise in.

Very soon, Rick would arrange for a corpse that was made to look like her, and she would be dead to the world at large. At that point, she would have completely become a person in the dark side of society.

“There has also been a report that Anita Alaban and Prince Raheem were executed,” continued Evan. “Up until the end, they insisted everything their children did had nothing to do with them, but they found plenty of evidence that showed they were engaged in selling weapons to foreign countries as well as embezzling funds. There was even evidence they tried to have Shaghad assassinated. There was so much evidence they couldn’t possibly talk their way out of it.”

So, did that mean Rienbul stamped out any annoying seeds of discord within the country? Astra actually owed Rienbul since this gave the country the opportunity to admonish all the young, low-ranking noblemen and women who sided with Aisha and Ismail.

Their parents, too, were made painfully aware of the importance of gathering intel and evaluating a situation. They likely wouldn’t make the same mistake again. If they did, the entire family would be ended.

Basically, everything was neatly wrapped up.

“This whole thing doesn’t leave a good taste in your mouth, but this is how struggles for the throne are,” said Evan. “The only thing awaiting the loser is death.”

Only a few months ago, the royal consort of Astra and her son, Heinrich, were crushed in a struggle for the throne and disappeared themselves. This wasn’t impersonal for him.

“People always have a choice: to die pure within beautiful lies or live soaked in blood within the grime. You and Shaghad simply made your decisions for your own goals and ideals,” I said.

“I know.”

Even so, there seemed to be emotions inside Evan that he couldn’t fully reconcile with. He looked like he was trying to force them down along with a drink of his bitter tea.

Living as a royal must be incredibly difficult.

“I’m going home,” I said. “I’ll be there to see Shaghad off tomorrow.”



“All right.”

Ismail Alaban knew his parents' love was false, yet could do nothing but cling to it. Aisha Alaban turned away from the true nature of her parents, seeing only a pretty lie she wanted to believe. Their parents tossed them aside when they didn't need them anymore, and, in the end, those parents were tossed aside by the kingdom when it didn't need them.

“Those who abandon others are, in turn, abandoned,” I murmured. “Maybe that's what people call karma.”

## Chapter Thirteen: The Feelings Within the Ruby

**WHILE** it felt like forever, their stay here had been quite short.

I was given a mission, told to look after them, and even made to train Shaghad in combat. Actually, it was a bit of a whirlwind. Maybe I should say something to Rick and request a short vacation. Or, maybe I'd prefer a bonus for all this work.

"Selena, thank you for everything you've done. You did so much for me," said Shaghad.

"It's thanks to you, Prince Shaghad, that my days were so full." *Seriously though. I don't want to do that again.*

"Selena, would you please accept this gift?" he asked.

"A ruby brooch?"

"Yes."

I could feel the people around me burst into a buzz. Evan, who was standing beside me, furrowed his brow, and I understood why: this brooch was said to be a treasure of Rienbul. Giving it to me, the daughter of a duke from a foreign country, was him signaling to his country and all others that he wanted me to be his queen someday.

*What is he thinking?*

"There's no deep meaning to the gift," said Shaghad. "It's just that rubies are said to protect the wearer from all dangers and disasters and to guide them to victory in battle. That's why I want you to have it."

He placed the brooch in my hands and closed my fingers around it.





“I heard about what happened at the Festival of Hunting,” he continued. “I thought this is something you needed more, as a noble lady capable of fighting and who carried out her role of protecting guests from another country. It’s a symbol of our friendship because you have done so much for me.”

“I see. Thank you. I will treasure it,” I said.

“Hey, do you really think that’s just a symbol of friendship?” muttered Evan.

“Of course it isn’t. Are you an idiot, Prince Evan?” jabbed Tiegel.

“Evan, if you don’t do something, you’re going to lose Lady Selena,” said the king.

“Evan, you’re too timid. You’re never quick to make things how you want them,” chided the queen.

The four of them, even the king and queen, were buzzing. But Shaghad said it was a symbol of friendship, so that’s what it was. Well, less friendship and more a student-teacher relationship.

“Thank you for welcoming me here, Your Majesties, Prince Evan, Lady Selena, and you too, Tiegel. My country will not forget the debt we owe you. When I have become king, I will come to return the favor.”

Shaghad gave a deep bow, then climbed into his carriage and left for Rienbul.

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“I can finally relax a little.”

I let Bruce out into the garden from the veranda and threw a stick out to him. Marin told me before that dogs like to play a game where they fetch a stick you throw for them, and Bruce seemed to hate me, so I decided I should do something to improve our relationship.

I thought of him as a mongrel when Rosemary brought him to our mansion, but I learned he was smarter than I thought. He could probably become a decent guard dog who could kill a ruffian with a bite if you trained him well enough.

“You seem to like that quite a lot. That ruby brooch,” said Tiegel. I had no

interest in gemstones, but Tiegel seemed to admire it as it glittered in the sun.

“Not really. I am curious about the possibility of a mere stone having protective powers,” I said.

“You don’t have to rely on a rock. I will eliminate all your enemies.”

This boy who did nothing but cower in a cell before had turned into something quite reliable. “Guess I don’t need this ruby then.”

“No, you don’t.”

For some reason, he seemed happy as he took the brooch from me and put it in a drawer. Someone who didn’t know him would still see him as expressionless, but the emotion on his face struck me deeply since he was far more expressive than when we first met.

Becoming involved in another’s life, training them, pouring your own strength into them, and watching as they changed brought certain emotions. Did my teacher feel those things when it came to me?

I took the stick from Bruce once he happily returned it, then threw it again.

“What is so fun?” I wondered as I watched the stick fly through the air and thought about how I’d go about my next project of training him into a war dog.

## Side Story: The Contradictory Existence

**THIS** is a story from before Selena Violette was reborn as Selena—from when she was nameless and known only by the number 9956.

“What’s wrong, kid? Hurry up, get to your feet.”

“Urgh.”

*You make it sound easy. Even if I wanted to stand, there’s no strength left in my legs.*

In front of me was my teacher with a wooden club in his hand. I had a dagger. No matter how many times I faced off against him, he always struck me down with that club. My arms and legs were numb from being beaten so much.

He came up to me while I was still unable to stand, with no expression on his face as he raised his club.

BAM!

*This goddammed old man!*

I woke to the crackle and pop of kindling and saw my teacher reading a book in front of a fire. I was on the ground, a bandage wrapped around my head, where my teacher struck me before I lost consciousness. Not only there, though. Each spot where the club hit me had been carefully treated.

“Hurry up and eat something if you’re awake,” he said and held out a bowl containing a jelly-like mystery food.

What in the world do you cook, and how, to produce a purple liquid like that?

“Eat, then we’re back to training.”

I scarfed down the contents of the bowl.

“Taste good?”

“It’s disgusting.”

“Ah.”

The training following that was merciless as always.

“Kid, you gotta keep standing up, no matter how much it hurts. No matter how close you are to your limits. You gotta stand all on your own. You gotta keep fighting because the moment you can’t, you die.”

He kept telling me to stand and keep fighting. It was like he was telling me to survive. It wasn’t the kind of thing a man who picked me up off the streets and forced me to walk the criminal path of assassination should say. Why did he want me to live anyway?

“.....”

*Looks like I passed out again. Don’t you think you’re beating people’s heads in a crazy amount? I wish he’d go a bit easy.*

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Burning things.”

“Burning what?”

“My student’s belongings.”

“Why?”

“They died.”

*Oh. Getting rid of what you don’t need anymore, I thought.*

“It’s not like that,” he said as if he read my mind. “When assassins die, their bodies are just disposed of. I figure I could at least give them a sort of funeral so their soul can rejoin the cycle of reincarnation properly. And I pray they find peace in their next life.”

He stared at the burning objects as they turned to ash.

“We must keep living. Just because we were born, we must keep living. All of us, all creatures. But there’s no future in the slums. Learning assassination to help you find work increases your chances of survival by a bit, maybe, but I don’t know if it’s right. Assassination is all I can do; that’s why I give others that same method. If I knew any other way, if I’d been part of proper society, I could’ve put all of you on a better path. I’m sorry.”



I didn't understand what he was trying to say, but I could see he had regrets about something. About putting me, putting us, on an assassin's path.

"You regret teaching me because I'm doing so bad?" I asked.

"No, that's not it." He smiled sadly. I didn't know if I had talent for this or not, but at least it wasn't my progress that was upsetting him.

"What are you upset about then?"

"....."

"You just said you don't know if it's right, but what even is 'right?' Why do people have to live their lives 'right?' Who gets to decide what's right? And if we're not living the right way, does that mean it's wrong for us to live? Does that mean assassins can't live?"

He didn't say anything.

"Assassins exist because they're needed. Because people use them. So, why are you saying they, we, are wrong? Do you mean if they're wrong, they have to be eliminated? That logic sounds good, but it's stupid. You said before we need to keep on living. *You* said that. So, don't go looking for what's 'right.' The world's not a nice place. It's not going to let you live exactly how you want to. It doesn't give you options. You just do what you can to survive."

"No one's more suited for being an assassin than you. I hope the day never comes when you understand what I really mean, what those words mean. Cause, if you do, you'll experience hell, just like me. But enough of this idle chit-chat. Let's get back to training."

His training was just as merciless after that as if the man he'd just shown me had been an illusion. And, like always, he knocked me unconscious, chucked me on the ground, and started training me again when I woke up, which continued until he knocked me out again. And repeat.

Those days went on for a year until I was finally granted my first mission by the organization.

"Kid, just so you know, sixty percent of assassins die on their first mission," said my teacher.

“Surprisingly high,” I said.

“That’s just how different a real fight is from training. People first understand what it means to kill a person when that person is right in front of them.”

“Huh?” I looked at him in confusion.

“Think you might be the only exception to that, though,” he said with a wry smile. “You’d already killed several people before I picked you up, so, I guess you might be all right. But as an assassin, you’ll have to infiltrate places. When you do, you’ll come into contact with people, maybe a few, maybe a lot. Killing someone you spoke to before has some similarities to killing someone you’ve never met, but it’s also a completely different beast. Talking even once to someone forges a connection with that person. They can be a mess, those connections. Especially for people like us. That might be our arch nemesis.”

Like always, my teacher was saying things I didn’t understand, and he kept talking even though he knew I didn’t understand. It was like he wanted me to understand while also telling me he didn’t want me to understand.

He was a contradiction.

“Take this,” he said.

“This’s a pretty beat-up weapon.”

“Yeah. Cause I used it while I was still working. The blade’s sharper than anything, though, since I take care of it every day. It might protect you. If you’re successful in your mission, the organization will give you a number. That’ll be your name from then on.”

“All right.”

“And kid...”

“Yeah?”

“Come back alive. Don’t die.”

“...All right.”

What did he mean by that? “Come back alive?” I didn’t understand why he was so desperate for me to survive.

I did have the vague thought as I set off for my mission that if I did die, he'd end up burning my things, filled with regret like that one time.

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**“LADY SELENA.”**

Tiegel's voice woke me. At some point, I'd dozed off in the chair on the balcony.

“It's not good for you to sleep in a place like this,” he said.

“You're right.”

That dream, those memories were from so long ago. I wonder if my teacher burned all my belongings, alone and filled with regret, just like he had that day.

I don't know why he felt that way; it wasn't like my death or the deaths of his other students were his fault. And yet, he always felt regret whenever one of us died.

Actually, thinking about it now, he was the only one to ever tell us assassins to live.

“Is something wrong, my lady?” asked Tiegel.

Now, I'm living as Selena, likely in the world my teacher wanted me to be in. I wonder if this is the world he wanted to give his other students, too. Well, he'd probably be fed up with me if he learned I still ended up involved in the assassination industry. He'd probably just laugh and say, “That's so like you, kid.”

“Lady Selena?”

“I'm fine,” I said.

“I see. If you're tired, please rest in your room. You have been very busy lately.”

“I have been,” I said. “Tiegel...”

“Yes?”

“You could go anywhere now. If you wanted to, you could leave here and live however you wanted. I don't want to trap you here, so—”

“Lady Selena.” It wasn’t often Tiegel cut me off. “I am by your side because I want to be. Please allow me to stay here until you no longer need me.”

“You are an odd one.”

I don’t regret how I lived in my past life. I don’t resent my teacher for giving me the skills of assassination. It was just a world I couldn’t escape alive once I’d set foot in it. All who fled were given death.

That dream reminded me of that and made me wonder if I’d tied Tiegel to myself. I wanted to let him know he was free to choose, but it seemed he didn’t need me to worry about it.

“I’ll go inside,” I said. “Make me a cup of tea. On the sweet side, if possible.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Teacher, I don’t know if this is right or not, but I do know that the funeral you likely gave me let me lead a “normal” life, even if it’s a bit different from what you’d hoped for. You don’t need to feel regret. That’s all I’ll say. Not that I have any way of actually telling you.

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“**WHAT’S** wrong, Teacher?”

“Nothing. Just had a weird dream, is all. Must be getting old.”

She was an excellent student. My only worry was that she didn’t have a human heart. She didn’t have a strong attachment to living. But she still came back alive so many times, just like I wanted her to.

She died in the end, though. She failed to assassinate the crown prince. They’d got word in advance.

“Selena, huh? Hmph. Not too bad a name,” I whispered.

“Teacher?”

“It’s nothing. Right, let’s get back to training.”

I don’t mind what life she’s living so long as she’s got no regrets.

## Afterword

**THANK** you for picking up volume two of *The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl*. I'm glad we get to meet again.

*Former Assassin* was originally published as a webnovel that underwent a lot of reworking before becoming a print novel, which was why I was so surprised when the publisher came to me with talks of a second volume.

I didn't know what sort of story to make this volume. I kept writing and deleting, writing and deleting, until I finally came to this as the final work. It didn't take as long as I expected, which made me feel a bit more at ease.

What did you think about the second volume? I thought it was entertaining, and I hope you did, too.

In this installment, Scarlanette makes another appearance, this time in the role of Selena's friend. I'd originally planned for her to be a background character who didn't show up again after the Festival of Hunting in the first volume.

But I started thinking about how Selena has absolutely no friends, which could be because of her personality, but also because she used to be an assassin (and is again, actually), which gives her a certain aura. I decided it would be nice if she had at least one friend, and Scarlanette was selected as tribute.

This is off-topic, but there's a saying for that in Japanese, "A white-fledged arrow stands for them," which they say comes from a story of how *kami* would put a white-fledged arrow on the roof of a girl's house to mark her as their chosen sacrifice. Scary, right?

Getting back on track, I depicted Scarlanette as an idiot in the second volume because I thought she wouldn't decide to become Selena's friend if she wasn't. A smart person would keep their distance from her because she has so many secrets and is so dangerous.

But Scarlanette being the way she is also gives her the ability to see some

things clearly, allowing her to support Selena in a way that Tiegel, Evan, and Rick can't. I even thought about how Scarlanette might be guiding Selena.

The cover illustration for this volume has a Japanese flair to it, which doesn't exactly have much to do with the story's contents, but it ended up that way because there were items like the *kanzashi* hairpin and metal folding fan. Selena catches our eye this time with an allure quite different from the first volume.

Lastly, it's thanks to a lot of people that the serialized manga version of *Former Assassin* is going so well in Japan. I hope you all enjoy it, including the differences from the original work. Thank you so much.

July 2023, Satsuki Otonashi





## Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato    Illustration by Meiji

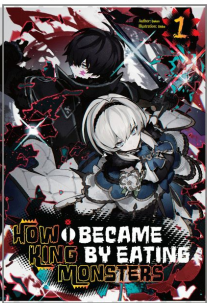
When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



## How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue    Illustration by Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



## How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken    Illustration by Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.



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