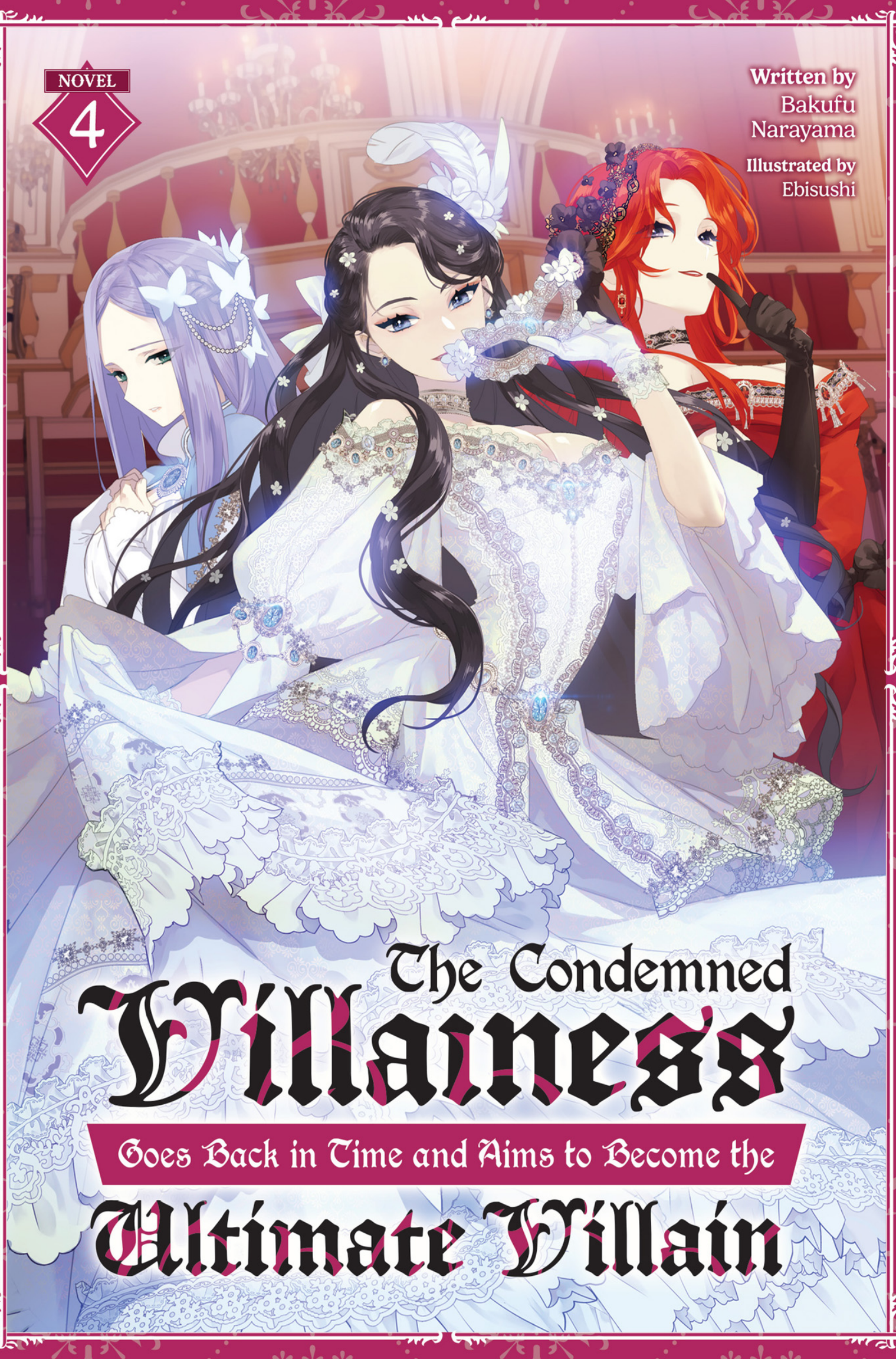

NOVEL
4
Written by
Bakufu
Narayama
Illustrated by
Ebisushi
The Condemned
Villainess
Goes Back in Time and Aims to Become the
Ultimate Villain

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NOVEL 4

WRITTEN BY

Bakufu Narayama

ILLUSTRATED BY

Ebisushi

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

OUR CAST

Relationship in Claudia's previous lifetime

Relationship in Claudia's current lifetime

BARI KINGDOM



LESTEA

Part of Raul's inner circle but serving as a spy for Harland after Claudia saved her life.

MASTER/SERVANT



RAUL

The younger brother of a neighboring kingdom's monarch. Was Claudia's customer in her previous timeline. Currently studying abroad in Harland.

THE UNITED KINGDOM OF ARAKANER



SERAPHIM

Crown prince of Arakaner. Friends with Sylvester. Asked for Claudia's help against the church.



RUKI

Seraphim's identical brother who was born in Harland. Member of Dragoon (now known as Rose Garden). Serves "Rose" directly.

POTENTIAL PARTNER



LOUISE

One of Sylvester's bridal candidates. Part of the aristocratic faction and a marquess's daughter.

ROMANTIC FEELINGS?



TRISTAN

A friend Sylvester feels completely comfortable around. Could be Sylvester's right hand in the future.

FRIENDS (POTENTIAL RIGHT HAND)



CHARLOTTE

One of Sylvester's bridal candidates. Shy and self-conscious about her voluptuous breasts.

BRIAN

Son of a baron and heir to the Evazu Company, which deals in cosmetics. Worships Claudia like a goddess.

HARLAND KINGDOM

BROTHEL CLIENT

PROPOSED



SYLVESTER

The crown prince and hero of our series. He married Fermina in Claudia's original timeline, but whether he truly wanted to is a mystery. At present, he is unofficially engaged to Claudia and very possessive of her.

POTENTIAL PARTNERS



CLAUDIA

The villainess and protagonist of our series. After being deceived and sent to a brothel by her half-sister Fermina, she reawakens as her younger self when fellow sex worker Helen dies. She aims to become the perfect villainess (lady). Also known by the alias Rose, which she uses to oversee the syndicate Rose Garden.

FELLOW SEX WORKER

FRIEND (LIKE A LITTLE BROTHER)

BELOVED SISTER

PERSONAL MAID



VIRGIL

Claudia's older brother. He condemned her in her first timeline, but now he absolutely adores her. The other aristocrats refer to him as the Ice Scion.



HELEN

An older sister figure to Claudia and a former earl's daughter. She was a sex worker in Claudia's previous timeline, but in this one, she serves as Claudia's personal maid.

The Condemned Villainess Goes Back in Time and
Aims to Become the Ultimate Villain (Light Novel) VOL. 4
Written by Bakufu Narayama
Illustrations by Ebisushi
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Prologue

THE STRENGTH OF the summer sun had begun to wane, and the sky was like a light-blue canvas unfurled behind it. It made for a tranquil sight beyond the estate's many windows and contrasted greatly with the busied chaos within.

The world, as she had learned, was a merciless place. Some might even say that was precisely what made true beauty all the more precious—but not her. Not that she would argue otherwise; only those who refused to see the truth would do such a thing. Rather, she was the type to feign ignorance, if only because it didn't concern her.

"My lady, preparations have been made for your departure," came a voice.

"I know," she said. "I'm going to bid Mother farewell before I leave."

The door to her mother's quarters was always left slightly ajar. When night fell, a thin finger of light would spill into the hallway. It was her mother's way of making sure she could enter whenever she liked.

Although in her mind, I never grew past the age of three. Her mother had been a worrywart and overprotective.

That door was now firmly shut, however. When she entered, she made a beeline for the bed, even though no one was in it any longer. The sheets had been perfectly ironed and tucked around the mattress, leaving not even a single wrinkle behind.

"Mother, I'm going now," she said. "I know I should probably visit your grave, but I thought this place would be best since I have the most memories of you here."

Her mother had been a sickly woman who spent most of her day in the confines of her bed. That was why her daughter felt her words would reach her mother better here—in a place more familiar to the both of them—than at a newly marked grave.

"If you were still alive, I'm sure you would have opposed this. But this is my choice, so please, rest peacefully and don't worry about me."

She had been the center of her mother's world. Surely she had expected whichever man her daughter married to be adopted into their family rather than to whisk her away from home. But the girl's father had other designs, and so did she. Still, even if it wasn't the future her mother had envisioned, she undoubtedly would've supported what her daughter wanted. And while she had meant everything to her mother, her mother had meant everything to her father.

She stroked the pillows at the head of the bed before peeling herself away and vanishing from the bedroom. *I doubt I'll ever set foot in her room again.* The door closed with a thud behind her, as if in answer.

The sky above was pure blue. It reminded her of a familiar pair of eyes, full of unwavering determination. One of the few things in this cruel world she considered truly beautiful. What she remembered most was his tender smile and the gentle way his eyes crinkled when he flashed it. He was the one who had given a spark of light to the suffocating darkness she'd found herself in. It was he who had taught her that it was a dog-eat-dog world out there. That was the answer to the callousness of the world: one could only survive by becoming stronger.

"It's all right because I'm one of the strong," she told herself.

No matter how mighty her opponent, she could see this through. Since realizing the truth of the world, she had dedicated all of her time to self-improvement. She was no longer the type to obey others heedlessly, as she had been when she was younger.

She lifted her chin and looked straight ahead. "I won't let this end the way *you* want."

Resolved, she left the estate and climbed into the horse-drawn carriage outside, never pausing to glance back over her shoulder even once.

Chapter 1:
The Villainess and Her Maid Keep a Strict Daily Routine

THUNDER ROARED THROUGH the night sky. A flash of lightning lit up the sprawling estate hidden in darkness, if only for a moment. It cast bizarre silhouettes in one room, where two women were writhing about. Backs on the floor, they twisted their bodies into almost unnatural contortions.

Huffing and puffing, Claudia said, “We’re getting a lot of lightning today.”

“That we are,” Helen agreed, taking a moment to catch her breath. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that it doesn’t fluster you at all.”

“It’s been like this all day, so I’m desensitized to it by this point. Besides, when you’re busy exercising, you can’t be bothered by such trivial details.”

The two kept a strict routine to maintain their beautiful figures. Helen loved learning new things and had picked it up rather quickly. She was now so familiar with the routine, she didn’t even need Claudia’s guidance. That said, this was her first time trying this particular workout, so Claudia was keeping a close eye on her.

“Be careful you don’t overdo it and get a cramp in your leg. And don’t forget to drink plenty of water,” Claudia advised her maid.

“I won’t!” Helen answered dutifully. “But, you know, I’m surprised the courtesans agreed to share their trade secrets.”

“Well, they’re quite diligent about maintaining their shapes as part of their work.”

In fact, the whole reason Claudia had a habit of working out was that she’d been a courtesan once, but Helen had no way of knowing that. It would create too many issues if her maid found out she was the one responsible for their workout routine. To cover it up, when they’d checked in on the brothel Flower Bed, Claudia had brought up the subject to the courtesans. Their most veteran member, Mirage, had pounced on the topic. She agreed that they would swap exercise secrets and test their effectiveness.

The more participants, the more data they would have—though it would be prudent to limit this to people who were fit enough to reduce their risk of injuries in the process. Hence why she had included Helen in this.

"This part that involves moving the wrists and ankles at the same time would probably be best at the start of our routine," said Claudia.

"Agreed. Loosening our joints will make it easier to perform the rest of the workout!"

By cycling through the routine, they measured the intensity of each exercise to figure out how to prioritize them. They had to be careful not to strengthen their muscles too much, lest they harden and bulge, ruining the soft, feminine curves of their bodies.

"Why don't we stop here?" Claudia suggested. "I think we've warmed up enough for one day."

"All right. I'll brew us some tea." After a brief pause, Helen lifted herself from the floor—only for her legs to buckle beneath her.

"Helen?!"

"Whoa, whoa!"

The maid landed square on her bottom. Claudia took her by the hands and guided her to sit on the bed.

"I-I'm all right, my lady. I simply didn't realize how tired my legs are." Her muscles were already sore, apparently. "I'm sorry for making you fret! The pain isn't that bad, so I can stand perfectly fine."

"Are you sure? I know I said it before, but I'll say it again: don't overdo it."

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm a bit exhausted, nothing more. Seems those exercises are really effective!" Helen's bright, sunny expression gave Claudia some relief. Even *she* felt the ache in her muscles.

"Why don't you return to the servants' dormitory for today?" she said.

Helen's jaw dropped. "What? No, I live for our nightly routine of teatime before bed!"

Stunned by Helen's vehement refusal, Claudia stammered back, "W-well, if it means that much to you, then let's have tea." She'd only tried to be considerate, but it obviously wasn't what Helen wanted.

When the aroma of the tea leaves permeated the air, all the tension from their workout seemed to ebb away.

Claudia's eyes landed on an envelope. She picked it up and said, "The masquerade ball at Parte Kingdom's embassy looks like it'll be a big to-do."

Parte was a small country southwest of Harland. It sat at the western edge of the mountain range that separated Harland and Bari, its border running along one of the rivers. Parte had hosted many masquerade balls, but they were all political in nature, so invitees were mostly limited to those involved in diplomacy. Something must have happened to change that, since their upcoming ball was more playful and casual in nature, and all of the aristocrats in Harland had been welcomed to attend.

"I've never heard of a masquerade ball quite like it," said Helen. She had been to many in her time as a former earl's daughter. Most had only required masks, but the one in Parte stipulated that participants wear a full costume for the event. Evidently, Helen had trouble picturing it.

Claudia had participated in one before, albeit in her previous life. "The only difference is that you're donning a whole costume rather than a mask," she said. "Though I suppose it's a bigger deal since you need to coordinate everything."

Some had worn full animal costumes. As this made any participants wearing such an outfit impossible to identify, they had to inform the host ahead of time.

"I see. I suppose that's why the hostess has planned the event so far out in advance, unlike regular masquerade balls. And she has yet to arrive."

The hostess was Niamilia Bendin of Parte Kingdom, a young lady from a powerful family. Though she was only two years older than Claudia, they had never met. She was traveling to Harland in the company of her country's delegation, which was unusual in itself. The delegation was already on its way, but it would be a few more days until they arrived at the royal capital.

Helen jumped in her seat. “Wait! Shouldn’t we get to work on your costume?!”

Claudia waved a dismissive hand. “We can go with something simple. Then it won’t take any time to prepare.”

“How can you say that, Lady Claudia?” Helen shook her head vigorously. “No, this is your costume! I need to reach out to the head maid tomorrow and set up a meeting to discuss your outfit.”

“No, um, I never intended to do anything too ostentatious anyway.”

“Regardless, we *cannot* have you attending in anything less than your best!” Helen hesitated, eyes darting. “Oh, but I suppose it’ll be difficult to procure a perfume for you.”

“I suppose it will, until Marilyn’s shop resumes its normal operations.”

Claudia had blended her own fragrances when she was a courtesan, but in her life as a duke’s daughter, she’d taken to ordering from a professional instead. Marilyn was well known among the upper crust, and her ability to meet her clients’ needs perfectly made her extremely popular.

Alas, a thief had broken into her shop in the spring. On top of ransacking it, they had stolen anything that looked remotely valuable. Months had passed since then, but the authorities still hadn’t caught the culprit.

“Fortunately, the ingredients for her perfumes were untouched, but the repairs for her shop will take some time,” said Helen.

Marilyn could resume blending her perfumes, but she wouldn’t be in top form if she had to worry about the thief coming back. Her techniques required a delicate touch. Claudia wouldn’t feel comfortable commissioning her when she had yet to get back on her feet.

Claudia tapped her chin. “There’s been a lot of unsettling rumors lately.”

“Yes, especially concerning that aristocrat who was killed on his way home from a brothel.”

The culprit responsible for the robbery and subsequent murder of that nobleman had yet to be identified or

apprehended.

“There are whispers that the syndicate is responsible for it, but I assume the men under you wouldn’t do such a thing unless they were contracted for assassination…right?” Helen asked, glancing at Claudia.

“Correct. Those in the underworld avoid getting mixed up with aristocrats as much as possible.”

Syndicate members lived in a completely different world than high-society elites. Should aristocrats condemn them, and the authorities decide to clean them out, they would be the ones in dire straits. An aristocrat might find trouble if they entered the syndicate’s territory, but by and large, there was no reason for the two groups to cross paths. Doubly so now that the government had taken control of the brothels, making them no longer part of the syndicate’s domain.

Besides, the capital was the territory of only one syndicate: Rose Garden, which was under Claudia’s (or rather, Rose’s) thumb. If they’d been involved in such an incident, she would have heard something by now. Bezel, the former leader, ran things in her stead—but he understood that with her leadership, everything had changed. He was diligent about delivering reports to her.

“I can’t discount the possibility that another syndicate aside from Rose Garden is responsible for it, though.” Unfortunately, that would make the situation even more complicated.

“But if another syndicate were to encroach on your territory, wouldn’t that essentially be a declaration of war?” asked Helen.

“Worse than that.”

Even if a syndicate received an assassination request, they wouldn’t agree to it if the target was in another syndicate’s territory. It was against their shared code to encroach on someone else’s domain. Doing so was asking for trouble.

“Which is why,” Claudia continued, “the authorities haven’t pursued that line of inquiry.”

The authorities involved with the investigation were well versed in the ins and outs of syndicate behavior. The last thing Rose Garden wanted was trouble on their doorstep, so they had been quick to cooperate and offer what information they could. If there were still rumors that the underworld was involved, that was

because some people honestly believed it and were peddling the idea.

Claudia sighed. “It doesn’t help that none of the stolen items have been seen on the market anywhere.”

The victims had not only had their money stolen but jewelry as well. There weren’t many places where these items could be pawned off, which would make it easier to spot if they were. But the thief had yet to cash in; there were no clues to be found. The same could be said of the vandalism incident at Marilyn’s shop.

“All we can do is pray that the investigation finds its footing quickly, for the sake of any future victims,” said Claudia.

A whole year had passed since her summer visit to the United Kingdom of Arakaner. Her trading firm was thriving, and she had grown accustomed to the work she had to do as its owner. It was this dire, dark news near home that had anxiety swelling in her breast.

Maybe the weather is partly to blame too.

Claudia looked out the window. The rain was beating against the glass, the sound of it filling her ears. The weather was often dour during the change of the seasons, and it showed no signs of letting up.

Chapter 2:
The Villainess Takes the Blame

AS SOON AS PARTE'S delegates arrived in the royal capital, the castle hosted an afternoon party to welcome them. It was a smaller affair than the ones Claudia had attended to receive Raul or Seraphim, but since the young lady of a powerful family had accompanied them here, many aristocratic ladies (including Claudia herself) were in attendance. Even before the delegation made it to the venue, the place was abuzz with conversation. Claudia was no exception, surrounded by the familiar faces of her friends.

Louise lightly tapped her closed fan against her chin as she tilted her head. Her long, flowing golden hair spilled from her shoulder with the motion. "It's exceedingly rare for a single noble lady to accompany a delegation, isn't it?"

"As far as I'm aware, this is the first time," Claudia said.

Raul chimed in, "Bari's delegation has never been joined by any outside parties."

"Whether from Bari or Harland, delegations always have a singular objective," Lestea said matter-of-factly.

No one said as much, but Parte's delegation differed from others in that it aimed to sell mercenary services and demand protection fees from other nations.

"I went to observe their drill practices once, and even our knights were flabbergasted," said Raul.

Lestea shrugged. "The most surprising thing wasn't the skill of their dedicated military—it was the fact that *citizens* participated in the drills too. No wonder their martial achievements are so widely touted."

The two of them had actually visited Parte before, unlike Claudia.

"Let me tell you one thing," said Raul. "I would *never* want to partake in their drills."

"Well, it's possible their drills were that tough so they could show off in front of us," Lestea allowed. "But it's pretty obvious that all of their people have a certain level of physical training."

As proof of that, every delegate Parte had ever sent was so toned and muscular, they might as well have set out for battle right after. Military might was Parte's biggest selling point. Their core ideology was that every member of their nation should be fit enough to go into battle, regardless of gender or age. This gave them a heightened morale on the battlefield, unmatched by any other country. No one wanted to face their warriors. Parte understood its strengths well, which was why it sold its mercenary services to other nations.

To the southwest of Parte was a collection of small countries locked in endless conflict. For Harland, Parte served as a buffer keeping them safe from the flames of war. Even if Harland didn't require Parte's mercenary services, it owed much to the other kingdom for keeping Harland safe. That was what the delegation was here to negotiate: the fee for Harland's protection. There was no need for a young noble lady to accompany them for that, though.

Claudia began fanning herself with the matching folding fan she'd received from Louise. The motion spread her rose-inspired perfume through the air. It was her favorite, the same scent she always had Marilyn prepare for her.

"I wonder if they have some new proposal for us," she said.

"That's exactly what everyone has been speculating about!" Charlotte cut in, bobbing her head of pink hair. She had apparently been eavesdropping on other people's conversations while Claudia and the others were busy talking.

Louise fanned herself as well, mimicking Claudia. "The Bendins are among the most powerful families in Parte," she said. "Considering how close they are to Parte's royal family, it opens up so many possibilities as to what her accompaniment means."

Charlotte added eagerly, "From what I hear about the way their hierarchy works, the Bendin patriarch is at the same level as a duke."

Parte was somewhat of a rarity among Harland's neighboring kingdoms in that it was a democracy. Policies were determined by the king and representatives voted in by the citizenry, so the king could not make decisions completely on his own.

Raul nodded. “Yes, even though they don’t have an aristocracy the same way our countries do, almost all of their assemblymen come from powerful families. Those with long histories aren’t much different from noblemen.”

“Prince Raul, are you personally familiar with Lady Niamilia?” Charlotte asked.

A year ago, Charlotte would’ve shied away from speaking to royalty like Raul. After being around Claudia for so long (and by extension, Raul), she had grown accustomed to him enough to engage in normal conversation.

It’s also likely in large part thanks to the way Prince Raul treats everyone equally, Claudia thought to herself.

There were, surprisingly, many who froze up and couldn’t speak when they were in front of Sylvester, but found it easy to approach Raul. This was especially true of the lower-ranking nobility in Harland.

“Nope. I had another young lady guiding me around during our visit, so I can’t say I’ve met her.”

Lestea hastened to add, “On that note, Lady Charlotte, I think you’ll find she isn’t quite what you’re envisioning. The drills aren’t quite so strict on young ladies from respectable families.”

The fact that they weren’t permitted to skip drills entirely was proof of how much Parte valued their training. As Lestea had indicated, Niamilia Bendin’s appearance was also a topic of great speculation at the party. Everyone knew Parte’s citizens were trained to be warriors. People were keen to entertain the idea that even a noble lady such as Niamilia might be every bit as buff as a man.

Blood rushed to Charlotte’s cheeks when she realized Lestea had read her thoughts, and she laughed awkwardly. “I just assumed…”

“Of course,” Lestea said. “Everyone we know from Parte is well built, after all. I can understand why you’d expect the same of her.”

Bari was also Parte’s neighbor, but the former kingdom’s size led to more diplomatic relations with Arakaner than Parte.

Charlotte wasn’t the only one ignorant of Parte. Most people had limited knowledge of Harland’s neighbors, having only

learned about them in class. The reception hall boomed with conversation as everyone speculated about the mysterious Niamilia. Claudia was beginning to wonder how long it would drag on when the fanfare came to an abrupt stop. People snapped their mouths shut when the delegation made its entrance.

The first to appear was the delegation's representative. He was every bit as muscled and beefy as the rumors suggested a man from Parte would be, and he walked with a confident and practiced rhythm one only saw from a military man.

Even though it's the beginning of autumn, they're dressed so lightly.

Their clothing wasn't all that unfamiliar to Claudia. Their shirts had no buttons and instead were folded over in the front and cinched with a cord around their waists. The clothes seemed loose and comfortable, yet their short sleeves looked tight around their thick, sinewy muscles.

The men and women who followed after him were similar in build, all fit enough to be warriors. They'd likely been handpicked to emphasize Parte's strength. If Niamilia was every bit as buff as the rest of them, it would be impossible to pick her out from others. Perhaps she was already in their midst and nobody had noticed, which was why the rest of the Harland aristocracy was studying the group to try to spot her.

A shock of vibrant red hair appeared, stealing everyone's attention. The woman's scarlet locks were as vivid as the evening sun. With each step she took, her loose ringlets bounced around her, framing navy-blue eyes that resembled a darkened sky. Bringing up the rear of the delegation, Niamilia Bendin was like a spotlight silhouetting the rest of her countrymen.

Everyone was captivated by the dignified young woman who had manifested before them. And though her hair was bright, her features were soft and warm. The texture of her hair and the way she stood so straight and confident reminded Claudia of herself, though the shape of her eyes gave a completely different initial impression.

Lestea was completely right about her.

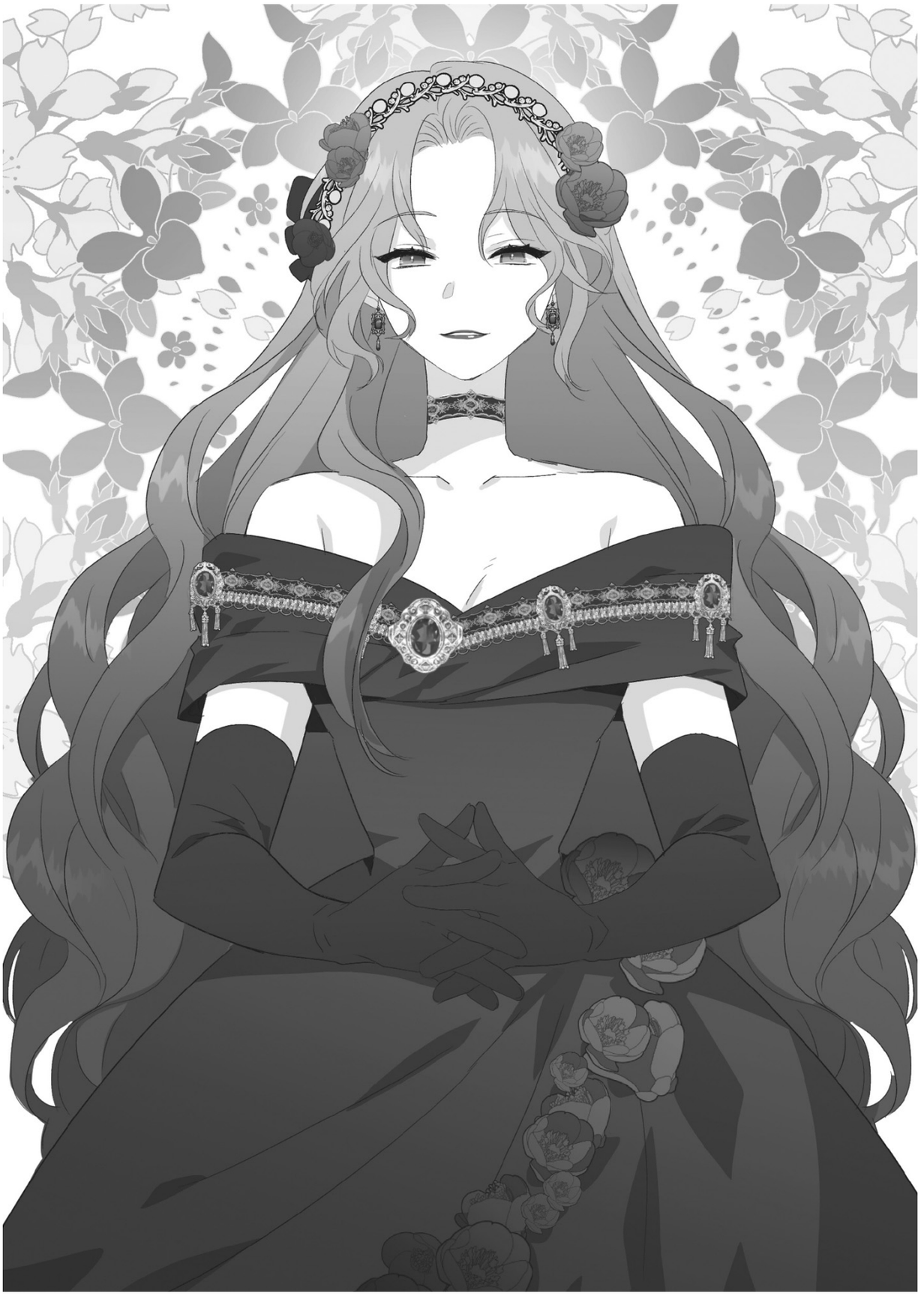
Although all of Parte's citizenry were trained to be warriors, there was a notable difference between Niamilia and the rest of the delegation. Her form and dress set her apart from her

countrymen. If she hadn’t been standing with them, she would have blended right in with the rest of the party.

Those who had crudely imagined her to have a more peculiar appearance sighed in disappointment, but they should have expected this. Even if Parte had a different system of government, they were a neighboring country and thus similar in many ways to Harland. Harland had influenced their culture and doctrines, so their aesthetic senses were nearly identical.

After the delegation entered the venue, Sylvester emerged from a door reserved specifically for members of the royal family. This door was a floor up from the rest of the venue and had a balcony attached to it. Everyone in attendance paused to look up at him.

Sylvester smiled gently and said, “Please offer some applause to our guests from Parte, who have had a very long journey. I’m sure many of our guests this time around are similar in age to Lady Niamilia. I hope you’ll take this as an opportunity to get acquainted with one another.”



People raised their glasses to that, then tipped back their drinks. Sylvester took that as his cue to descend the stairs from the balcony to the main floor. He made the rounds greeting people, then rendezvoused with Claudia and her group. The guest of the evening, Niamilia, already had a crowd of young noble ladies and scions surrounding her.

“Seems everyone is extremely curious about her,” Sylvester said.

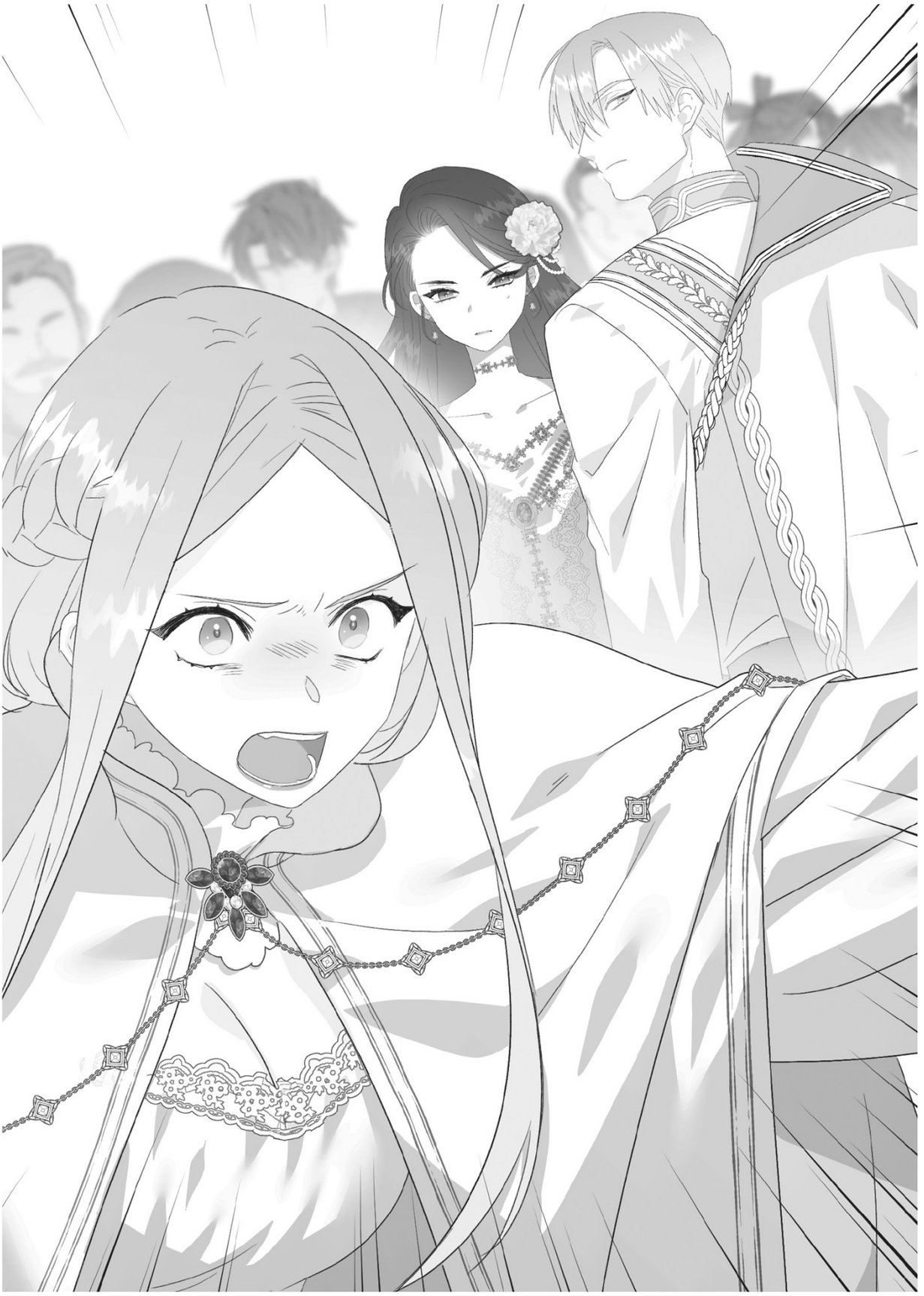
“She *is* the host of the upcoming masquerade ball,” Claudia reminded him. “She’s different than anybody most of our people have met, given her country of origin. Even I’m interested in what kind of person she is.”

“Yet you’re not among those congregating around her?”

“I think basic greetings are adequate for today, considering we have a tea party planned for us to get to know her better.”

Besides, if high-ranking noble ladies like herself and Louise joined the throng, it would discourage those with less status from doing the same. That was why Claudia had limited her interactions with Niamilia to basic introductions. Aside from her presence here, this was like any normal party.

Or at least, it was until Wendy Lloyd appeared, face pale and twisted in horror. “Don’t be deceived by her, Your Highness!” she cried shrilly. It was completely unlike her, not least because she had such a sheltered and pampered upbringing, which had instilled in her the value of maintaining her composure at all times. Naturally, her panicked shouting had everyone around her breaking into murmurs.



Claudia was taken aback by the way Wendy glowered at her with contempt. She had never seen such an open display of emotion from Wendy before. In fact, she had never been met with such straightforward hostility from anyone. That part might've been more concerning.

What in the world is going on? she wondered.

Louise was equally bewildered by the display, having known Wendy for a long time.

For her part, Claudia had kept somewhat of a distance from Wendy purely because she and her family were part of the aristocratic faction, but the two had never taken issue with each other. Wendy was always composed and dignified, so the Wendy she knew stood in stark contrast with the hysterical woman before her.

Wendy shook her head, the violet locks of her hair bouncing in the braided updo her maids had styled. "You mustn't trust this wicked villainess! Th-the fiendish schemes she's concocted are too horrifying to name!" Despite her stammering, she spat out her baseless accusations with no sign of stopping. The only unruffled part of her or her attire was the violet flower brooch on her chest.

"You know about the new syndicate that was formed here in the capital, don't you, Your Highness?" Wendy went on, shoulders rising and falling with each shallow breath. "L-Lady Claudia is the one in charge of it! And she's colluding with the United Kingdom of Arakaner! *And* she's using that trading firm she received from her father to—oh dear, it's too awful to speak of!" What little color was left in her face drained, turning her skin almost blue as she clapped a hand over her mouth. Her eyes shimmered with tears. She had plucked together whatever paltry amount of courage she had to come to Sylvester with this revelation.

"All right," Sylvester said calmly. "I would be happy to hear you out. There's no need for you to panic or be afraid while I'm here." He didn't sound the least bit flustered.

That has to be intentional, Claudia realized. He understood it was better to meet these accusations with kindness and understanding than to rebuff them harshly. Claudia wasn't even angry about everything Wendy had hit her with. Rather, she was deeply confused. More than anything, she wanted to know how Wendy even got these ideas in her head.

Wendy was visibly relieved that Sylvester hadn't outright denied her claims. She seemed to be calming down, though that didn't last long thanks to an unwelcome interloper.

"What's this?!" cried a dramatic voice. "If what Lady Wendy claims is true, then there is no doubt in my mind that Lady Claudia has been using her position as a bridal candidate for her own aims! If she really has been colluding with foreign powers, that makes her a traitor!"

Sylvester's voice hardened as he said, "Lord Thomas, I would thank you not to make such dangerous statements when these claims have yet to be verified."

"Oh, yes, pardon me. I simply wanted to assuage Lady Wendy's concerns as quickly as possible," said the earl. His blond hair was cropped at his shoulders and curled toward his chin. It bobbed as he lowered his head toward the prince. Despite backing down, he showed no inclination to actually apologize to Claudia. His attention was solely focused on Wendy and Sylvester.

As I recall, Lord Thomas is part of the royal faction. Given his attitude, it was easy enough to infer he didn't think very highly of her family. The Lindsays occupied a neutral position between the two opposing factions, so quite a few houses held animosity toward them for it.

This year marked Lord Thomas's sixtieth birthday. He held great authority within the royal faction. For someone his age to seize upon the statements of a lady young enough to be his granddaughter to gain a political edge... It was downright shameful. Claudia wanted to sigh and throw her head back in exasperation.

In some ways, I suppose it's preferable that he's being so open about his feelings toward us. It was easier to combat the enemy when you knew who they were. Nonetheless, she couldn't let his statements go unchallenged, lest he think he could take advantage of her silence.

"Lord Thomas, am I to assume those words were meant for me as well?" she asked, referring to the non-apology he had given Sylvester. She was subtly trying to point out how impertinent he had been.

But a man didn't grow to be as old as Lord Thomas without learning how to talk his way out of trouble. "Absolutely. With how widely you're regarded as the perfect lady, I should think you would understand my concerns." His voice sounded polite enough, but Claudia had learned that eyes were the true windows to a person's soul—and his shone with derision.

If I'm reading him right, he's telling me that a young lady like me shouldn't assume she can go toe to toe with someone like him.

"If you only spoke out of concern for Lady Wendy, then I have nothing more to say on the matter." Claudia's face clouded over with worry as she glanced at Wendy, demonstrating that she was just as anxious about the situation.

She could have kept quiet and left the matter entirely up to Sylvester to resolve, but she needed to appeal to the masses and show them she had nothing to feel guilty about. Her composure was the polar opposite of Wendy's hysteria.

"It seems there's been a grave misunderstanding," she said to Wendy. "Why don't we go somewhere else so we can discuss this?"

"I-I know the truth. I know how terrifying you really are!" Wendy blurted out.

"Should I interpret that to mean you aren't in the right state of mind for a discussion? Lady Wendy, I assure you there's an explanation for everything. Prince Sylvester already knows about all of this."

Wendy frowned. "Then does he also know you're involved in that unsolved murder—that you ordered your henchmen to attack the victim because he was a member of the aristocratic faction?!"

"That's the first misunderstanding we need to resolve, I suppose," Claudia replied evenly.

Under the guise of "Rose," she had indeed taken over the local syndicate, which had since been renamed to Rose Garden. She had also taken pains to hide that information. No one was supposed to know about it, regardless of which faction they were in or how highly they ranked in it.

So where could Lady Wendy have heard about all of this? Whatever the case, she and Rose Garden weren't involved in the robbery and murder of the lord from the aristocratic faction. *The*

fact that she's so certain about what faction the murderers are from makes me assume someone has been filling her head with lies.

It was the only explanation that made any sense. How else would Wendy have come to the conclusion that the syndicate was responsible for the crime? To begin with, it was strange that a sheltered aristocratic lady like Wendy knew about the newly founded syndicate. It wasn't a topic the upper crust concerned themselves with; only the royal guard or commoners in the slums would have cause to talk about it. The more Claudia thought about it, the more suspicious she became.

As if the situation wasn't bad enough already, Wendy's next statements sent shock waves not only through the crowd but through Claudia as well. "I highly doubt it's a misunderstanding. His Highness must suspect you too! Why else would he invite Lady Niamilia here to be a new bridal candidate?!"

This was the first Claudia had heard of such a thing, and apparently no one else had either. Everyone—Claudia, Louise, Charlotte, Raul, and Lestea—turned their gazes on Sylvester.

The prince maintained his dignified smile. "Lady Wendy, I advise you not to repeat unsubstantiated rumors to the public."

"As I understand it, they aren't unsubstantiated at all," Wendy shot back. "What other reason would Lady Niamilia have for accompanying the delegation here?!"

Those close enough to overhear the drama swiveled to face Niamilia, as if she might confirm the truth of the matter.

Those big, navy-blue eyes blinked several times. She was no less charming even with a look of shock on her face. "The whole reason I'm here is in hopes of becoming His Highness's betrothed," she admitted.

Chapter 3:
The Villainess Receives an Invitation

THE WELCOMING PARTY for Parte Kingdom's delegation closed on a rather dramatic and unexpected note. Not even Sylvester could have predicted the information coming out so suddenly, which was why he had summoned Claudia to meet with him. No arrangements among the upper crust—royal family included—were immediate, and so the need for preparation meant she had to wait quite a while.

Claudia opted to send a messenger home to inform her family that she would be late. She watched as the messenger left alongside the rest of the aristocrats, who were still shaken by what they had heard, their gossip blending into a boisterous cacophony.

"Lou, Charlotte, are you sure you aren't going to attend the meeting with me?" she asked over her shoulder. Since they were bridal candidates as well, Claudia thought they deserved to hear the truth from him.

"You should prioritize yourself," Louise insisted with a shake of her head. "We may be involved in this too, but we're not at the very center of it like you are, Dee."

"Precisely." Charlotte nodded. "Your feelings come first. I think I'll see if I can't find an opportunity to speak with Lady Wendy." Her father, Lord Roger, was also an earl, and both men were in the aristocratic faction. Charlotte stood a much better chance than Claudia or Louise of getting information out of Wendy.

"My only request is that you don't take any risks," said Claudia, since she knew Charlotte was only doing it to help her out. The last thing she wanted was for Charlotte to become collateral damage.

"I'll take care not to worry you while doing the best I can to pitch in," Charlotte promised.

"If it looks like you're going to run into trouble, be sure to let me know so I can help," said Louise.

For better or worse, a person's authority was determined by their rank within the aristocratic hierarchy. When it came to lineage and connections, Louise's family was on even footing with Wendy's. The influence they wielded extended beyond the respective factions they were associated with.

"Though I'll admit I won't be as much help as Dee would be," Louise added, smiling bitterly.

"My, my." Claudia giggled. "Two allies are still better than one. The more, the better."

Charlotte bobbed her head in agreement. "Exactly! I feel invincible knowing I have both of you to back me up." She flashed a carefree smile, which only brightened even more when Claudia reached over to stroke her head.

I need to keep my own head straight so I don't worry them. To that end, she needed to handle this issue one step at a time. Panicking wouldn't solve things any faster.

After Claudia saw Louise and Charlotte off, two new figures appeared at her side. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of dark-brown locks and sky-blue hair. The shadows had grown long in the passageway where they stood, but the sun was still high enough for her to make them out.

"Sylvester has more options now than he did before," Raul said. "Why shouldn't you?"

"You're always welcome in Bari," Lestea said. "In fact, we're anxiously waiting for you."

In lieu of a response, Claudia asked, "Are you two staying?"

"Of course. There's still an opportunity to gather information here, even without speaking to Sylvester directly."

Lestea smiled wryly. "By which he means our diplomat is scrambling to find out what's going on."

Bari and Parte were neighbors, even if they didn't have as strong of a connection as Harland and Parte did. If there was trouble brewing on the horizon, Bari couldn't ignore it. Claudia could tell they hadn't known about Niamilia ahead of time, given how genuinely shocked they'd looked during the party. There was also the fact that Lestea hadn't reported the information to Claudia in advance, which could only mean she—and by extension, Bari—had no awareness of the arrangement.

“I’m not sure why, but judging by the way Lady Niamilia spoke, Parte’s pretty intent on landing a marriage between her and Sylvester,” Raul said.

“Indeed, otherwise she wouldn’t have said what she did,” Claudia agreed.

Niamilia could have been vaguer and more noncommittal in her response, but she had confirmed the rumor without hesitation.

“From Lady Niamilia’s point of view, it was the perfect opportunity to make her intentions clear. I doubt she meant ill by it.” Lestea’s lips slowly curved into a calculating, almost malicious smile. “I hesitate to say the same about Lady Wendy, unfortunately.” She softened her words, but it was readily apparent she thought of Wendy as an enemy. Claudia and Sylvester had acted as a barrier between her and Wendy at the time, so she couldn’t act on it, but her narrowed eyes shone with barely restrained anger.

Raul stroked his chin. “It would have reflected poorly on Lady Niamilia had she come out and announced it herself, but she was able to keep up appearances thanks to Lady Wendy’s outburst.”

“It was a clever way to respond on the fly,” Lestea said with a shrug. “By answering that it was her intention to be his bride rather than an established fact that she would be a bridal candidate, she couldn’t be contested.”

It would have left a bad impression on the other partygoers if she *had* treated it as an established fact, given that it hadn’t been publicly announced. The crowd would’ve decried Wendy’s behavior as improper in any other circumstance. They only hadn’t because they were too curious about the truth of her claims. That was probably another reason why Niamilia had chosen her words so carefully.

But what is going on with Lady Wendy all of a sudden? Claudia couldn’t help but wonder. The Wendy she knew never forgot her manners.

Claudia dropped her gaze to the ground, and a shadow moved in front of her. She lifted her gaze—and she had to lift it quite high, given his height—to find Raul standing immediately in

front of her. Those eyes, dark as bitter chocolate, looked strangely sweet. He remained silent and held her gaze for a while.

"Claudia," Raul murmured at last. He took her hand, his touch as gentle and delicate as if he were inviting her to dance with him. He leaned down to kiss the back of her hand. It was the same sort of reverent gesture he offered at parties. The way he did it was light enough to be passed off as a jest, but his gaze burned with such passion that Claudia knew better. His wavy bangs fell over his eyes as he tipped his head, but even with them in the way, she could still feel the intensity of his stare. It made him look even sexier than usual. "I would be delighted to take you back home with me to Bari Kingdom whenever you desire. I mean that."

He was trying to remind her that, just like Sylvester, she had other options. *He's such a sweetheart.* Raul didn't push the issue with her; the decision was always hers to make. It warmed her heart how much he respected her feelings. Unfortunately, the answer to his proposal was the same as it had ever been.

"My mind—and heart—are already made up," she said.

"I know. I only want you to keep my offer in the back of your mind. I can already tell that this is only the start of some real trouble."

"And for what it's worth, I will always be on your side, Lady Claudia," Lestea threw in, wearing the same handsome smile that would make any other lady swoon.

"You mean *we*," Raul corrected, shooting her a look.

"Oh, right. I forgot you were here."

He whirled on her. "Do I need to use my fist to remind you?"

Lestea clicked her tongue. "I have no choice but to endure my master's abuse."

"Keep that up and I really will punch you!"

Claudia giggled at their playful squabbling. Lestea was, as ever, skilled at taking the tension out of any situation.

"Only the start of some real trouble," hm? Raul has the right of it. Parte Kingdom wouldn't go to all this trouble to offer up one of its own if the nation wasn't serious about securing a marriage. It made sense now why Lady Niamilia had accompanied the delegation, but it still left one question unanswered: why was

Parte so intent on a marriage between their kingdoms? Claudia wouldn’t know until she spoke with Sylvester about it.

Chapter 4:
The Villainess and the Crown Prince Have a Discussion

A SERVANT GUIDED CLAUDIA to the reception area, one she'd sat in many times before when waiting for the prince. Though she knew what to expect when she entered, she was still struck by the sight: the room was aglow with beautiful hues of red and orange, traces of sunset filtering in through the window. The color wasn't glaringly bright, but it dominated the space.

It reminds me of Lady Niamilia and her fiery-red hair.

Sylvester, who was already inside, followed her gaze to the window. For a few moments, they both stared out at the sky.

"I made you wait quite a while, didn't I?" he said, breaking the silence between them.

"No, I was seeing everyone else off, so I didn't really feel the wait."

He motioned for her to take her seat, so she did. Perhaps part of the reason the room felt so different was because of the map spread across the table in front of the sofa. This particular map displayed the locations of Harland, Bari, Parte, and the nearby region locked in constant conflict. He had probably prepared it to aid in his explanation of the situation.

Sylvester took a sip of tea before he began. "I know you heard the news from Lady Wendy, but the truth is that Lady Niamilia hasn't been officially accepted as a bridal candidate yet. The matter is still under consideration. That said, the motion to accept her is on the cusp of passing. I expect an official announcement to be made in the next few days."

"Did something happen?"

She would be lying if she said she wasn't taken aback by Wendy's sudden condemnations and the revelation about Niamilia, but rather than express how upsetting that was, she wanted to understand the full picture first. *Something must be going on for all of this to crop up,* she thought.

Claudia studied the map and tried to calm her nerves. Whatever the issue was, it extended beyond Harland's borders.

Sylvester's tight features softened. It was a rare show of vulnerability from him, and Claudia couldn't help but smile.

"I'm not angry with you," she said. "I assume you must've planned to speak with me about it once everything was settled." Claudia reached over, placing her hand over his where it sat on his lap. Knowing him, Sylvester had probably fought against the motion to accept Niamilia to the bitter end. Otherwise, he would've told her sooner.

Sylvester wasn't the only one in the assembly; her father was part of it too. He must've been strongly opposed as well, which was why he hadn't said anything to her either. That narrowed down the possibilities of where Wendy had gotten her information: it had to be the side that supported the measure to accept Niamilia as a bridal candidate.

I wonder if it wasn't Lord Thomas himself who told her. Or perhaps Wendy's own father had mentioned it to her, though Claudia thought that less likely. Families of the current bridal candidates didn't stand to benefit at all if more competition appeared.

"I'm ashamed that now we have to scramble to deal with the fallout and didn't better prepare for this eventuality beforehand," Sylvester said, dragging his other hand down his face.

"Please don't berate yourself. You couldn't have anticipated Lady Wendy doing what she did."

They could have waited longer to make the announcement officially if not for Wendy. Niamilia would've made her intentions clear sooner had she really intended to do so from the start, but she only spoke about it when she was confronted. There was no reason for Sylvester to blame himself for any of it.

Sylvester's golden eyes squinted, his face contorted with anguish. "Sometimes when I talk to you, Dia, it's like the words get stuck in the back of my throat, and I can't properly describe the feelings welling up inside me." The light in the room bounced off his brilliant silver hair. He turned to Claudia, wrapping his arms around her and enveloping her in his warmth.

Claudia returned the gesture, her hands gliding across the wide plane of his back. "I struggle to express myself sometimes too."

“You do?” His hot breath caressed the shell of her ear, voice so low and husky that she almost melted right then and there. The situation was even more sexually charged with the setting sun in the background; it was all too perfect.

No, Claudia! You can’t let yourself get swept up in your feelings when you’re trying to have a serious conversation! Her panic prevailed over her base urges, so she tried to bring her body in alignment with her mind.

Gently, Claudia pushed on Sylvester’s chest to coax him back and put some space between them, hoping he hadn’t heard her pulse hammering away in the meantime. Her cheeks had grown pink, but she trusted that she could pass it off as a trick of the light.

Sylvester reached down and grasped both of her hands in his, forcing her to face him. “Dia, I’m so grateful. You don’t know how reassuring your words are… But every time I try to tell you these things, all that comes out is clichés.”

“I know you’re being genuine.”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m not getting what I want across to you.” He leaned in close enough that their noses bumped. His lips were soft on hers, barely touching, yet when he pulled back, the sensation lingered long after. They were still close enough that their breath mingled in the narrow space between them. “Dia, I love you with all my heart.”

“I love you too, Syl.”

He kissed the back of her hand, then glanced back up at her with dewy golden eyes. It made her heart stutter. His scent filled the air around her. She should have noticed it sooner, but it was only now she had the wherewithal to take in the fact that their scents were mixing—her perfume and his cologne.

Outside, a curtain of darkness had already fallen across the land.

Sylvester pressed another kiss to her hand, first to her fingers and then to the back. His eyes were hidden from her view, but she could sense the passion in them, hidden beneath those long, silvery lashes.



Even in the dim light, he radiated beauty and charm. His magnetism was so intoxicating, it made her head spin. The heat in her body grew with each chaste kiss. The only reason he wasn't pressing her for more was that their time together was too limited for anything to come of it—but that did nothing to subdue her rising desire.

Silence hung in the air for a while, broken only by an exhaled breath. Claudia wasn't sure if it was hers or his.

As soon as Sylvester released her, Claudia's hand shot toward her teacup so she could wet her parched throat. He followed her lead and did the same. Her gaze instinctively wandered to where his lips met the porcelain, and she had to force herself to look away.

"The matter with Lady Wendy concerns me as well, but let's discuss Parte Kingdom first," said Sylvester.

Claudia nodded. "Yes, I would like to know why—at this late hour—parliament would pass a motion to increase the number of bridal candidates."

It wasn't unusual for foreign ladies to be included as potential candidates, depending on the political climate at the time. For this particular generation, Harland had thus far limited its candidates to women within its borders. The continent was relatively peaceful and stable at the moment, so the royal family wanted to keep the marriage between people inside Harland to strengthen domestic ties.

"In Parte, there's a growing animosity toward Harland. It's reached a boiling point."

Claudia shook her head in disbelief. "That can't be…"

If it was at a boiling point, that meant Parte was seriously considering war. Claudia was in too much shock to say anything else. Harland and Parte had a long-cultivated friendship; it seemed abrupt that the people of Parte would harbor such intense hostility.

Sylvester was obviously feeling the pressure of this jarring political shift. His normally blank expression crumpled as his brows pinched together. "I struggle to believe it too. There were some signs of unrest, but that's all they were—signs. It's hard to understand how the wider sentiments about us took such a

dramatic turn." He shook his head. "I suppose the lesson to be learned here is that even democracy has its shortcomings."

Since Harland was a monarchy, the king had the final say. No matter how much unrest and discontent stirred among the common people, they couldn't make spur-of-the-moment political decisions. In fact, the aristocracy would step in to regulate the people before it got to that point. Even if uprisings occurred, they were usually limited to specific areas or regions.

Parte, being a democracy, functioned very differently. The king's opinion was given greater weight than an individual assemblyman who was voted in by the people, but he had no power to make decisions on his own. And although powerful political families in Parte held similar influence to aristocrats in Harland, there was no real aristocracy there. If one of them tried to mobilize their private army to quell the unrest amid the common folk, it would be labeled an abuse of authority and they would be appropriately punished for it.

"So not even Parte's king can quell his citizens' unrest?" Claudia asked.

"It's already past that point. The fact that Lady Niamilia accompanied the delegation here is proof of how bad things have gotten. I never expected Parte Kingdom to act with such emotion."

As he further explained, the growing tension was due to Parte acting as a buffer between the conflict zone and Harland. The marquess seated at Harland's southwestern border was practically aristocracy in name only; he had no need to use his forces to protect the nation, unlike other nobles of similar rank. Parte had taken over that duty for him.

No matter how much Harland paid to compensate Parte, at the end of the day, it was Parte's people fighting and dying on the battlefield. Hence why the people complained that they were little more than a vassal state.

"I can understand where they're coming from," said Sylvester. "That's why we welcome their delegation each year to negotiate and give them such preferential treatment and financial aid. Until now, that was enough to protect our friendship."

Claudia nodded. "I assume the reason they aren't similarly fed up with Bari is because, due to Bari's location, Parte isn't really acting as a buffer for it anyway."

It was the only explanation that made sense, as there were no other major differences between Harland and Bari. Bari still paid its own fee to Parte, who in turn sent mercenaries to the conflict zone, but because of where Bari sat, it was already on the border with the conflict zone and had to protect itself to some degree.

"That's certainly possible. Frankly, I have no idea how Parte's people have made up their minds about this in the first place."

Nations with an aristocracy were easier to understand, if only because a single aristocrat represented a large swathe of people—to the tune of tens of thousands. Granted, that number could be more or less depending on the size of a given aristocrat's region. Their opinion represented all the people under their stewardship, whether those people agreed with that opinion or not. The powerful political families in Parte worked differently. They were elected after a majority generally agreed with their positions, but that didn't necessarily mean they were always in alignment on every subject. There was no real room for nuance, which made it difficult to know how the people really felt—or rather, why they felt the way they did.

"All we know," Sylvester went on, "is that the people are vehemently against us."

The opposition to Harland was apparently so overwhelming that all the powerful political families, including the royal family, had no choice but to bow to their will.

"The delegates are trying to appeal on their country's behalf, suggesting I take Lady Niamilia as my fiancée to appease their people and avoid war between our nations."

"It makes sense. If your countries were bound by marriage, then they wouldn't feel as subservient to Harland as they do now."

Sylvester had used the word "fiancée," but really what they wanted was for Niamilia to be the crown princess. It was a reasonable plan to combat the growing unrest among their people.

"The biggest issue is how stubborn they are about their proposal. They insist war is unavoidable if I don't take Lady Niamilia as my bridal candidate."

“But even assuming we did go to war, Parte Kingdom doesn’t stand a chance of winning against us, do they?”

Parte had stronger warriors and better military tactics, but Harland had size and numbers on its side. In terms of overall strength, Harland had Parte beat several times over. Anyone could see that.

“Yes, but our kingdom would stand to gain nothing from it.”

War was a last resort for when all other avenues had failed, as it caused substantial losses on both sides. There was the cost of weapons, for one, on top of having to draft workers into the army to fight. Harland had its own dedicated army, but there weren’t enough established troops for war. In this particular instance, the marquess at the border with Parte and the other liege lords near it would have to conscript their people. This would reduce the number of workers, bringing their economy to a grinding halt. Traditionally, the losing nation in a war would be forced to foot the bills incurred by the victor, but Parte couldn’t shoulder all of Harland’s losses. Plus, its people possessed a much different mentality than that of most nations.

“Even Parte Kingdom’s citizens are trained as warriors. They won’t stop fighting until every one of them is dead,” said Sylvester.

It wouldn’t matter to them whether their loss was inevitable. Their people prided themselves on never backing down from a fight, even if the odds were impossibly stacked against them. Harland couldn’t safely subjugate Parte unless they killed every last person. And if they did that, the ongoing skirmishes in the conflict zone would spill over into Harland. Ultimately, Parte and Harland had nothing to gain and everything to lose from going to war.

Sylvester looked straight into Claudia’s eyes. “There’s no possible way I would agree to an engagement with Lady Niamilia, nor would I allow war with Parte Kingdom.” He sounded assured and determined. The strength in those golden eyes stole her breath away. “I will find another way, no matter what it takes. But to buy myself time, I will temporarily accept her as a bridal candidate.”

Claudia was convinced this wasn’t just his position but rather the position of all those who opposed the motion, her father included. To put it not so charitably, they were prolonging the

issue by not dealing with it at the moment, but it was really their only option to avoid conflict.

"I'm sure I'll cause you undue concern and anxiety until this whole issue is resolved, but I want you to trust me and wait for me," Sylvester said.

"All right. In return, if there's anything I can do to help, just say the word." She smiled at him. "There's no need for you to fight this alone."

He brushed another kiss over her lips. "Thank you." His lips curved into a smile so gentle and sweet that she thought she might melt. But this wasn't the time for that; she had a tea party in a few days for her and the other aristocratic ladies to get acquainted with Niamilia.

I need to do my part in gathering information too. She had her own methods for that.

Meeting with Sylvester and hearing his side had helped soothe her distress. He had reminded her that she wasn't alone. *Everything will be all right. Syl and I will overcome this together.*

Outside, the evening sun had sunk completely beneath the horizon.

Chapter 5:
The Villainess Attends a Tea Party

THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME of noble ladies had been invited to the tea party in the royal gardens. Claudia climbed out of her carriage and strode through the long corridor leading to the gardens. It had a series of pillars on either side, arranged in perfectly measured increments. It almost felt like she was walking through the forest, with enormous trees jutting out along the way and towering overhead.

How many times have I walked this same path? she wondered. The sight brought back a particular memory of her chasing after Fermina, her half-sister. She'd been hurrying home, and Sylvester had walked with her. It was the first time she had a true peek at his feelings for her. She couldn't help but smile bitterly now, since at the time she hadn't recognized his love for what it really was. *How could I have ever imagined he was serious about me?* Claudia had assumed he was making light of her. She knew now that he had been entirely sincere.

She reached out, her fingertips sweeping one of the pillars.

It was our first kiss, but there wasn't really anything romantic about it. His impulsive choice had left her so shocked that she'd responded coldly toward him. Looking back at it now, she cringed at herself. It was an embarrassing moment she would rather nobody else know about.

I suppose that's not entirely a bad thing, since it's a memory we can keep between the two of us. No one else could poke fun at her that way. It could be a shameful blip in their romantic history. *And a secret between Syl and me.*

Perhaps she was feeling so nostalgic because she was about to face Niamilia. A few days prior, it had been officially announced that Niamilia would also be a bridal candidate. Claudia had known it was coming, and talking to Sylvester about it beforehand had helped to reassure her. She would be lying if she said it didn't give her any anxiety, but maybe a part of her was still in denial. Niamilia wasn't the only shock she had received at that party, after all.

Everything will be okay, she told herself. *I'm not dealing with this by myself.* She had Sylvester on her side, of course, but her father and Virgil were also hard at work seeking a resolution to the issue with Parte. Plus, she wasn't attending this tea party with Niamilia alone. Louise and Charlotte, as well as the other ladies she grew up with, would be there with her.

No sooner had she straightened her back, ready to face what was to come, than she heard the noisy chatter floating in from the garden ahead. Some of the attendees were already enjoying themselves, it seemed. Light footsteps echoed around her as other ladies strode down the corridor toward the party.

I wonder what flower is in season at the moment. The seasons were changing, so she expected the garden had been arranged for autumn. The weather was perfect, which would make it all the more enjoyable. She picked up the pace.

"I thought I asked you to ensure I wouldn't run into her?!" came a shrill voice behind Claudia.

"M-my deepest apologies!"

"Honestly, you're useless!"

Claudia stopped and spun around to see what was going on. Wendy stood at the entrance of her carriage and was about to alight; she and Claudia had arrived at nearly the same time. The moment their eyes met, Wendy averted her gaze and scurried down the steps. In her haste, the maid helping her was thrown off balance and collapsed to the ground with a pained squeak.

"How dense are you that you would embarrass me in front of other people?!" Wendy glowered at her, having safely disembarked, then promptly stomped off.

She's like a different person. Or perhaps this was who Wendy had always been, and Claudia hadn't realized it before now. She had always smiled quietly in the background. That image ran at odds with the Wendy at the party and the Wendy she saw now.

Wendy's maid was red-faced and trembling, humiliated at having been scolded so harshly in front of other noble ladies and their servants. Tears tracked down her face, dripping onto the floor.

Claudia strode over to her and crouched down, fishing out a handkerchief. "Here, use this."

“Oh!” the maid said, voice hitching. “You’re Duke Lindsay’s daughter, aren’t you?! I-I’m so very sorry!” Her eyes were wide as saucers. She had obviously never expected someone like Claudia to approach her, which was probably why she’d stammered out the unnecessary apology.

Claudia could sense the woman was too rattled to accept the handkerchief on her own, so she reached out and dabbed the maid’s tearstained cheeks. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Are you all right?”

“Yeah—yes, uh-huh,” the maid blurted out awkwardly. She was so nervous that she had stopped crying.

Claudia took the woman’s hand and tucked the handkerchief into it, thinking she might need it later. “Will you be all right returning to your employer’s estate?”

At any other tea party, a waiting room would be prepared for any knights or maids who accompanied the attendees, but there was no such room at the royal castle. It had its own servants and guards to look after people. If a noble wanted to contact their estate, they could send a messenger. Even if the worst happened and a lady’s heel broke, the castle had its own artisans here to repair it. All of this was done free of charge, hence the rumors that some poorer noble houses would intentionally come in clothes or shoes in need of fixing.

As convenient as the castle’s services were, Claudia couldn’t shake the sense that there was an ulterior motive. Anything that happened went straight back to the royal family. They were kept abreast of everything, down to the minutest details. On its own, this information probably seemed inconsequential, but there was no telling how much they stood to benefit from the sheer quantity of it. Claudia knew that from experience. It was similarly minor details which had allowed her and Sylvester to pin down where Cardinal Nigel had been running his illegal casino. That experience made her think more critically than most about the castle spying on them.

There was a long pause as Wendy’s maid struggled to regain her composure. “Y-yes,” she finally managed. “I’ll take a carriage back to the house and return when it’s time to retrieve my lady.”

“Very good. Then shall I help you into your carriage?” Claudia hadn’t brought Helen with her for this particular event. All she’d

needed was someone to help her in and out of the carriage, and the driver was more than capable of doing so. Granted, that had led to some of the staff fighting among themselves about who would get the honor of driving her to the castle.

I can do most things by myself, honestly, but I'm not allowed to because of my position. The experience from her brothel days had prepared her to dress herself if she needed to. She was perfectly capable of disembarking from a carriage by herself too. She only had people to help her because it would be scandalous for a duke's daughter to handle those things by herself. It was part of aristocratic etiquette to have someone assist you, and anyone who didn't observe such manners was considered barbaric.

Claudia gently took the maid's hand to help her, which sent her into a panic.

"Wh-what?! N-no, I'm just fine! I can do it by my—ouch!" She tried to pull away from Claudia and stand on her own, but she must have twisted her ankle when she fell the first time, as she quickly lost her balance. Realizing she could injure herself again, Claudia caught the maid in her arms. She was proud of herself for instinctively assuming a wider stance to maintain her center of gravity.

"Ah...!" The maid gawped, face planted firmly in Claudia's bosom.

"You shouldn't push yourself like that," Claudia told the maid. She raised her head, meeting the driver's eyes. "Would you please help me?"

"Of course!" The man flew out of his seat and rushed to her.

"Could you help this woman into the carriage?"

"Certainly, miss!"

No matter how much she had trained her body, not even Claudia could carry a fully grown woman. It was all she could do to hold the maid up. The driver stepped in and lent the woman his shoulder, helping her hobble into the carriage.

Once the maid was safely inside, Claudia headed her off before she could make any promises of repayment. "You don't have to worry about me. You may keep the handkerchief, though I think it would be in your best interest not to mention what happened here to Lady Wendy." Given her earlier outburst, it

wasn't hard to picture. Claudia emphasized this same point to the driver. Wendy's maid kept staring out the window on the door, dipping low in gratitude until the carriage pulled away.

When Claudia emerged on the other side of the corridor and into the garden, she was met with orange dahlias among a number of other beautiful flora. A cool autumn breeze caressed her cheeks.

She barely had a chance to move before another flower popped up before her. This one came in the form of a head of pink hair. "Big Sister! I've been waiting for you!"

"A pleasure to see you again, Charlotte."

Charlotte curtsied. Beside her was Claudia's other best friend, her emerald eyes standing out against her pastel-orange dress.

"And you too, Lou," Claudia added.

Louise nodded. "It's good to see you. I hear you've already had a run-in with trouble."

"Oh dear. Rumors are already spreading, are they?" Claudia feigned surprise, but she had expected this. There were other noble ladies in the corridor to witness what had happened. It would be more surprising if the encounter *hadn't* hit the rumor mill yet.

Louise hid her mouth with her folding fan and sighed. "Wendy seems to have no intention of backing down."

"No, she seems intent on it," Claudia responded. And by "it," she meant Wendy's animosity.

Charlotte groaned, her lips puckered in a pout. She cocked her head to the side. "I went up to greet her a moment ago, and she seemed restless. Oh, but she did invite me to attend a tea party for the ladies in the aristocratic faction!" The fact that Charlotte brought it up suggested she planned to follow through on her promise to speak with Wendy directly.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Louise asked her. "You may be in the same faction, but you've spent far more time with us. Are you sure you won't be singled out if you attend?"

"If they try something like that, I'll just leave and go straight home. I doubt it'll come to that, though." Charlotte's candy-colored eyes darted between Louise and Claudia. "From what I

gather, the other ladies in the aristocratic faction are similarly thrown off by Lady Wendy's sudden change in attitude."

Evidently, Claudia wasn't the only one who thought Wendy seemed like a different person.

"Until recently, Lady Wendy kept her distance from you, but she never attacked your character in public. In fact, it seemed she respected you…and that no one else around her was against you either."

Harland's aristocracy was broken into two main factions: the royal faction and the aristocratic faction. Despite their opposition, all of Claudia's peers at the academy—regardless of affiliation or gender—respected her, thanks in large part to how impartially she had treated all of them during academy events. Most, albeit not all, trusted her.

Since Wendy had always portrayed herself as quiet and demure, she had made friends (or at least Claudia assumed that was what they were) with ladies who had similar temperaments. According to Charlotte, even they were concerned with how emotionally volatile Wendy had become.

Claudia squinted as she tried to recall the faces of all the women she knew were close with Wendy. "I can see your point. I never had a bad impression of any of her friends."

"See? That's why I doubt I have anything to worry about by attending a tea party with them."

"So Lady Wendy is the only problem," Claudia concluded.

Louise nodded at that, and the conversation ended.

The guest of honor at today's party was the visiting Niamilia. Claudia and her friends straightened themselves and strode over to the table where Niamilia was seated. No one dared stand in the way of Claudia, given that her family sat at the very top of the aristocratic hierarchy.

When Niamilia noticed Claudia, she immediately stood and curtsied. The other ladies who had been seated at the table with her were quick to excuse themselves, sensing that their time with the hostess was over. They understood the societal rules well.

Niamilia was wearing a cream-colored gown, complete with frills along the neckline and sleeves, which almost reminded Claudia of an ornately decorated cake. Niamilia's vibrant hair was

like a fruit on top, meant to add acidity to the sweetness. Niamilia and her designer had impeccable taste, proven in how they balanced the aesthetics of her dress so perfectly with her natural hair color.

In contrast, Claudia was wearing a dark-emerald gown. It was more akin to a flower stalk, integral to the health and preservation of the beautiful blooms seen throughout the royal gardens. But of course, how one interpreted the meaning of the dress was completely up to them.

“A pleasure to see you today, Lady Niamilia. You were radiant at the party, but you look absolutely adorable today. It’s a delight to behold,” said Claudia.

“A pleasure to see you as well, Lady Claudia, and I can’t tell you how delighted I am to receive your praise. I worried that perhaps the design was a bit childish.” She motioned to the empty chairs. “If you’d like, why not take a seat? You as well, Lady Louise and Lady Charlotte.”

The three of them did just that.

Claudia noticed that every little motion of Niamilia’s was practiced and graceful. *I suppose etiquette in Parte Kingdom is no different than it is here.* She hadn’t expected that, since the first word to come to mind when someone mentioned Parte Kingdom was “warriors.” Judging by Niamilia’s conduct, the ladies of the most powerful families in Parte likely received similar training to ladies in Harland, even if it wasn’t widely discussed.

After Claudia and her friends exchanged greetings with Niamilia, the hostess of the party—Harland’s queen—made her appearance. The lively chatter quieted into anxious murmurs; everyone expressed shock that Her Majesty would actually show her face. The queen was a busy woman, after all. She normally had a representative attend and speak on her behalf. Her taking time out of her full schedule proved how serious the situation with Parte Kingdom was. It dawned on Claudia then just how many people were working tirelessly to prevent war.

Claudia stole a glance at Niamilia. As much as she didn’t want to acknowledge it, even Niamilia was playing her part to prevent conflict simply by being here. *Though I’m still not sure how personally interested she is in securing an engagement with Syl.*

The Bendins could certainly benefit from the arrangement. If not for the current political circumstances, Niamilia would never have been considered as a bridal candidate. On the other hand, Niamilia didn't seem ridiculously overjoyed about the prospect. Not that she really could express much joy when peace between two nations hinged upon her betrothal.

That's right. For her, this is the only way to prevent a war.

Sylvester and the rest of those opposing her inclusion were scrambling to find another resolution to this conflict, but Parte Kingdom had already resigned itself to marriage as the only option. Claudia couldn't even begin to imagine how heavy it was for Niamilia, carrying the fate of an entire nation on her shoulders. It was all up to her whether a bloody, relentless war might break out.

She's courageous for doing this.

Outwardly, at least, the two nations were allies—yet their relationship was far from stable or peaceful at this point. While there was no way for Claudia to know exactly what Niamilia thought or felt about all of this, she had to feel at least a little uneasy. For all Niamilia knew, she was walking into the clutches of the enemy. Whatever discomfort she might've felt about it, she let nothing show. She was obviously self-possessed. On top of that, her smile was as bright as the sun, lighting up everything around her.

"It's a pleasure to meet with you all, and with such lovely weather too. As I hear it, you haven't had many clear skies as of late," said Niamilia.

"Yes, now that you mention it," Claudia drawled, the crashing thunder still fresh in her memory, "it was storming before the day of your party, but then it cleared up the day you arrived. Perhaps even the sky was celebrating your arrival here." She'd had a sense of unease then, which she now thought was possibly an ill premonition of the troubles that followed.

Niamilia's lips broke into a smile, her navy-blue eyes crinkling. "I would be delighted if that were true. Parte is covered in mountains, hills, and knolls, so unpredictable weather is a frequent problem."

Parte Kingdom was at the foot of the mountain range that separated Bari Kingdom and Harland Kingdom. There were some plains within its borders, but most of its land consisted of forested mountains and hills.

Claudia nodded thoughtfully. “I hear the weather changes quickly at high elevations.”

“It does! Say it begins raining when you’re at the summit of a mountain. Naturally, you’d dash back down the mountain to escape the bad weather, right? Well, you’d be surprised to find that at a slightly lower elevation, there’s no rain at all!” Niamilia spoke animatedly with dramatic hand gestures. She had such a winsome expression as she eagerly engaged in conversation that it brought a warm, welcoming air to their table. And if it wasn’t already enjoyable enough, Charlotte was like an adorable puppy wagging its tail, anxious to be a part of the fun.

There were four seats at their table, occupied by Claudia, Louise, Charlotte, and Niamilia. All of the prince’s potential brides should have been present, which made Claudia wonder where Wendy was.

As if on cue, she made her appearance.

“I hope you won’t mind if I join in as well?” Wendy said nervously.

Niamilia smiled at her. “You are more than welcome!”

Claudia and her friends had no reason to refuse Wendy’s request. There weren’t enough seats for Wendy to join them, so as soon as she approached their table, one of the servants rushed to grab one for her. Once she was seated, her expression was visibly tense. Claudia could feel Wendy sneaking glances at her, an obvious indication Wendy was still wary.

Even though she wants to avoid me as much as possible, I guess she couldn’t overlook the opportunity to join the rest of His Highness’s bridal candidates.

The air around them was thick with tension, but Charlotte’s chipper voice managed to soften it a bit. “Lady Niamilia, there’s something I would like to ask you.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do you also undertake strict physical training?”

All citizens in Parte were considered warriors and therefore forced to undergo training, but Niamilia's slender frame suggested she wasn't subject to the same regimen as everyone else. Lestea had already told them that noble ladies were given special exceptions, so they already knew the answer to this question, but it was a clever way to temper the atmosphere.

Niamilia giggled. "Hee hee, if it doesn't look like I've been training, then it means I've done a splendid job."

"What does that mean?" Charlotte tilted her head, puzzled.

"It may not look like it, but I have a training regimen tough enough to rival anyone else's. But as you can probably guess, bulging muscles on women aren't very desirable, so I put a lot of thought into my wardrobe to hide it."

Claudia's eyes widened. "Goodness, I didn't realize you could do that." She suspected Niamilia's workouts were much like her own.

"Oh, are you interested, Lady Claudia?"

"Yes, if it isn't too inconvenient, I'd love to hear more about your regimen."

This could lead to new discoveries of how to better tone her body. Claudia leaned forward in her seat, anxious for more information. Her blue eyes shone with genuine curiosity, which elicited a gentle smile from Niamilia. She was probably happy that her own hard work had drawn such interest from someone.

Before she could respond, Wendy cut in, "Lady Niamilia, please be careful not to be deceived by this woman."

"Don't you realize how insulting that is toward Dee?" Louise blurted out, unable to hold herself back. Her eyes narrowed with dismay. What about this innocent topic warranted such a comment?

"The same goes for you as well, Lady Louise," continued Wendy, unperturbed. "Lady Claudia is skilled at cozying up to people. You should be careful too." She wasn't as hysterical as she had been the day of the party, but she was still stubbornly aggressive.

The pendant of a violet flower on Wendy's chest glimmered as the light hit it. It was the same one she had worn at the party. *She must really like it.* It was rare for a lady of Wendy's caliber to

wear the same accessory so often. Women at the top of the aristocratic hierarchy tended to own a wide variety of jewelry to show off their wealth, since wealth symbolized power.

If I pointed it out to her, she would probably interpret it as derision. That was somewhat understandable, considering some ladies liked to pick on their poorer peers by pointing it out when they wore the same thing twice. Even if Claudia only did it for conversation, Wendy was too combative to take such a comment at face value.

Louise snapped her fan shut, her mood soured. "I will acknowledge that Dee has the ability to draw other people in, but that is virtue, not something to be cautious of."

"You're clearly in the dark," Wendy shot back. "Or maybe you aren't, and you're simply covering for her, hmm? Regardless, I don't want anyone else falling victim to Lady Claudia's deceptions."

"I have no idea what you're referring to, Lady Wendy," Louise responded curtly.

Wendy acted as if she had proof of her claims, but they were so vague and obfuscated that she only succeeded in confusing people. Whatever the case, arguing the point would ruin the atmosphere completely. Claudia couldn't let the matter drag on—not in front of Niamilia, who was supposed to be the guest of honor for the day.

What a mess this is. Was stirring trouble the only reason Wendy had elected to join them at their table? That had to be it. She wanted to obstruct Claudia.

As Claudia debated how to change the subject to avoid further friction, her eyes met Niamilia's. The redheaded lady's gaze conveyed a silent request, asking Claudia to go along with what she was about to say.

"Well, um…I suppose I'll be cautious, then," Niamilia said carefully.

"Good," Wendy replied. "When it comes to Lady Claudia, keep in mind that you're speaking with a villainess."

Claudia frowned. "I'm sitting right here, you realize." She didn't fight the accusation beyond that, but she wasn't about to let it fly without expressing *some* disapproval.

Niamilia, meanwhile, had only agreed to placate Wendy so they could move on. The look she had given Claudia said everything; she didn't actually mean a word of it.

"At any rate, why don't we consider our conversation?" Niamilia said. "As long as Lady Wendy is present, I'm sure Lady Claudia will mind herself."

Wendy nodded approvingly, and at last they could continue the topic of exercise. Claudia enjoyed herself for the rest of the conversation, save for the part where Wendy spent the entire time scowling at her.

Once the party was over and everyone made to head home —and Wendy was already long gone—Niamilia flagged Claudia down.

"I'm sure you already know I wasn't speaking from the heart, but I have to apologize for how offensive that must have been," said Niamilia.

Claudia shook her head. "No need for that. If anything, I should be the one saying sorry for not managing the situation better." Her face fell. She felt bad that their guest had to walk on eggshells to smooth things over.

Niamilia flashed a bright smile back at her. "She must have some reason for her actions, but I really enjoyed our conversation, Lady Claudia."

"It means a lot to hear you say that. I'll be putting your regimen to the test as soon as possible."

"I would love that! If you have any questions, feel free to reach out and ask me! I can't tell you how happy I am that you're so interested in body sculpting." Claudia wasn't quite as dedicated as Niamilia, but their shared interest had brought them closer.

Claudia found herself smiling too. "You can come chat with me anytime."

"Of course, and the same goes for you. I look forward to it."

Their farewells were a bit cliché, but the warm expressions on their faces was proof of the easy friendship that was forming between the two. Their passion for body sculpting had all but made them comrades-in-arms.

Chapter 6:
The Foreign Lady Contemplates

BY THE TIME the tea party was over and Niamilia's carriage was leaving the castle grounds, the sky was stained ruby red as the sun began to set. *Had everything been set up properly, I could've hosted the party myself.*

She was staying at Parte Kingdom's embassy in Harland, but it unfortunately didn't have the requisite space for an event of that scale. Its event hall could only accommodate a small number of guests, since the building itself was only intended for diplomatic events. The size of a country's embassy was proportionate to the size of their kingdom, and since Parte wasn't a particularly wealthy nation, it could only afford to build a modest embassy. Consequently, its embassy felt more compact than the others, with its only real standout feature being the Parte emblem hanging proudly at the front of the building. The entrance otherwise looked quite crude, without so much as a flower bed for decoration.

Harland seems to think of us as little better than barbarians. People had ogled her with unrestrained curiosity at the party. It wasn't hard for her to understand why. Certain stereotypes circulated about her, based on how muscular and fit the delegates were and the way Parte prized strength. That was why she wished she could have held the tea party herself, to show people that Parte had more dimensions than they realized—that Parte's culture was no less refined than theirs. It would have helped to reassure the people here that she was more like them than they realized. Alas, they didn't have the appropriate venue for it, so there was nothing she could do.

I have to make sure that this masquerade ball succeeds. From the moment the decision came down that she would become Sylvester's bridal candidate, she had squeezed together all of her wit and creativity to come up with the plan for a masquerade ball.

A ball probably seemed like a pipe dream after she couldn't even hold a proper tea party here, but the attendees also needed time to put together their costumes, which gave her and the

delegates extra time to prepare as well. Parte had poured a lot of money and effort into altering the embassy for the occasion.

On the day of the masquerade ball, the embassy would have the event hall, the connecting rooms, and the rear gardens open for the evening. They would be using almost the entire first floor to ensure they could accommodate all of Harland's aristocrats. Of course, since they planned to use the gardens, all Niamilia could do was pray that there were clear skies on the day of the event.

As for Niamilia's lodging at the embassy, she had been given a room on the second floor. It was a fifth of the size of her personal quarters back in Parte, but she couldn't really complain. The Bendins were wealthy enough that they could've outright purchased an estate for her in Harland, but her father had waved off the option. He claimed there was no sense in it when she would inevitably be summoned to live with the prince in the royal castle anyway.

He certainly is confident. But she knew he would be; her father wouldn't have sent her all the way here to Harland if he wasn't convinced that they could push for a marriage between her and Sylvester.

Niamilia threw herself down on the nearest sofa. Her elderly chamberlain stood nearby. The man was nearing fifty at this point—a suave, gray-haired gentleman. His name was Darton, and he had long served the Bendins as a butler. For this particular occasion, he had relinquished his position as butler to his successor, instead volunteering to join Niamilia and serve as her chamberlain.

"Did you fill everyone in about my rules? Like the door?"

"Yes. All of the servants will obey without exception."

There were a few servants who had accompanied her like Darton, but the majority of the staff at the embassy weren't acquainted with her at all. It was up to Darton to inform them of her preferences and any other pertinent information. He had to be as detailed as possible if they were to avoid any issues in the future.

"Were you able to pick up anything useful at the tea party, Lady Nina?" Darton asked as he set down a fresh cup of black tea for her. The scent of it was so soothing that Niamilia's body instinctively relaxed, relieving all the built-up tension she didn't

even know she had. It warmed her heart having a protector like Darton at her side.

“I did. It was a productive event,” she said. “Her Majesty even made an appearance.”

Niamilia had been surprised by Wendy’s aggressive attitude toward Claudia, but it hadn’t affected her personally. She did think it was a good idea to keep an eye on the two and any developments that might occur.

“Harland Kingdom is split between the royal faction and the aristocratic faction, correct?”

“Precisely, my lady. Your fellow bridal candidate, Lady Claudia, is the daughter of Duke Lindsay, who maintains a position of neutrality between the two opposing sides.”

“It seems she is good friends with Lady Louise, whose family is part of the royal faction, and Lady Charlotte, whose family is part of the aristocratic faction.”

“I assume she isn’t so close with Lady Wendy.”

Niamilia choked out a small laugh. “That’s an understatement. They’re obviously enemies. That’s the only thing that differs from the intel we have, though.”

She had gathered as much information about the aristocrats and their relationships as possible before visiting Harland. Naturally, she paid special attention to the other bridal candidates. Based on that information, she knew Claudia and Wendy weren’t friends, but no one had mentioned anything about there being such friction between them. If Claudia occupied a neutral position like her family did, it made no sense why there would be any.

“Something must have happened to change their dynamic,” said Darton.

“Whatever it was, it was quite the dramatic change. Lady Claudia and all the other ladies appear to have been blindsided by it.” Niamilia only knew a little of Wendy based on what she could gather outside the country, but even the ladies closest to Wendy seemed flabbergasted by her antics. “Lady Wendy is the only one showing any hostility. It doesn’t seem to be part of a larger factional conflict.”

“Seems it would be best to keep tabs on the situation for now.”

Niamilia nodded, and it occurred to her that there was one thing she wanted to tell Darton about. “Oh, that’s right. Change of topic, but it seems Lady Claudia is into body sculpting as well!”

She filled him in on the details, including how excited she’d been to discuss it. Niamilia had never dreamed anyone here in Harland would be interested in such a thing. She doubted body sculpting even crossed the minds of most young noble ladies. Yet of all people, she had caught the attention of the woman widely renowned as the perfect noble lady. The two of them were basically rivals due to their status as bridal candidates, but Niamilia didn’t know many people here in Harland, so she was glad to find someone she could be herself with.

“She said she would try out the workouts I shared with her right away,” Niamilia went on.

“Don’t you think that might be dangerous if she doesn’t have a coach to oversee her?”

She wagged a finger at him. “Do you really think I’d teach her something that could mess up her body? Of course not! Besides, I think Lady Claudia is perfectly capable of judging her limits.”

“You think she’s a veteran?”

“I would say she’s experienced. The way you put it makes it sound like we’re in the military.”

And in fact, that wasn’t entirely far from the truth. Darton had visited a number of different countries and regions while he was working as a mercenary, well before he ever became a butler. He had made such a name for himself that many had wanted him to take a position as a commander, but Darton was not only an exemplary warrior but also a man of many talents. That was why, in the end, he settled into his position as the Bendins’ butler.

Darton still had rippling, bulging muscles all over his body, and Niamilia knew they were covered in countless scars. She also knew that the other servants in her family’s estate referred to him as the demonic instructor. Whatever his past, she found her time with him the most comfortable and relaxing. That was partly because he was the only person who referred to her as Nina.

“She knew a lot about muscles and exercise. She had a beautiful posture the entire time, so I can tell she’s trained her core.”

“Coming from you, that must be true.”

At that, Niamilia shook her head. “You have a sharper eye for these things than I do.”

“Oh dear, that is troubling to hear. If your ability to judge others has fallen that much, perhaps we need to revisit your training.” His blue eyes gleamed dangerously.

Panicked, Niamilia blurted back, “No! My judgment is perfectly solid!”

She didn’t need to put herself at the mercy of the demonic instructor—because that was what he’d been for *her* too. Most ladies of her rank had been pardoned from her country’s compulsory fitness regimen, but her father had insisted on a specialized routine to keep her fit. Darton was the one who had planned her workouts and acted as her mentor. Where the other servants whispered in secret about him being a demonic instructor, she had experienced the full extent of it firsthand.

Niamilia let out a long, drawn-out sigh. “That’s a bad habit of yours, always trying to force in more training sessions anytime you see an opportunity.”

“I am merely providing what services I am able.”

Her lips pressed into a thin, taut line at his smooth deflection of her complaints. He was even older than her father, which made it difficult to order him around like a chamberlain. It would still take some time and experience before she managed that.

Chapter 7:
The Villainess and the Crown Prince Confront the Problem

THE SUN BEAT DOWN, casting silhouettes of the horses. Inside the carriage swaying behind them were a man and woman of impressive social status.

“I didn’t imagine our solution to this problem would be to leave the capital,” said Claudia.

“As far as everyone else is concerned, you haven’t left at all, Dia.”

The carriage was decorated with the royal family’s emblem, and they had a number of knights riding alongside them in formation. Sylvester was traveling to perform his official duties as prince, and she had jumped on the opportunity to join him. To give her the freedom to move about, she had to hide her identity, and so she had stolen away with Sylvester in secret. The aforementioned freedom this whole plan afforded her came at greater risk to her personal safety, so they took as many safety precautions as possible.

Claudia and Sylvester’s objectives for this trip were one and the same: gather intel. The two would separate halfway through their trip to each gather information in different locations on how to prevent this war with Parte. For Claudia, this was a unique learning opportunity and another reason she had to keep her identity under wraps.

“I assume you left the problems in the capital up to Ruki to take care of?” said Sylvester.

“Yes. Who better to deal with issues in the underworld than someone who already works in it? He’s more familiar with these things than I am.”

By “things,” Claudia meant the robbery and murder of the noble lord on his way home from the brothel. He had been a member of the aristocratic party. Wendy claimed that Claudia was behind it, that she had ordered her syndicate to carry out the attack. Claudia had no idea where she came up with such a thing, but she acted with such confidence that Claudia had to assume she had some basis for her accusations. If there was any truth to her claims, then it deserved investigating.

“She was right about me being the leader of a newly established syndicate. That doesn’t mean all the information she has is correct, though,” said Claudia.

Wendy’s accusation that Claudia was the mastermind behind the recent attacks on nobles was entirely untrue. She might have been able to dismiss such absurd claims if not for the possibility that someone had reached out to the underworld to get the job done. A different syndicate might very well be responsible, and the authorities would have trouble pursuing that line of inquiry on their own.

“So we’ll have to hope Ruki can solve the issue on his own,” Sylvester concluded.

“Yes, and he seemed quite motivated when I spoke to him.”

Ruki struck Claudia as a man who disliked taking orders, yet to her great surprise, he’d been eager to accept her request. If he couldn’t come up with any answers, then she would have no choice but to throw in the towel on this matter.

Sylvester leaned forward in his seat. “What I want to know is where she’s getting her information.”

“I doubt she would tell us, even if we begged.”

Regarding the accusation that Claudia was in league with the United Kingdom of Arakaner, people could cast as many aspersions as they wanted based simply on the fact that she had a trading firm in their territory. The part about her having ties to the syndicate was notably different; it wasn’t publicly available information, and it wasn’t something a noble lady would come up with on her own.

“We’re looking into everyone around Lady Wendy to see if we can’t identify the source, but it’ll take some time before we have anything concrete,” said Sylvester.

If this source—whoever they were—realized that someone was looking into them, they’d make a run for it. Sylvester and his agents had to proceed with caution.

“When problems like this crop up one after the other, it really makes you turn to the heavens to ask why,” Claudia expressed with a shake of her head. Were they being tested by the Capricious God? Whatever the case, she was more in the mood to decompress than rack her brain for answers that wouldn’t come.

“If it was only Lady Wendy’s word against yours, we could ignore her accusations,” said Sylvester. “Now that Lord Thomas of the royal faction has latched on to them, it makes things more difficult.”

The Lindsays maintained their neutrality, but at parties and social events, Claudia was always surrounded by lords and ladies of the royal faction. Despite that affiliation, Lord Thomas didn’t seem to like her.

“I suspect,” Sylvester went on, “that Lord Thomas was the one who leaked the information about Lady Niamilia to Lady Wendy.”

Few people knew about the motion, and anyone who opposed it wouldn’t want to acknowledge the matter publicly. They would keep their mouths shut. Only those who approved would have motivation to publicize it early.

“You think Lord Thomas is going to join forces with the aristocratic faction?” asked Claudia.

“He could for this one matter, if it means weakening your family. He might even make a deal with Parte to accomplish that.”

Her jaw dropped. “You think he’d involve Parte too?”

“Knowing that crafty old badger, I wouldn’t be surprised if he meant to make you and Lady Niamilia take each other out so they can push Lady Louise to be my fiancée instead.” The way Sylvester described Thomas made it sound like the man looked down on Parte as a minor nation with little importance, a cogwheel inside a much larger machine. “And if Lady Niamilia got in the way of his plans, he’d find a way to get rid of her—even if it meant war. He isn’t the kind of man who concerns himself with the casualties it would cause.”

Claudia nodded slowly as she took in all this information. “You mean he doesn’t care for what happens to anything or anyone outside his own territory.”

Thomas’s domain was far from the country’s borders, near the middle of the kingdom. He didn’t have to worry much about his people suffering if they went to war.

“I think Parte’s common folk may have a greater ambition for war than our aristocrats do,” said Sylvester.

Not all of the lords and ladies in Harland shared Thomas's view. Nonetheless, having lived in peace for so many decades, few of them truly understood the implications of war. Even Claudia's knowledge of war was limited to what she'd read in books. That was partly why she'd made the decision to visit Marquess Sasriel's region, which sat along Harland's border with Parte.

"Dia, as much as I hope that your trip will prove fruitful for you, I must caution you once more not to put yourself at risk."

Claudia smiled at him. "I'll be careful not to. Trust me, my brother already gave me an earful."

Since the word "war" had entered the discussion, everyone in Harland was being much more cautious when it came to Parte Kingdom. Even though they were still in diplomatic negotiations and Parte Kingdom's army hadn't made any threatening moves against them, no one wanted to take chances.

There were several fortresses between the border and the city Claudia planned to stay in during her visit. Assuming the situation did devolve and war broke out, she wouldn't be in immediate danger, at the very least. The circumstances also provided her an ideal opportunity to visit somewhere close to the front lines and learn firsthand what it was like.

"If there's even a remote possibility of danger, I'll return home immediately," Claudia promised, like a recitation she'd been forced to say before. "Besides, the people I've brought along with me wouldn't allow me to do otherwise."

It was only the two of them in this carriage, but following further behind them was another carriage with people in it. Tristan was, like always, accompanying Sylvester for this trip, but he was riding farther back since Claudia had decided suddenly to join them for the trip.

"I hope that's true." Sylvester shook his head. "The problem is that few people can say no to you when you insist on doing something."

"On the contrary, I wouldn't risk putting the people with me in danger."

He paused and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Interesting. Yes, you make a good argument there."

She sighed. “I don’t remember doing anything so risky as to make you worry in the first place.”

“You haven’t, no, but you always take such initiative with these things that I thought it prudent to drive home the point. You’re the only lady in the kingdom who would think to visit Marquess Sasriel’s region at a time like this, you realize.”

“This is the exact sort of time that one should visit if they want to gain anything from it,” Claudia insisted.

It would be pointless to go when there was no tension between their nations. This tense air of potential conflict had pushed her to make the decision.

“I understand. I agree that it’s a good learning opportunity.” Sylvester also knew there were no real threats to her as long as she stayed in Harland, and to get any real experience, Claudia would need to go visit a place less insulated than the capital. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t still worry about you.” He reached out and took her hand, his touch as tender as if he were stroking the petals of a flower.

Claudia’s expression softened, her eyes less sharp and piercing than usual. “I could say the same. I worry about you as well, so make sure you don’t take any unnecessary risks either.” She squeezed his hand. The warmth that transferred through their touch provided extra encouragement to both of them.

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Stars glittered overhead by the time they reached the region directly under the royal family’s control, where Sylvester would conduct his business. This was one of the areas recently returned to the royal family after the liege lord could no longer afford to carry out his duties. It sat right next to Marquess Sasriel’s territory. The name of the lord who had been responsible for this area before the royal family took over was the earl Lord Hoskins—Helen’s father.

Although Claudia and Sylvester would split up to fulfill their own respective agendas, Claudia was taking a short break here before she continued on to Marquess Sasriel’s region. She would stay in the former earl’s estate in the meantime.

As Helen prepared the room for her mistress, she murmured, “So His Highness is here for an official inspection of the royal family’s new territory.”

“Yes,” Claudia said, “but his real objective is to collect information about Parte as soon as possible and personally hand out orders to the officials here.”

It took substantially more time for information to reach the capital than it did a region closer to the border. As much as Sylvester might have liked to have gone to the marquess’s region with her and been closer to the front lines, societal rules prevented him from doing so. Regional lords didn’t appreciate interference from the royal family.

No matter the royal family’s reasoning, an unwelcome stay sent the message that they didn’t trust the lord to govern adequately, and it bred mistrust between them. The royal family couldn’t very well risk the bond of trust that was supposed to exist between them and the lords who served them. A royal needed a proper excuse to leave the capital, which came in the form of an official duty. Excuse or not, Sylvester couldn’t cut corners when it came to his duties, so he would have to follow all the normal formalities regardless. Once he was done, he planned to pay a visit to Sasriel and greet the marquess.

“I never thought I’d visit our region again.” Helen stopped herself short and shook her head. “No, sorry, *former* region.”

After Helen finished making the bed for Claudia, her gaze wandered to the window. It was pitch black outside. However hard she squinted, she wouldn’t be able to make out anything, but that nostalgic twinkle in her eye said she was reflecting on bygone days. Claudia silently appreciated Helen’s expression in profile and let her have this moment.

The servants at the former earl’s estate were the same ones who’d been employed there before the earl gave up his title. They all remembered Helen and had been moved to tears upon her unexpected return.

“I was surprised,” Helen said. “I thought they would’ve already forgotten me by now.”

“They must have really loved you.”

It made perfect sense to Claudia that they would, given Helen's personality. Helen had probably been extremely kind to them even when she was a noble lady. And it wasn't just her, either. Every single servant was relieved to hear that even after having lost their status, the Hoskins were still living happily.

"The people here loved the way your father ruled," Claudia said.

"Do you truly think so?"

She nodded. "There wasn't a single dry eye when they saw you."

The former earl had returned his title after encountering financial difficulties. Unfortunately, his region didn't produce enough wealth to keep them afloat, yet he refused to increase taxes and put any additional burden on his people. The man didn't possess the requisite skills to administer his region. At the same time, he hadn't resorted to underhanded measures to keep himself afloat. Sylvester had told her that they conducted an investigation after the earl returned his title and found his people held no ill will toward him.

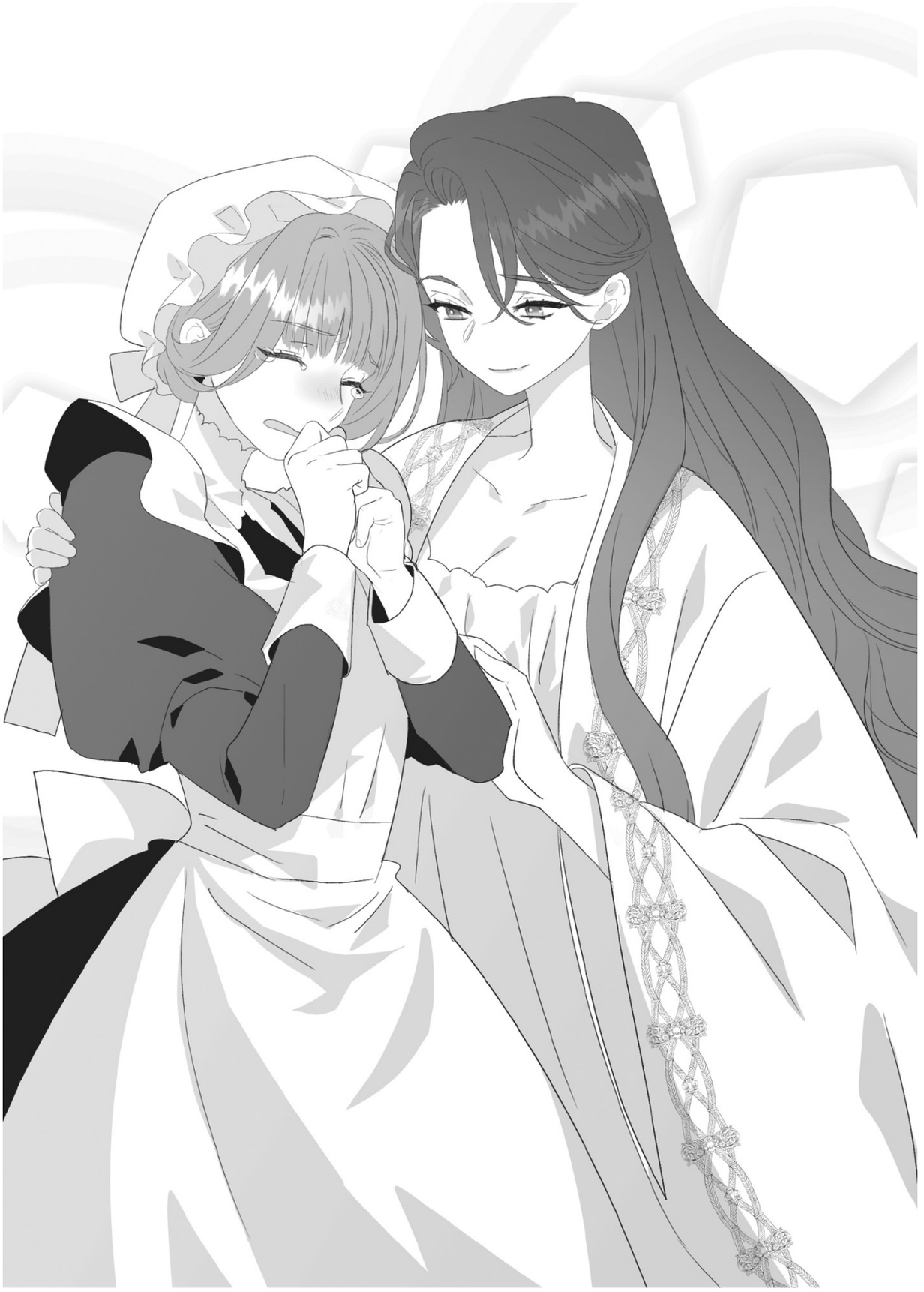
"I think my father would be overjoyed to hear that," said Helen.

Claudia smiled and wrapped her arms around Helen. "Yes, I think you should tell him as much when you go back home." Helen trembled in Claudia's embrace, a sob leaking past her lips.

It had taken Claudia some deliberation to decide whether to stay here. She knew they needed to rest their horses at some point—that they couldn't make their way straight to Sasriel—but she'd been afraid of upsetting Helen by stopping in the area. When she'd broached the subject, she framed it in such a way that they could make alternate plans if Helen wasn't comfortable. To her surprise, Helen was eager to revisit her home.

As Helen explained it, it wasn't that she didn't trust the royal family to take care of her former region and its people. She simply wanted to see for herself that her people were happy and thriving. Claudia couldn't deny her that.

Tomorrow morning, they would visit a few nearby places before setting out for Sasriel.



“I’m trusting you to guide me around,” said Claudia.

“Of course. There’s somewhere I want to take you.”

Claudia pressed a hand over her lips, hiding her mirth. “Oh? I look forward to it, then.”

Helen averted her eyes. “Well, I should preface it by saying it’s nothing special, so I hope you won’t get your hopes up too much.”

“It’s special to you, isn’t it? That makes it special to me too.”

Besides, Claudia wasn’t staying here for her own enjoyment. It was far more important to her to share this time with Helen, to see what she saw and feel what she felt.

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When Claudia and Helen left through the estate’s front entrance the next morning, they were blinded by amber rays of sunshine. Surprisingly, the estate didn’t look much different in the sun than it had outlined in darkness the night before. It sat proudly over the surrounding landscape, reflecting years and years of history. It was weathered and worn in places, some of its decorations having crumbled away, but it maintained the same majesty as it likely had in its glory days. That said, with repairs still ongoing, the scaffolding for the construction workers did stand out.

“I cannot begin to express how grateful I am that the administrative official now living here has decided to keep the estate as is,” said Helen, having picked up on the same details as Claudia.

The official Helen was referring to was a representative of the royal family who oversaw affairs here personally. Given their elevated status and the expectations that came with it, they wouldn’t make a move unless it was absolutely necessary. The official must have felt that the estate had value as it was, which was why they hadn’t chosen to make any alterations.

And it was the former earl who gave this estate its value. If the estate had been a negative symbol to the citizens of the region, then the official would have had it destroyed as soon as possible.

To Claudia, that spoke to the former earl's many achievements in a way that wasn't immediately obvious to most people. It also made it painfully clear that accomplishments and goodwill were not enough to run an entire region. *If we don't shake ourselves out of this funk, we'll be stuck grieving for what was instead of appreciating what it is.*

Determined not to waste a single moment, Claudia said, "I'm glad to see it's so sunny out." She hummed as she stretched and drank in the morning air, which was remarkably crisp and clean. She had to smile when she caught Helen fidgeting beside her out of the corner of her eye.

"Um, are you sure about this?" Helen asked.

"A maid is free to spend her morning break however she likes."

"Yes, but there's no need for you to pretend—"

"Pretend? All I'm doing is wearing the same dress as you, Helen. Besides, I'm a civil official right now."

As far as everyone was concerned, Duke Lindsay's daughter was still in the capital. Claudia was masquerading as a high-ranking civil official to keep her identity secret at this estate. More importantly, she was Helen's friend. There was no reason why two friends couldn't go out and have some fun. To that end, she wore a more modest dress than usual, which seemed to be bothering Helen. It was rather plain and made of cheap fabric, but it wasn't unpleasant to wear. The fact that it had no extra embellishments made it a breeze to slip on; all she had to do was pull it over her head. She was also wearing flats rather than heels. And to make it all even easier, she had tossed her hair into a simple ponytail.

"Now that I know how easy this is, I might be reluctant to wear gowns again," said Claudia, spinning in place.

Helen frowned. "It is easier, I'll admit…" Her voice trailed off, but she could see Claudia's point. She herself had once been part of the aristocracy, forced to adorn herself in the same sort of complex outfits. "But I enjoy dressing you up, Lady Claudia."

"Oh, honestly, as if you don't enjoy the practicality of it." Claudia shook her head. "And another thing: while I'm here, you need to call me 'Dee.'"

The name Claudia wasn't exactly rare, but anyone familiar with Sylvester would immediately think of his bridal candidate. She wanted to use her nickname to avoid the association.

"Come on, practice it for me," Claudia ordered.

Helen hesitated and then stammered, "D-Dee."

Claudia snapped her mouth shut. Even though she'd been the one who forced Helen to say it, Helen's bashfulness rendered her speechless. Heat built up in her cheeks. "Y-you'll make me feel awkward if you act all embarrassed about it!" she finally blurted.

"I can't help it!"

They were both blushing furiously now.

"Excuse me," Brian interjected. "As much as it pains me to interrupt the two of you, we will run out of time if we don't leave soon." He smiled, scratching the back of his head.

Lestea stepped forward and bowed at the waist. "Your hand, if you would, my liege." She was wearing a dark wig over her blue hair to hide her identity. They'd gone the extra mile in disguising her out of an abundance of caution. She was dressed as a merchant to match Brian, wearing a gray vest with brown slacks and a beret atop her wig.

She and Brian were the two accompanying Claudia on her trip to Sasriel. In fact, it was all thanks to Brian that Claudia had managed to keep a low profile so far. The Evans Company was providing a cover for her; her knights had disguised themselves as mercenaries hired by the Evans family. While it would have been better to cut down on costs by taking as few bodyguards with her as possible, that wasn't an option with the potential danger involved. At the same time, she couldn't risk standing out by having a whole contingent following her around, so most were hidden inside one of the cargo carriages.

Lestea, meanwhile, had been a last-minute addition.

It took great restraint for Claudia not to sigh at Lestea's antics. She wasn't even trying to hide her allegiances in front of Brian. The baron's son had been intensely skeptical of letting Lestea tag along at first, given that she was supposed to be Raul's right hand. When Claudia assured him it wouldn't be a problem, he was quick to drop the issue. Lestea must have recognized that

as a sign of his loyalty, which was all the more reason that she saw no point in hiding the truth.

"I suppose," Claudia said flippantly, setting her hand in Lestea's palm. "Let's be on our way."

Lestea escorted her to the Evans' carriage. She and Helen settled in side by side, with Lestea across from Claudia and Brian across from Helen.

"Everything feels so nostalgic," said Helen. She gazed out the small window in the carriage, her expression bright enough to rival the sun. Even Claudia had experienced some grief over everything Helen had lost, but Helen showed no indication that she was dismayed by it.

"You know," said Claudia, "you could stay here and accompany Syl."

"I couldn't possibly!" Helen vigorously shook her head. "I'm going with *you*, Lady Claudia!" Claudia had thought it a good idea, but Helen clearly felt otherwise. "I'm satisfied with just a short trip to see the nearby sights, and I already had the opportunity to hear about how things are going here from the staff at the estate." She smiled contentedly.

From the way Helen spoke, it sounded like she had come to terms with everything. Her face was as cheerful and unclouded as the skies outside—and likely why Brian was smiling so warmly.

The scenery they passed by was quaint and unexciting. There were rolling fields dotted with farmers tending to their crops. The only difference between this area of Harland and the Lindsays' own territory was the mountain range in the background. The horizon wasn't visible in the distance. Instead, the plains ended abruptly, giving way to jagged peaks.

The place Helen wanted to show Claudia was a hillock. Her bodyguards, dressed as mercenaries, rode ahead to ensure the area was safe.

"We will be walking to the summit, but it won't take long," said Helen.

Since an earl's daughter frequented the area, there was a proper—if simple—path up to the top.

"Thank goodness I'm not in heels," said Claudia.

“Yes,” agreed Helen. “Even though the path here is decently maintained, the earth is a bit soft.”

As they climbed the gentle slope upward, they came to a cluster of trees. Claudia didn’t think much of it until they were close enough for her to spot what sat in the middle.

She gasped. “Goodness, that is an enormous boulder!”

In the center of the copse of trees was a boulder at least three times her size. The surrounding flora had no choice but to make room for it.

Helen giggled. “Are you surprised? Well, that’s not all. The boulder has its own mystery.”

“It does?”

The maid grinned, happy to impart this bit of knowledge. “You would expect this boulder to have been here from the start, right? But whatever it’s made of is completely different from the other rocks in the area.”

“It couldn’t have been carried here, could it?”

Even at a glance, Claudia could tell that was near impossible. There were no cracks in the boulder, so if it had been carried, it had been carried here whole. And it was far too big for anyone to do something like that. Even if someone tried to use horses or cows to cart it up here, no cart would have been able to withstand the weight.

“We have no idea why it isn’t like the other rocks,” Helen answered honestly. “Perhaps it’s a mere coincidence. Some scholars have even come to study it and see if they can figure out the mystery, but it remains unsolved.” She reached out fondly and ran her hand over its bumpy surface. “The children like to play on it.”

The boulder was thick at the base and tapered slightly to a narrower top. Its surface had enough bumps and divots in it for a child to climb up it.

“They play on something this tall?!” Claudia asked in disbelief.

“Amazing, isn’t it? I was shocked when I first came here and one of them called down to me from the top. I wanted to join them, but my maids wouldn’t let me.”

Brian found a foothold to see if it really was possible to climb. “Wow, you’re right! This is easier to scale than it looks.”

Claudia’s knights informed her that they had already climbed it beforehand to make sure it was safe, upon which she immediately asked, “Then could I climb it?”

“Please don’t,” Helen said.

“We could climb it together,” Claudia suggested.

Helen smiled bitterly. “As appealing as your offer is, your knights are vehemently shaking their heads.”

Lestea perked up. “You could use me as a step stool to help you get up.”

Claudia shook her head. “No, thank you.” She wasn’t *that* interested in climbing it. Instead, she gazed at it and sighed in appreciation. “You said where you were taking me wasn’t that special, but I think this is plenty special.”

“Actually, this isn’t our final destination,” Helen said.

“It’s not?” Claudia had figured this boulder was exactly what Helen wanted her to see. She couldn’t help but wonder what else there could be.

“There’s a really good overlook just a little farther on.” Helen started forward, and everyone quickly tagged along behind her. They moved through the copse to a clearing, where the summit was. With nothing else around, it gave almost a complete view of the surrounding area, save for the trees and boulders that obstructed the scenery behind them. Vast plots of farmland rolled out before Claudia, the same as she had seen on the carriage ride here.

“This is what I wanted to show you,” said Helen.

She had been right when she told Claudia it would be nothing special, but somehow, Claudia could understand the emotions it stirred in Helen.

A cool breeze caressed Claudia’s carefully bound hair. Being up here drained all the tension from her shoulders. It reminded her of how time seemed to flow differently—slowly—when she returned home to her family’s region, far from the hustle and bustle of the capital. Perhaps Helen used to feel the same when she came up here.

“It’s a wonderful view,” she told Helen, and she genuinely meant it.

Helen smiled. “There’s something about the ordinariness of it that’s strangely comforting. It makes you realize just how precious the monotony of daily life is.”

Life didn’t always need to have a spark of excitement. Sometimes it was fine to let the sands of time simply carry you along. It was practically a message from nature that one didn’t need to change or be more than they already were, or so that seemed to be Helen’s interpretation.

What a beautiful human being, Claudia thought as she gazed at her friend’s profile. Helen’s eyes were filled with such fondness, a twinkle of love keeping them alight. It warmed Claudia’s heart because she particularly liked seeing this expression on Helen’s face. Even with all the changes that came in this new timeline, Helen would always be Helen. Claudia was happy simply being with her.

“I also found myself wanting to protect the normal lives of all the people here,” Helen added.

As an aristocrat, the daughter of a regional lord, Helen had wanted to ensure her people’s continued prosperity. She wasn’t able to, due to the fall of her house, but the royal family was doing so in her place. The best proof of their success was the fact that the view here hadn’t changed.

“Speaking to our former servants at the estate yesterday made me truly grateful that I was born here in Harland.” She turned to Claudia and gently took her hand. “And that’s why I will go with you to the border region.” If she was allowed to decide her own path, then she wished to protect her own daily life. She stared straight into Claudia’s blue eyes.

“Thank you. I’m glad to have you with me,” Claudia said. She had resolved to respect Helen’s wishes either way.

“And I’m glad to be with you, my lady. I swear to do my utmost to serve you!” Since all the people present were close friends, Helen didn’t hesitate to express her dedication as Claudia’s servant. Her insistence on maintaining that relationship had once hurt Claudia’s feelings, given that the two had been on equal footing during their brothel days, but no longer. Claudia

accepted that Helen was her maid, while also being her best friend and older sister figure. Their closeness allowed them to appreciate this view together. And with that, Claudia was anxious to see what else Helen had to show her.

"Shall we be on our way to the shopping district next?"

"Certainly! I'll take you to a bakery where you can get fresh bread."

"And you'll call me 'Dee' while we're there, right?"

"Hrk! Um, yes..." Helen's cheeks flushed, which made Claudia feel self-conscious too. The embarrassment made her stomach flutter, but once the two of them were used to the new form of address, it wouldn't cause such a strong reaction in either of them.

Part of me is anxious for that to happen, and another part of me is reluctant. It was selfish of her, Claudia knew, but she couldn't help it. And with that, her group turned and left the hillock behind.

Chapter 8:
The Assassin Moves Swift and Sure

THE CAPITAL'S DOWNTOWN area bustled with crowds at night, as if no one had a care in the world about the recent murder that had yet to be solved.

Ruki skillfully weaved through the masses of people, his face hidden by his hood. Rose, the leader of their newly established syndicate, Rose Garden, had just passed down new orders for him. He found himself grinning as he recalled the moment. *Nah, that wasn't really a command. It was more like a favor.*

Bezel was the one in charge of overseeing operations within the syndicate, but if not for Rose, there was no telling what might have happened to them. None of their members were foolish enough to forget all she had done for them. Honestly, she had every right to command them in whichever way she wanted, but when she spoke to Bezel and Ruki, she treated them like equals…

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"I assume you've heard of the aristocrat who was robbed and murdered on his way home from the brothel," she'd said, dressed in a flattering suit rather than a gown when she came to visit. It was her usual "Rose" getup.

Ruki sometimes acted as a body double for his half-brother, Seraphim, the crown prince of the United Kingdom of Arakaner. Even with that experience, he was surprised to see how well Claudia pulled off her disguise. *Feels completely natural,* he thought. It was unexpected, considering how highly she was touted as the perfect noble lady.

"Yeah," Bezel replied, his hand on his chin. "The authorities are having a tough time. They even came to ask us about it." He had initially tried to act subservient when speaking to Claudia, but she soon realized how unnatural it was, so he'd since dropped all pretense. "Why? Is the matter on your mind too?"

"I'm interested in the truth," said Claudia. "If it's simply a random attack, then that's fine. If it isn't, I want to know."

“Hm. Since the authorities haven’t been able to catch ’em, I’ve got a feelin’ it ain’t just a random attack,” Ruki chimed in.

Thieves were usually easy to locate, as they tended to cash in on their spoils quickly. There were backdoor deals for that sort of thing, but the authorities would be checking those avenues too. Those with their own connections for fencing stolen goods typically planned out their thievery beforehand. So the question became this: was the murder premeditated or was it committed on impulse? Claudia was concerned about the former. If the victim had been targeted, then there had to be a reason for it.

“You two know a lot more about the underworld than the authorities do,” she reasoned. “Is there anything about this that sticks out to you? Something they might not have noticed?”

Bezel shrugged. “Haven’t paid any attention to the matter, to be honest with you. How about you, Ruki?”

“I’ve got nothin’ either. But if it’s weighin’ on you, Boss Lady, why don’t we look into it for you?”

She nodded. “Could I ask you to do that?”

Ruki guffawed. “Course you can. The government might own the brothels now, but this used to be our turf.”

Ever since the brothels came under the supervision of parliament, the syndicate had relinquished its hold on them. But this was a very recent development, so Ruki was still familiar with most of the women working there.

“All right, then please look into it. But if you sense danger at any point, you’re free to withdraw.”

“Yep, you got it.”

After that, Ruki watched her leave with a big grin on his face.

Conversely, Bezel kept a perfectly blank expression. He reached up and scrubbed his hand over his bald head. “Kind of an odd feeling, isn’t it?” he said, suggesting he felt the same way Ruki did about this.

“Odd, maybe, but it ain’t bad.”

“Yeah. Not bad,” Bezel agreed.

Soon they were smirking at one another in the dank darkness of their underground headquarters. Back when they were under Cardinal Nigel’s thumb, they hadn’t been able to

refuse his orders. Worse, he had shown them no mercy. They couldn't even begin to count all the people who had died because of Nigel. Everything had changed drastically since Claudia took over.

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"She actually *asked* me if I didn't mind," Ruki mused aloud.

Claudia had framed it like he actually had a choice, and knowing her, she'd probably been genuine about giving him the option to refuse. It made him doubt his own ears, especially when he'd experienced firsthand how unforgiving society was. Each time he played back her request in his mind, he couldn't help but smile.

I'm glad I got her to be our leader. They hadn't lost a single one of their members since her takeover.

"Guess I should check in with the ladies and see what they know first."

Ruki figured the authorities had already gone poking around with the courtesans, but their business hinged on maintaining customers' privacy. Trust was paramount, so they probably wouldn't divulge much to the authorities. Most still considered Ruki family, meaning they'd be more likely to let something spill with him.

No sooner did he turn to head for the red-light district than a ruckus broke out behind him. He spun around.

"Ruki!" called a fellow Rose Garden member. "Someone took out Toya! At the pub one street over!" Toya was also one of their members.

"Oh yeah?" Ruki's black cloak fluttered as he whirled away in the direction of the pub.

Once inside, it wasn't hard to figure out who was responsible for the violence; all the other customers had given the culprits a wide berth. The scoundrels had plunked themselves down and were throwing back tankards.

"We already retrieved Toya," whispered the member who followed him to the pub. "Thankfully, he survived their attack."

“Yeah, one thing Toya’s got goin’ for him is that he’s damn near impossible to take out,” said Ruki. At least that was one less thing to worry about. He could focus on observing the enemy now. Being an assassin, Ruki knew from experience how important it was to investigate a target thoroughly before making a move.

Other members of Rose Garden had gathered at the pub upon hearing the news. They hung back, awaiting Ruki’s orders. They trusted him fully.

Four of ’em, eh? They’re no amateurs, then.

From the ruffians’ threatening aura to the way they carried themselves, they were no different from members of Rose Garden. They were bulky, buff men—each with a tattoo on his arm. All the tattoos were the same, so Ruki knew instantly that they were also members of a syndicate.

Many underworld organizations had members get tattoos as proof of their affiliation. Rose Garden had no such rule, but lately, plenty of Ruki’s cohorts had been getting rose tattoos anyway. They were a source of pride, no different from the way nobles liked to show off their house crests. For the leader of a syndicate, having members get tattoos instilled a deeper sense of unity among them; there was no reason *not* to enforce getting them.

Only downside is that it makes it really obvious which syndicate a person belongs to. Although that could also be an upside, depending on the circumstances.

Sailors often got tattoos so that if they died at sea and their body was found, they could be identified. It was much the same for those in the underworld; most who died did so in grisly ways. Even though they weren’t out at sea—and therefore unlikely to be found as waterlogged corpses—they were often mutilated enough that the tattoos came in handy.

Still, what’re guys from another syndicate doin’ here? Either they’re complete idiots, or they’re tryin’ to start somethin’.

While most syndicates operated independent of one another, there were unspoken rules between them. The first of which was that a person shouldn’t go messing around in another syndicate’s territory. You only did that when you wanted to pick a fight. Unfortunately, those at the bottom of the hierarchy were

sometimes too foolish to abide by that rule. New initiates would get a big head about their barely official membership and, for whatever reason, think themselves invincible.

Which ain't that big of a problem as long as they're on their home turf. It was when one stepped into someone else's territory that their actions became the trigger for much larger problems. All of this led back to the same question: were they idiots, or were they here with a purpose? *Most of the time, they're just idiots.*

It had been a year since Rose Garden's founding. Their name was still new, even if the members and organization itself were no different from when they called themselves Dragoon. Everyone, including the authorities, knew that they controlled the underworld in the capital and its surrounding area. Few were willing to challenge a group as powerful as Rose Garden. They'd have to be awfully combative to want to do that. If such a syndicate existed, Rose Garden would have heard something about it by now. As of yet, they had not.

Since they were able to take down Toya, I won't be able to beat 'em with strength alone. Toya worked at this pub as a bouncer, and he was one of their strongest members. These men had to be tough to go toe-to-toe with him and win. Ruki couldn't deny that. But even with that disadvantage, it wasn't like he was out of options.

"These guys in the capital are weaklings!" bellowed one of the ruffians.

"That so?" Ruki shot back, stepping forward. His sudden entrance sent a wave of tension rippling through the room. He scooped an empty bottle off the floor and lunged at his target. Light caught the glass as he swung down and smashed it against the man's head. Slivers clung to the man's hair, which Ruki grabbed in a tight fist. "You look like a sturdy fella, but what about your carotid artery?" He pressed the jagged edge of the bottle against the man's throat.

No matter how much a person worked out or bulked up, it didn't make them invulnerable. Plus, Ruki knew more than most about how the body worked. As the seconds trickled by, blood oozed from the man's skin. His instincts had finally kicked in when he realized the danger, and he froze, lips trembling.

"Wh-wha...?"

“You’ll die if you move even an inch, y’know? Not that I care either way.” Ruki’s cold eyes scanned the faces of the man’s cohorts. There was a darkness in his gray eyes that reflected no light. Inebriated as the men were, they knew right away that he wasn’t playing around—that he was the type of person who could kill someone without hesitation.

Ruki had a waiflike figure compared to Toya. He could never beat Toya in terms of strength. But when it came to actual battle, Ruki was leagues ahead of him. No one in Rose Garden knew more ways to kill a man than Ruki did. He was a reaper swathed in black.



He smiled at the men. “You guys have any idea where you’re at right now? Outsiders ain’t allowed to walk in here and do whatever they want.” To punctuate his statement, he brought the broken bottle down in a diagonal arc, slamming it against the man’s head two more times. It didn’t matter how sturdy his body was; any person was vulnerable to having their brain rattled.

Black cloak flapping behind him, Ruki danced past the man, who collapsed to the floor with a concussion. He had no plans of letting any of them leave here unscathed, not after what they’d done to Toya.

Ruki’s next target tried to resist, but he was too slow. Ruki himself was a shadowy blur, though something in his hand gleamed when it briefly caught the light.

“I’ll ask you again: where do you think you’re at?” Ruki repeated, even as the man closest to him howled and collapsed to the ground, a knife protruding from each calf. Unfortunately for them, Ruki was always armed and ready for anything.

“Y-you aren’t fighting fair!” hollered one of the remaining ruffians, spit flying from his mouth.

“Ain’t no such thing as fair or unfair when it comes to life.” Fighting between drunks was likely prohibited at this establishment, but the bouncer they’d knocked out for trying to shoo them when they got too rambunctious was Ruki’s comrade-in-arms. “You guys crossed the line first.”

“Our syndicate isn’t going to take this lying down!”

Ruki burst into uncontrollable laughter. “Aha ha ha!”

So that’s it. They’re idiots to the core. It was obvious they didn’t understand the situation they were in.

As ridiculous as Ruki must have looked standing there cackling, the two drunks looked equally hilarious standing there with weapons in their hands. They actually thought that they could beat Ruki since they had the advantage of numbers. *How can any person be so stupid?*

The two fools had come here to another syndicate’s territory. Did they really expect that their only enemy in the room was the one they could see? The only reason the rest of Rose Garden hadn’t surrounded them was because they were standing back so as not to get in Ruki’s way.

The two men hunched low, ready to attack. Their actions brought a wry grin to Ruki's lips. "Since it seems like you don't know, I'll tell you: this here's Rose Garden territory."

Either they didn't hear him or they were too focused on trying to beat him, as they didn't back down. One brandished an empty bottle, while another sprang forward with a knife. It was all too easy to combat them when they weren't the least bit coordinated to begin with.

The pub had groups of tables and chairs all throughout the room. Normally, its floors were kept clean to accommodate the foot traffic, but they were covered in bottles and plates thanks to the buffoons trashing the place before Ruki had even arrived. It was dangerous ground if one wasn't careful, yet the men ignored the mess and charged him blindly. And although they didn't pay any attention to the hazard that posed, their uneven footing affected their balance.

It's so obvious that they're outta sync. The two seemed to think attacking at the same time would benefit them, but they were so uncoordinated that he easily dodged their attacks.

Still smirking, Ruki sidestepped the bottle and kicked a nearby toppled chair, which slid right into the guy with the knife and obstructed his path. Then Ruki spun around, bringing his leg down against the head of the man with the bottle. His foe doubled over from the impact, and for good measure, Ruki planted a fist square in his gut. The man hit the ground with a muted *thud*. There had been so little resistance from him that all traces of mirth faded from Ruki's face.

There was only one enemy left now. The man went completely pale when he realized he was on his own, but that wasn't a good enough reason to show him mercy.

Ruki could read the man's moves. When his adversary slashed at him, Ruki grabbed his wrist and twisted.

"Gah!"

"Lemme tell you somethin' else while I'm at it," Ruki whispered in the man's ear as he slipped behind him, driving his foot into the man's calf. Even a child could bring an adult to his knees if he hit him in just the right place, and Ruki had used all of his strength to do it.

“Eek!” The man was soon on the ground, trying to crawl away.

Ruki snatched the back of the man’s head and slammed it into the floor. “See, if I get rid of you…”

Slam!

“…there’ll be no one left…”

Slam!

“…to report to your superiors.”

Even if the men had comrades in the area, all *they* would know was that there’d been some fuss at a pub. They might be able to surmise who was involved and what had happened, but there’d be no proof. After all, this was Rose Garden’s territory. The fact that no authorities had shown up to intervene should’ve made it obvious to these ruffians that outsiders wouldn’t find help here.

The authorities had to prioritize. They had limited numbers, and they were busy with other things. It would be one thing if a noble or a civilian were involved, but they weren’t about to bother with fighting between syndicates. If anything, they probably hoped the two organizations would wipe each other out.

“Well, guess if your people like to blindly pick fights, then it ain’t a problem…” Ruki’s voice trailed off as he smashed the man’s head against the floor again. “But there ain’t no syndicate that stupid.”

The man had already lost consciousness by this point. Ruki’s fingers slacked on the man’s skull, and he pulled himself to his feet. A fellow member of Rose Garden rushed over with a towel so he could dab away the blood on him.

Another organization would have to be quite powerful if it wanted to take on Rose Garden. But Ruki doubted these guys were capable; he didn’t even recognize the tattoos on their arms, which meant their syndicate wasn’t one of the more influential ones. It was possible they had made some strong alliances with other syndicates, but regardless, his point still stood: no criminal organization wanted to encroach on another’s territory without good cause.

“We can’t be sure they don’t plan to take us on,” argued one of the members. “If their lackeys are this braindead, I’ll bet their

leader's no better."

"Nah. If the leader is this big a fool, he doesn't stand a chance against us."

"You got a point there."

Ruki watched as his cohorts tied the men up and searched their pockets. *We can get rid of them after we've figured out where they came from.* By the way they talked, he was certain they were part of some organization, but better safe than sorry. He wouldn't want this to come back to bite Claudia later.

"They got quite a bit of cash on 'em."

"If they're that rich, they oughta have fun with it instead of pickin' fights here. Wait, nah, it's probably 'cause they have money that they're actin' so cocky, huh?"

The guys were excited at having gotten some money out of the incident. They needed as much as they could get to compensate the proprietor for all the damage that had been done. Ruki had been part of the destruction too. Out of guilt, he joined the other staff and started helping them clean up.

"Guess that's it. They just got a big head on 'em. Hm? Hold up, this is... Hey, Ruki!"

Ruki paused and looked up. His comrade's face had gone hard. "What is it? Find somethin' good?" His eye landed on what was in his comrade's hands, and his breath stilled. "Why do these guys have somethin' like that?"

"What should we do?"

"What else? Take these guys back and question 'em. It's all we can do," said Ruki.

His stomach roiled; he had a bad feeling about this. He could only hope that he was wrong. The one saving grace in all of this was that he'd had the foresight not to kill those ruffians so they could question them later.

This, combined with the Boss Lady's concerns, make one thing clear: someone's up to somethin'. And whoever they were, they were doing it in Rose Garden's territory. *I'm really gonna have to look into this now.*

Ruki and his comrades still carried the scars of the trauma they'd endured under Cardinal Nigel. It was only thanks to Claudia

that they were able to find hope once more.

And now that things are finally better, I ain't gonna let anyone ruin that for us. His hands formed tight fists at his side. Ruki wouldn't forgive anyone who got in his—or more importantly, his savior Claudia's—way.

Chapter 9:
The Villainess Visits the Border Region

THE EVANS COMPANY had purchased an estate in Lord Sasriel's region, and their visit was the perfect opportunity to set it up as a base of operations in the area. Once Claudia left, they could move their current local branch to this estate. While the servants busied themselves carrying all the cargo inside the manor, Claudia sipped black tea in the drawing room.

"I can't thank you enough for everything you're doing for me, Brian," she said.

He shook his head. "Not at all! I'm honored to be of service!"

Since the estate was meant to serve as a dormitory for the staff, it had a vast number of rooms and was hardly different from the type of estate an aristocrat would call home. *They must be making incredible profits.* The Evans Company mainly did business in the capital but were currently expanding their enterprise. They had to be quite wealthy to afford an expensive manor like this as part of their branch operations. Claudia was grateful for that, though, since it meant they had enough space for all of her knights to rest.

"If you need anything else, please don't hesitate to ask," Brian told her. "The servants here are tight-lipped, so you needn't worry about them saying anything."

She smiled at him. "I trust the Evans Company's quality guarantee. The trip here was already very pleasant."

Claudia had ridden in the Evans Company carriage the rest of the way to Lord Sasriel's region after she parted ways with Sylvester. It had less opulent decorations because it was primarily made for carrying cargo, but it had been much more comfortable to ride in than she anticipated.

"We often do paperwork during a trip," Brian explained. "We try to make sure the ride is as smooth and easy as possible so we can focus on work."

Claudia nodded to herself. "So that's why. You prioritize comfort to achieve efficiency."

“Exactly. And I’m relieved to hear you’ve been well accommodated. We’ll be heading out into the city soon, so if there’s anything you would like, please let me know.” He paused to glance over at Helen and Lestea. “You two as well.”

Helen politely dipped her head. “I appreciate your consideration, my lord.”

“As long as my liege is pleased, I have no complaints,” said Lestea.

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Since they had arrived while the sun was high in the sky, they took a short break and headed back out to take a look around the city. In Claudia’s case, she would be spending most of her time inside the carriage. Unlike the Hoskins’ former region, which was largely rural, the cities in this border region were heavily populated. These cities were also set up to accommodate ample foreign trade. Claudia thought it would be best to remain as unnoticed as possible to keep herself out of trouble.

“From what I can see,” Claudia said, gazing out the carriage window, “this city doesn’t seem much different from any other.” The busy streets and the lines of buildings looked the same to her as anywhere else. Perhaps the only exception was the fortress in the distance. “I expected a stark change with a possible war on the horizon.”

Helen nodded in agreement. “Indeed. The people’s faces appear to be bright and cheerful.”

The official announcement about Niamilia being accepted as a bridal candidate had already been made, but there had been no public explanation about the tension between the two nations. Thus, maybe it wasn’t so strange that there had been no impact on the average citizens’ lives yet.

“I can only assume they don’t know about Parte’s growing dissatisfaction with us,” said Claudia. Prior to leaving the capital, she had expected to find *some* tension in the air so close to the border; she was surprised to find nothing here was as she had pictured.

Brian shared the same sentiments. He scanned the crowd and tilted his head. “You’re right. It doesn’t seem like the situation has affected the people here at all. What do you make of this, Lady Lestea?”

“I share my liege’s opinion,” she said primly.

“Of course you do.”

Although Claudia had turned to the Evans Company to help hide her identity during this trip, there was one other reason why Claudia had thought to bring Brian along: as a merchant’s son with his own business acumen, he had a particular way of viewing things, and she thought she could learn from that.

Military logistics were paramount during war. Those involved had a number of responsibilities, from distributing supplies to replenishing provisions. Merchants were especially important when it came to securing goods, as it was impossible for any army to prepare everything themselves ahead of time.

Claudia had heard that the Evans Company had some staff who traveled in and out of the conflict zone. She’d asked ahead of time to get their input on the current state of affairs. Brian himself had visited Lord Sasriel’s region several times as well.

“This place is the same as ever,” he said. “It’s strange.”

Claudia perked up at that. “Strange how?”

“There’s no sense of impending crisis whatsoever. They *could* be hiding it really well, I suppose. We should visit the merchants’ guild. That should give us a better idea of what is happening.”

And so Brian instructed the driver to take them to the merchants’ guild—a collective organization for businessmen like Brian and his family.

“Just to be on the safe side, Lady Claudia, would you mind waiting in the carriage with your knights? There are some sharp-eyed people in the merchants’ guild who might see through your disguise.”

“All right,” Claudia agreed. “But could I ask you to take Helen in my place?”

“Huh?! You want me to take Miss Helen?” His voice rose in pitch, his eyes round with surprise.

“She will be my eyes.” Claudia honestly wanted to join him, but she couldn’t ignore his advice. She had come here undercover for a good reason, and she needed to make sure no one found her out. If word got out that she was here, it would put the marquess on edge. He’d wonder what she was doing here at such a crucial time.

“Very well,” said Helen. “I’ll act the role of Lord Brian’s maid.”

“Uh, y-yeah, um…that would be great,” Brian stammered in a fluster.

Claudia couldn’t help but smile at his reaction. Helen, on the other hand, looked sympathetic. It was as if she thought of him as a younger brother.

Oh goodness, Claudia thought. *She knows he’s fallen for her.* He was an expert at keeping a poker face when it came to business, but he was an open book when it came to his own romantic feelings.

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The merchants’ guild was in a sturdy, three-story brick building. A large sign hung on the front of it, making its purpose plain for anyone who could read. Claudia stayed in the carriage with Lestea as Brian and Helen climbed out.

Once they were gone, Claudia turned to Lestea and asked, “Did you notice anything in particular?”

Lestea was skilled at diplomacy and backdoor machinations. Raul had agreed to let her accompany Claudia because Bari was eager to get its hands on information too.

“Nothing too substantial, just a sense that something is off. I apologize for not being able to give a more detailed answer than that.” She looked genuinely apologetic as she bowed her head.

Claudia smiled thinly at her. She hadn’t assumed they would be able to gather anything significant from a mere carriage ride around the city. “That alone is helpful. All I could tell was that everything here looks normal.”

She had no other points of comparison, so if someone told her this was how a city was—even with the looming threat of war

—she was gullible enough to believe it. Brian and Lestea, on the other hand, had sensed something amiss. Claudia was glad she'd brought them along.

"I think your expectations of what we'd find were pretty on the mark," said Lestea. "Maybe not as extreme as you imagined, but we *are* talking about an allied nation suddenly flipping and turning on Harland. The common people should be panicked and alarmed, or at least have some kind of palpable reaction."

Other than this border region, which sat directly beside Parte, the rest of the kingdom and its territories were removed enough that the citizens were none the wiser about diplomacy between Harland and Parte. Yet many traveling merchants frequently ventured across the border, just as Brian's subordinates did. It made merchants and citizens alike more sensitive to any changes between their country and its neighbors. That was precisely why Lestea had expected to see Parte's abrupt hostility toward Harland manifest in people's behavior.

"If Parte was that intent on war, then all the more reason the people should be on edge," Lestea went on. "The locals here on the kingdom's outskirts know better than capital-dwellers just how strong Parte's warriors are. It makes them reliable allies, as long as Harland and Parte are on good terms. In fact, it's only because Parte serves as a buffer that they're protected from the violence spilling over from the conflict zone."

If not for Parte, Lord Sasriel and his people would be the ones making the sacrifice to protect the rest of the kingdom from the ongoing skirmishes in the conflict zone.

"If they weren't neighbors and didn't enjoy close diplomatic relations with Parte, I could see them not being concerned, but that's not the case." Lestea furrowed her brow the more she thought it over. "It wouldn't be strange for them to have a better understanding of the situation than we do, actually."

It was impossible to silence people completely. Someone coming in from Parte would've certainly said something, sparking gossip. On the contrary, there was no impression that the people were wary of an incoming attack.

"Lord Brian seemed to have an idea as to what's happening," Lestea said as she continued mulling over the situation. "His way of viewing things is more like the common citizens' than anyone

else in our party, so he should have a more well-rounded take. We just have to hope he catches some good information while he's in there and brings it back to us."

Lestea wasn't fond of Ruki, but she was very accepting of Brian. Claudia had to assume it was because Brian was much more personable. His natural business acumen gave him an edge when it came to winning people over. Even if someone realized he was doing as much, he did it in the most inoffensive way. It was merely a facet of Brian's personality.

Chapter 10:
The Baron's Son Steps Up

BRIAN HAD ANTICIPATED entering the merchants' guild by himself, so his heart was racing as Helen followed him. It had him so flustered, he nearly forgot she was staying a step behind him to carry out her role as his maid.

Get your act together, Brian! This is your chance to impress her! he thought. *Besides, I can't let Lady Claudia down either!*

The announcement about Niamilia becoming a bridal candidate had come as a shock even to the merchants' guild in the capital. They prided themselves on keeping abreast of the latest information. Any merchant who got their hands on such intel was to report to their local branch guild, and that intel would then be delivered to capital headquarters.

Information was only good as long as it was up-to-date, and in this case, it hadn't reached HQ in time. The branch in the border region should have sent its fastest horse to deliver news, but it hadn't. This had made the leader of the merchants' guild HQ suspicious of the branch.

The delegation would have passed through this area on its way from Parte Kingdom to Harland's capital, and the delegates would have needed to stop to replenish their supplies. Even if the local merchants weren't aware of the mounting hostility and danger of impending war in Parte, they should have sensed something was off by the fact that Niamilia—a daughter of a powerful politician in Parte—was traveling with the delegation. No matter how small or insignificant this tidbit of information might have seemed, it would have been customary to forward it along. The branch here had failed to do that.

I didn't tell Lady Claudia because it's a guild issue, but if it looks like it will affect her, I'll need to let her know.

The headquarters in the capital was the central location for the guild, with various branch locations dotting the kingdom's map. Alas, old merchant habits died hard. They were happy to reach out and help one another during times of peace, but if a business opportunity presented itself, few could resist. A branch

location could very well decide—as might be the case this time—to withhold information from HQ for its own benefit.

Actually, the guild leader at HQ had expressly asked Brian to look into the matter. *Though who knows how much an outsider like me will be able to get out of them.* Small as his family's venture was, they did have a modest location out here in the border region. Unfortunately, they could give him no answers as to what was going on—and assuming members of the branch guild were keeping something to themselves, they weren't likely to share it with him. *If they have some intel they haven't shared, I'll bet it's being withheld by their higher-ups.*

His family's company had grown enough to land large contracts, but that was only in the capital. In the countryside, a merchant would need strong ties to the local lord to rise to leadership at the branch guild and exercise their own authority. The same was generally true anywhere you went. Those who put down roots in the local area had the most influence there. Despite the Evans Company being official members of the guild, they were still outsiders as far as the local branch was concerned.

As soon as Brian and Helen arrived at the thick wooden door, he paused to glance back at her. None of the chatter or bustle leaked through the building's sturdy brick walls, but he could already picture what it was like.

"The guild tends to be a lively—or sometimes deafening—place. There are always tactless people milling about inside, so please stick close to me while we're inside."

"Yes, my lord. I shall follow your orders."

"Uh, about that…" He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I'm just a baron's son, so no need to be super polite with me."

She shook her head. "You are Lady Claudia's friend. I must show you proper respect."

"Yeah, I figured you would say that."

Brian had hoped that the two of them could be more casual with one another, but alas, Helen wasn't on board with it. *As happy as I am to hear that Lady Claudia considers me a friend, this isn't what I wanted.*

Even when he was near Helen, their difference in status made it nearly impossible for him to strike up a conversation with her. Part of that was because he sensed she was drawing a line between them.

I don't get the sense that she hates me or anything, though. It was more that Helen was strict about keeping things purely business, and the walls she put up were almost impenetrable. *I need to at least get to the point where she considers me someone she can depend on!*

Based on their relationship thus far, Brian knew it would be no simple task to break through her walls. He just had to hope that she would eventually open up to him while doing his best to win her affections in the meantime.

Brian finally nudged the door open and slipped inside. The second he entered, angry shouting thundered in his ears. The shift in volume was like a slap to the face. *Why are guild reception areas always like this?*

It was probably because all merchants were determined to secure their share of the profits, even if it meant squabbling with the guild. Most merchants kicked up a fuss when they took a loss. As Brian and Helen made their way toward the reception counter, he prayed she wasn't too disturbed by all the noise.

Unlike Claudia's clandestine sojourn to the border region, Brian's trip was common enough knowledge. Luckily, as much as the marquess disliked interference from the royal family or other members of the aristocracy, a lowly baron's son was beneath his notice. The same couldn't be said of the merchants' guild.

The leader here would know, especially after the official announcement about Niamilia, that HQ would be sending someone. They had no reason to believe that Brian was that person, but the Evans Company's reputation would have reached the border region by this point. It would be easy to turn away any ordinary outsider. Brian, however, was his father's heir. Moreover, he was an aristocrat, not a commoner.

Well, let's see how they handle me.

He gave Helen a glance to make sure she was all right while he waited to see how the merchants' guild responded to his

arrival. If they insisted that he wait like anyone else, it meant they weren't going to pay him special attention.

It's fine if they do that. I'll find a useful way to spend the extra time. He was already eavesdropping on the conversations happening close to the reception desk. It was the best way to find out who was here and what they were here for. While those things weren't necessarily useful on their own, the tiniest bit of information might provide insight he didn't have before.

After a short wait, a servant arrived and guided him into one of the reception rooms.

"Miss Helen, won't you sit with me?" Brian offered.

She lifted her chin. "I am a maid, so I'm fine over here."

Helen stood against the wall, as she always did whenever she was with Claudia. It made him even more restless, but he knew it would be impossible to convince her to sit with him. His only choice was to focus on getting through this meeting.

Considering how quickly they got me in here, I have to assume they're showing some consideration for my status. They obviously knew he was the heir to the Evans Company. He was big enough that they couldn't outright ignore him, at least.

The person who came to receive him, however, was not the branchmaster.

"I'm afraid the branchmaster is away from his office at the moment. As his assistant, I'm here to welcome you on his behalf. I apologize for the discourtesy when you've come all this way, my lord, but I hope you understand."

Brian quickly shook his head, waving it off. "Oh, no. I should be the one apologizing for not contacting you ahead of time. As ashamed as I am to admit it, the situation called for haste, so I wasn't able to do so."

He already understood that the branchmaster being away was an excuse. Well, perhaps it was true, but the branchmaster would have rushed back if Brian were important enough. *It seems like they're sufficiently wary of me, but not enough for the branchmaster to come out personally.*

This was more or less what he'd expected to happen. It didn't matter that the branchmaster was one of the common folk and he was a noble; the branchmaster had close enough ties to the

marquess that he had nothing to fear from the likes of Brian. Here in the marquess's territory, the marquess's word was law.

"What brings you here?" asked the assistant.

"Given the volatile situation abroad, I came to inform the guild that we have plenty of supplies to sell."

"Ahh, you're referring to the situation with Parte Kingdom."

War was the last resort, but in the event that it happened, the army would need as many supplies as they could get their hands on. No one would find it suspicious, then, if the Evans Company came out here hoping to capitalize on the opportunity by making some sales.

"Precisely," said Brian. "I'm guessing you've already heard?"

"We know as much as HQ knows about the situation. We were trying to confirm the intel we had when we received word about Niamilia. It shocked us all."

He studied the assistant's face and asked, "Then should I assume your branch also sees the business opportunities this situation presents?" If they really had dropped the ball concerning Niamilia, then it wouldn't surprise him if they were unprepared. It was equally possible, however, that they were only making excuses.

"I'm sure you'll have no issues finding a chance to profit," the assistant answered, smiling vaguely and dodging his question altogether. "Excuse me for changing the subject so abruptly, but have you heard that there will be a masquerade ball here the night after next?"

"A masquerade ball?" Brian slowly shook his head. "No, I haven't."

The only masquerade ball he knew of was the one Niamilia was hosting, but being only a baron's son, he hadn't received an invitation for that. If the one this assistant spoke of was happening so soon, it was a different ball altogether.

"Rumor has it the marquess's son will be attending. If you're interested, I would be happy to provide an invitation."

"Yes, please," Brian answered instantly.

He wasn't sure why the assistant had brought it up out of nowhere, but there had to be some reason they were encouraging

him to attend. He wouldn't know unless he went himself. His intuition told him there was a good reason for it, though.

The assistant flashed him a pointed smile and said, "I thought you'd say that. I can see why HQ's relying on you."

"Oh? And how does your branchmaster think HQ feels about all of this?"

They had seen right through Brian. There was no way they should have been known for certain that he was here as HQ's representative, but the assistant wouldn't speak so confidently if they didn't have good reason to believe he was. But this wasn't a disadvantage. It was better if all the attention was on him, as their real goal was to keep Claudia's presence a secret.

"We know HQ is suspicious of us. Why, we'd feel the same way if we were in their shoes. Having said that, I want to make it perfectly clear that we aren't attempting to defy them."

"And your answer to the question of your loyalty is this masquerade ball invitation?"

"Only those among the aristocracy with special permission are allowed to attend. I hope you enjoy yourself."

I guess that's their way of telling me to figure out the rest for myself at the ball. As frustrating as it was not to have a straight answer, he'd made some progress. There would definitely be something fishy going on at that ball.

Brian was stunned when, after they stepped out of the reception hall, Helen actually spoke to him. "Why weren't you angry about that?"

"Angry?" he echoed, brows drawn. "Was there something I should have been angry about?" Brian couldn't think of anything that had been said in there that warranted such an emotion.

"You were told by a common merchant that they would prepare an invitation for you."

He nodded slowly. "I was, yes."

"Such an invitation should ordinarily come from a fellow aristocrat. But they didn't deign to invite you themselves. They don't think you or your family are important enough to deserve one."

Helen was being frank about the matter, but she was absolutely right: Brian and his family were insignificant out here in the marquess's domain. The marquess himself probably didn't think much of them either. Brian had sent word that he wanted to pay his respects and meet with the marquess, but the marquess had dismissed his request as unnecessary. The upside of this was that he could move freely without worrying about the marquess keeping an eye on him, unlike Sylvester or Claudia.

"A merchant is offering to provide an invitation that you, as a noble, couldn't even get yourself. They're basically positioning themselves as superior to you," Helen explained.

It finally clicked in his head. "Ohh, so that's why you thought I should be mad!"

She frowned, eyes narrowed with exasperation.

"So most aristocrats would've been angry about that?" Brian asked.

"At the very least, they would have complained about the ignominy."

He nodded. "Yes. Yes, that makes sense. I guess I forgot about my status for a moment there."

Brian remembered the way the assistant had suddenly grinned. Him acting like a merchant rather than the nobleman he was might've been what tipped them off about his link to HQ. His attitude had been suspicious enough for a former earl's daughter like Helen to notice, so surely the assistant would have picked up on it too.

"I can see how you would interpret it that way," said Brian, "but I'm more concerned about why the assistant went out of their way to bring up the masquerade ball in the first place." Especially after they mentioned the marquess's son attending. To him, it came across as a hint—an attempt to lead him to the answers he sought—but he could see how Helen would view it as a show of superiority. *Hm, interesting. I'll bet the assistant wanted to gauge my response too.*

"You already heard the assistant mention it, but the merchant guild HQ has lost trust in this branch," Brian said, thinking back on the exchange. "Assuming they're trying to shake free of HQ's control, HQ will retaliate by cutting them off from its

information network. That's something the branch will want to avoid at all costs."

Or they normally would, anyway. If the information they had really was valuable enough to trump the losses they would incur by keeping it, that would be a different story. But the chances of that being the case were exceedingly low. Plus, if they were that confident about turning on HQ, they would have had no reason to entertain his visit in the first place.

"Assuming what the assistant said was true, and they don't intend to defy HQ, then they need to prove it," Brian reasoned.

"And they're proving it by giving you an invitation to a masquerade ball?"

He nodded. "That's what I'm thinking. There must be something at the ball that they can't divulge outright." Brian had come to this conclusion because the assistant went out of their way to mention the marquess's son. Hypothetically, if the branch wasn't willfully defying HQ, then it was possible that the marquess himself had applied pressure on them to keep them from forwarding what information they had to the capital.

Helen's face fell, and she shook her head. "I clearly didn't give the matter enough thought before I spoke. I apologize for overstepping."

"No, please don't apologize! I wouldn't have realized what their intentions were if you hadn't brought up your point of view. Truth be told, I was looking at the situation as a merchant, not the son of an aristocrat."

She gave him a judgmental look, but Brian was just happy she was starting to act more open and honest around him.

Chapter 11:
The Villainess Attends a Masquerade Ball

BRIAN HAD PLANNED to attend the masquerade ball on his own, but Claudia insisted on going, so he had to ask for four invitations to account for their full party. Claudia was confident she could sufficiently hide her identity, since there would be powerful merchant families in attendance as well as nobles.

As it turned out, the marquess was hosting the ball personally, so it was only natural that his son would be in attendance. With it being a high society event, Claudia would have an easy time there. And so, they decided that they would attend as couples: Claudia with Lestea and Helen with Brian.

Claudia didn't see any problem attending alone with Brian, but Lestea wouldn't have it. No matter how impressive his business acumen, he fell short when it came to wielding influence as a member of the aristocracy.

After hearing about their exchange at the guild, Claudia thought Brian and Helen complemented each other well, which was why everyone agreed they should attend together.

Since they were going as a group, and Helen was wearing a gown too, they were both getting ready together. The maids attending them worked briskly and efficiently. Claudia watched in pensive silence, her mind drifting back to Brian's report.

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The first thing Brian had told her upon returning to the carriage with Helen was this: "It's very possible that Lord Sasriel isn't preparing for war at all."

That made a certain amount of sense, given how the citizens were acting, but it also made her stomach twist with uncertainty. It explained why Lestea had felt something was off but couldn't quite explain it, why everything here seemed so "normal." The people weren't preparing for war, which didn't make any sense; no citizen should be able to remain carefree knowing they were on the brink of conflict with a neighboring nation.

“The first thing that tipped me off,” Brian went on, “was how peaceful the city seemed when we arrived. Nothing here has changed from when I last visited.”

Lestea had expressed the same suspicions earlier when Claudia asked for her opinion. It was possible that the people were simply unaware, that the local lords had kept the information from spreading to the larger populace. But there were those among the common folk who were more sensitive to these matters than even the aristocracy: merchants. They would have picked up on the growing tension and subsequently rushed to prepare, which would have tipped off even the most ignorant citizens that something was brewing on the horizon.

Brian continued, “And for nothing to have changed means even the merchants aren’t making a move. While a number of them may be gambling on the chance that there won’t be a war to begin with, *some* merchants would normally want to capitalize on the opportunity to squeeze out as much profit as they can.”

His suspicions were part of why he had gone to visit the merchants’ guild. Surely there would be stirrings at the local branch, he’d thought. Far from it, the guild had been as normal as the rest of the city.

“The little bit I was able to eavesdrop on at the reception counter was no different than usual. No one said a word about war possibly happening or anything like that.”

Claudia didn’t have the same specialized insight that a merchant like Brian did, but she understood that when war happened, supply and demand would shift. Horse feed, for instance, became especially important with the transportation of troops and provisions. There were always merchants who specialized in selling supplies for war, but they were nowhere to be seen here in Lord Sasriel’s region.

There was a brief silence, and then Brian said, “I didn’t want to tell you this right away after what happened with Lady Niamilia, but there’s something you should know. The merchant guilds’ main headquarters in the capital has grown suspicious of this branch for not providing information in a timely fashion, as they should have. They handed me some a dossier on the branch. I looked it over, but it doesn’t seem like the branch left anything out. They’re operating the same way they always have.”

“Based on that, you surmised that the marquess isn’t making preparations, I assume,” said Claudia.

“Exactly, which makes no sense. He should be preparing supplies ahead of time. If war does occur, it’ll be too late.”

So long as there was a possibility that diplomacy might fail them, the marquess had an obligation to ready his people and his region because they would be on the front lines. The Evans Company had anticipated him buying up as many provisions as he could in the meantime, which was part of why Brian had come all the way out here—to sell what they could to the marquess. Part of why merchants were so sensitive to shifts in the political climate was because they provided new opportunities for profit.

Something about all of this niggled at Claudia. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Brian’s judgment (because she did), but she didn’t want to be too hasty. *Even Lord Thomas is vigilant about the possibility of war, despite how much he looks down on Parte and its people.* She had to wonder: why would the border region’s lord decide *not* to take essential precautions?

“Could they make do with the provisions local merchants can provide?” Claudia asked.

“That would be next to impossible,” Brian answered. “More so because in recent years, Parte Kingdom has had such close ties to us that Lord Sasriel and his people had no need to fear war.”

Rumors were spreading in the capital that Lord Sasriel’s title was merely decoration at this point.

“Plus, merchants typically specialize in certain types of goods. Those who are accustomed to the demands during peacetime can’t simply adapt to what’s necessary in wartime. There’s too much involved in the process, like changing suppliers.”

The only exception would be merchants who supplied everyday necessities, since those were all the more vital for a nation at war. In fact, the Evans Company had planned to sell those to account for what they assumed would be a rising demand.

“There are even merchants who specialize in military supplies. It wouldn’t be possible for the branch guild to provide everything on its own.”

Claudia nodded, satisfied with his explanation. “That makes sense, and you would know, since you have that dossier on the branch.” Her mind raced. “Then what if the marquess has been stockpiling supplies for a long time now, and that’s why he has no need to buy them up?”

“Oh, that’s actually possible,” Brian admitted with a hint of surprise in his voice.

And yet, Claudia waved a dismissive hand at him. “No, he would need the royal family’s permission to keep that many military supplies.”

Helen and Lestea bobbed their heads in agreement. Anyone knowledgeable about regional administration and land management would realize the same. If the royal family allowed a regional lord to accumulate military armaments whenever he wished, they would be practically welcoming civil war. There was no guarantee that the lord in question wouldn’t harbor ambitions of overthrowing the royal family.

Lord Sasriel would only be allowed to do so to protect the border. If he’d gone through the proper channels and requested advance permission from the royal family, it would’ve indicated that he and his people sensed the growing tension from Parte. And if such a request had come in, it would have tipped the royal family off, and they wouldn’t have been so blindsided by this whole situation.

“I think we’ll get more answers about what’s happening, especially with the merchants, if we attend this masquerade ball,” said Brian. Claudia found it heartening to see his gaze brimming with intense determination. It reminded her of how many people had supported her and stepped in to help her get to this point.

A warmth enveloped Claudia, traveling all the way to the tips of her fingers, and her eyes gleamed with renewed resolve. *I cannot afford to lose.* She wanted to become someone others could depend on.

From there, the conversation transitioned to the topic of the masquerade ball.

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Claudia blinked away the memory. It was time to focus on what lay ahead. She noticed that Helen's hair looked even more radiant than usual after the maids finished brushing it.

"This was supposed to be a simple visit and nothing more," she murmured to herself. She had anticipated learning a bit more about how the environment shifted in wartime, but nothing had happened the way she'd imagined.

Helen nodded with a look of wonder on her face. "Lord Brian's observation skills really took me by surprise."

"Indeed. He noticed things that none of us would have detected on our own."

Claudia understood the importance of military logistics and the demand for supplies on paper, but she hadn't given much thought to the merchants who played such a pivotal role. It was one thing to read about it and another to truly grasp the complexity of it all.

"It makes me ashamed of how inexperienced I am," she confessed, dropping her gaze to her lap.

Helen reached over and grasped her hand. "Isn't that the reason you brought Lady Lestea and Lord Brian along, to provide a different perspective you couldn't have come up with on your own? You haven't done anything wrong." She squeezed Claudia's hand, the warmth of her skin transferring to Claudia's. Helen always had a knack for giving her courage when she needed it most. "Plus, the whole point of this trip was to give you more experience."

Claudia's heart swelled with emotion. "Thank you, Helen. You're exactly right."

She already had an extra lifetime of experience, but there was so much more for her to learn. It made her realize how unbalanced her experiences were. This whole trip had emphasized to her that knowledge from books couldn't fully substitute for the real thing—that there were still things she'd overlook.

This must be why Syl takes trips to other regions for inspections. It was essential for a leader to see things for themselves.

"It reminds me of just how incredible merchants are," Claudia said, her thoughts returning to Brian.

Helen had said that merchants had a more comprehensive outlook on things, and she understood now how true that was. They were always looking for business opportunities. If one wanted to be able to properly identify such chances, they needed information and experience, which was why merchants were so eager to get their hands on both. This gave them a deeper understanding about political trends than the average person.

"The real question is whether the marquess trusts Harland's ability to negotiate peace or if they have reason to believe Lady Niamilia will end up as the prince's betrothed," said Claudia.

"I hope it's the former," said Helen.

The latter risked causing friction between the marquess and all the families with daughters who were bridal candidates, including the Lindsays. As much as it seemed Lord Sasriel wasn't taking the possibility of war seriously, perhaps he had a good reason for it. But that in itself was a problem; much like the branch guild had failed to alert the main guild of what it knew, so too had Lord Sasriel neglected to report to the royal family.

"I wonder if we'll find the answer at this ball," Helen mused aloud.

Claudia nodded. "I suspect we will. If the branchmaster's assistant invited Brian because they thought it would convince him—and by extension, guild headquarters—that they have no ill intent, there must be something there. We just have to find it."

Fortunately, even if Claudia overlooked something at the ball, Brian surely wouldn't. Nevertheless, they all had to do the best they could to gather intel at the event.

Once she and Helen were finished getting ready, they stood together. Claudia took in her best friend and couldn't suppress the grin that rose to her lips.

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Lord Sasriel lived in a fortress, a rustic castle tucked behind towering stone walls. A part of the fortress had been opened up to serve as a venue for the masquerade ball. From the outside, the place looked deserted.

Claudia and Helen traded questioning glances. It didn't look like there was a party inside. If there hadn't been a host standing outside to welcome people in, Claudia would've worried they had the location wrong.

Once they handed over their invitations, Brian leaned in and whispered, "I thought these high society affairs were supposed to be opulent and over-the-top. Are all masquerade balls like this?"

"It depends on the host," Claudia replied. "Though I must admit, it's exceedingly rare for anyone to host a party within the halls of their fortress."

Claudia had never visited a military facility before. This was a first for her.

Beside her, Lestea sighed. "What is this marquess thinking, allowing outsiders to get a peek at his fortress's layout?" She had a point there, doubly so considering there were more people on the marquess's guest list than just local aristocrats.

"I have to assume that exposing this portion of the fortress to the public won't leave the rest of it vulnerable. It could be that the layout of the rest of the fortress is different from the area they're using for the party," Claudia ventured.

"Even assuming that's true, he's being too lax," Lestea said. The marquess probably thought it safe because he could call in his knights at a moment's notice if anything happened, but Lestea only frowned, insisting that was conceited. "Besides, if he's this lax with us, it creates an opening for anybody else to exploit too."

"Perhaps that's his intention, and this is all purposeful."

Lestea grunted at that. "Maybe, but I somehow doubt it." After a brief silence, she added, "Make sure you don't leave my side while we're here." She had no faith in the marquess whatsoever.

Since the branch guild suggested we come here, I have to assume there's no immediate danger. They had invited Brian to attend as a way to prove to HQ that they weren't trying to be combative, after all. But there was no telling what might be lurking here in this fortress, so Claudia agreed to Lestea's request just to be safe.

The four of them walked down the corridor that led to the party venue. The air was as stale and damp here as in Rose

Garden's underground headquarters, likely because of the lack of windows. Braziers lit along the way cast dancing shadows as people passed. These led all the way to a thick wooden door, which opened to the main hall where men and women wore fancy suits and gowns with masks covering their faces. It was so bright and dazzling inside that Claudia was momentarily blinded.

"Wow," Brian blurted out.

The contrast was almost eerie. Dark and quiet as it had been on the way in, the hall itself was lavishly decorated. A smooth piano number played in the background. The masked guests held glasses of wine, sipping as they engaged in light conversation. There was no tension in the air, no sense of urgency. It was exactly the sort of relaxed, mature atmosphere Claudia would expect from a high society event for adults. Most of the guests were of an older generation than her and her friends. All of the high-quality furnishings in the room made her forget they were inside a fortress.

"Hm." Lestea turned to Claudia and drank in her appearance anew in the light. "Even with a mask obscuring your beauty, you are still heads above any other person in the room." She flashed a winning smile. Though Lestea's face was covered by her mask, Claudia could feel the intensity of her gaze.

"Thank you," she said. "That dark hair suits you well." On top of that, the style of suit popular in Harland matched Lestea perfectly. Then again, everything looked good on an affluent lordling. The crimson suit complemented her dark wig, bringing out her unique personality.

"It's a privilege to wear the same colors as you."

"It's no coincidence. You picked them on purpose." Claudia knew Lestea had altered her request when they were picking their outfits for the ball. For her part, Claudia had on a red wig and a raven-black gown, which made the two a matching pair. Brian and Helen had merely dressed for the occasion, but Claudia and Lestea had added wigs to better obscure their identities. Claudia had chosen a blood-red lipstick, which she coordinated with her other makeup. Even if the rest of her face was hidden by a mask, she didn't want to take any chances.

It's amazing how skilled my maids are at this. They tirelessly honed their skills every day so they could honor any request she

made of them.

Claudia had kept her clothing relatively modest but fit for an evening party. The style of it—intended to highlight her voluptuous form—reminded her of her brothel days. Helen had gone for something more subtle. Her dress was gold with white lacing, the luster of the fabric reflecting any light that fell upon it. It made her stand out, like a single sunbeam in a dark place.

When Claudia caught Helen's gaze, the maid blushed. She didn't have the same romantic inclinations that Brian did, but Helen's reaction was so precious that Claudia was tempted to run over and pull her into a hug.

Brian was, unsurprisingly, fully enamored with Helen. His gaze was glued to her.

I wonder if he'll be able to make it through this at the rate he's going.

Fortunately, Helen nudged him to give her his arm so he could escort her. That was as good a sign as any that they would be all right.

Whereas Brian would be asking around to find out more from the merchants in attendance, Claudia's plan was to focus on her fellow aristocrats. Namely, Lord Sasriel's son, Drestin. *I think I've only danced with him two or three times at parties in the capital.* He spent most of his time in his father's territory, so he only made it out to the capital about once a year. Drestin had lived in the capital during his time at the academy, but since graduating, he had respected his family's tradition and returned home to the border region.

I don't know any of the other people here. The social season was ongoing, so most aristocrats and their families had gathered inside the capital. The only ones left out here in the countryside were low-ranking nobles without their own lands and people related to the marquess. Another reason she didn't recognize most of the people was that a good portion of them were merchants.

If anyone from the royal faction were to attend, they would be quite judgmental about all of this. If it wasn't already obvious, Lord Sasriel was part of the aristocratic faction. Claudia had noticed that some of the people he'd invited were new money—fresh aristocrats who had just received their titles.

“I’m glad we don’t have to do introductions,” said Lestea.

At that, Claudia gave a one-shoulder shrug. “There would be no point in a masquerade ball if all the guests gave themselves away.”



Part of the appeal of such a ball was the anonymity it afforded the attendees, which was why people took to referring to one another by terms of endearment rather than their actual names.

"Yet no matter where you go, my liege, you always draw attention." Lestea smiled even as she added under her breath, "It makes me want to gouge out the eyes of all the people ogling you."

"It should hardly bother you at this point," Claudia said.

Men often ogled her breasts or behind at parties in the capital. It wasn't necessarily a pleasant experience for her, but it was proof of her sex appeal. *And if I recall rightly, Lord Drestin is no less a pervert than the rest of them.* He was less interested in a woman's personality than whether she physically appealed to him.

Claudia held back the urge to sigh, a wrinkle forming in her brow. She knew exactly how to attract a man's attention. When Lestea escorted her to a sofa, she gracefully sat and crossed her legs. Lestea knelt at her side, gazing up at her in admiration. The whole thing was an act to advertise their dynamic. Claudia was the domineering, strong-willed lady; Lestea was her obedient manservant. Lestea played her part so well that Claudia didn't have to put any effort in.

Drestin was the type of person to go after a woman if he found her appealing, regardless of what her personality was like. *That makes this so much easier.* It made him the perfect target for seduction, which was exactly what Claudia was attempting to do.

She fanned herself with a black folding fan that matched her dress as she surveyed the room. Her eyes finally landed on her prey. Drestin must have heard about her already, as he was making a beeline for her. She smiled bitterly to herself at seeing the eager way he hurried along.

Lestea narrowed her eyes, annoyed. "Now there's a man who only thinks with his lower head."

"And we should be glad of it, since it saves us the added hassle," Claudia reminded her.

Drestin was wearing a mask like the rest of his guests, but he had gone to no further trouble to hide his identity, so everyone

knew who he was. As proof of this, a would-be admirer who had come to see Claudia stepped aside as soon as Drestin arrived.

"My lady, would you give me the honor of occupying the seat beside you?" he asked.

The marquess's son had wavy green hair and dark-brown eyes. These two colors, which reminded Claudia of a forest, were characteristic of the Sasriels. Although in Drestin's case, he came across more as a fickle playboy than anything else. He had a decently handsome face, hence the many rumors about him messing around during his stint at the academy.

Claudia extended her left hand, which was covered in a lace glove. He was quick to take it, planting a kiss on the back. Everyone else was deferential to him with his identity so blatantly apparent, but Claudia made a point of showing no such favoritism. Her role was to inquire as the mysterious beauty with too much pride—one she could only play because of the nature of the masquerade ball, which allowed everyone to hide their true identity and status.

As soon as Drestin registered what she was doing, he grinned. His hand began to slip away from hers when his eyes went round and he exclaimed, "You finally came to see me! Your costume is different this time, so I didn't recognize you at all!" His face lit up with genuine joy.

Their eyes met. Claudia understood that he was talking to her, but none of what he said made any sense.

"Your fragrance is much fainter than usual," he said. "Are you trying to test me? Ah ha ha, but of course you are. That's just like you, Claudia."

He recognized me?! A chill ran down her spine.

The two of them had danced a couple of times at parties in the capital, but that was the extent of their association. While Claudia was easily recognizable due to being a duke's daughter and one of the crown prince's bridal candidates, her disguise should have been enough to prevent anyone from recognizing her so readily.

How does he know? What could I have possibly overlooked that gave me away? Her mind reeled, thoughts tangling into a jumble.

Lestea shot her a questioning look, but Claudia didn't have the wherewithal to respond. Cold beads of sweat rolled down her forehead. Her heart hammered so hard against her ribcage, she feared it might burst free. The tension made her whole body freeze in place. In contrast, Drestin was smiling from ear to ear.

Claudia knew she had to respond to him somehow, yet her mind had gone completely blank from the moment he said her name. What she couldn't have predicted was that her silence was exactly the right answer.

"Surprised? I finally one-upped you," said Drestin. "Every time I smell that perfume you left for me, I remember that night we had together. Don't worry, I know you won't be able to speak tonight either. But since you came all this way to see me, I would like for us to spend some time alone together."

Her mouth was tightly pursed the whole time he rambled on and on. *Perfume? A night we had together? What in the world is he talking about?* Claudia had no awareness of any of the things he'd mentioned. Thanks to her silence, she'd learned something extremely valuable: he thought she was someone else. That someone else was going around masquerading as her, wearing her custom-made perfume.

It was an oversight on my part to forget that some of my perfume lingers on these gloves. As she obliviously went about her day, the scent had transferred from her normal clothes to all the things she had touched. She was so used to the smell by this point that she hadn't noticed it.

Lestea picked up on what was happening and quickly interjected, "Unfortunately, being completely alone will be impossible, as I have to remain by her side for the night."

"What?" Drestin scowled at her. "I was hinting that you're in the way, or didn't you understand that part?"

"My lady doesn't have much time to spare," Lestea responded politely. "If you allow me to come along with her, even though your time is limited, I promise it will be better quality for my presence."

Realization dawned on Drestin's face. "Oh, now I get it! You serve as her voice! That means I'll finally be able to communicate

with her, right? Well, if that's how it is, I don't mind you tagging along."

Claudia had never found Lestea's presence more reassuring than she did in that moment.

Drestin led her and Lestea away from the party venue and into a different corridor than the one they'd entered through. At the end of it, they reached an area with a number of doors. One of the rooms had an inscribed plate on the front of its door that read "Armory," which Claudia took to mean that this was the storage section. *Given how small it is, I assume other areas in the fortress must have their own storage.*

The room Drestin eventually brought her to was so cramped, it could only fit a small sofa and an even smaller table. Considering how closely spaced the doors were in the hallway, she figured all the other rooms were equally small. It was also dark, with just a single candelabra on the wall lighting the space. The only decoration was a flower on the table.

"We used to use this area for something else, but this whole section was renovated for the party," Drestin said.

"You aren't using the fortress for its original purpose?" Lestea clarified, speaking on Claudia's behalf.

"Oh, we'll use it for that if the time ever comes. But you already know that it won't, don't you, Claudia?" The way he uttered her name was so sickeningly sweet, it gave her goosebumps.

She tried to focus instead on the content of his words. *Brian suspected that Lord Sasriel wasn't preparing for war at all. It looks like he was right.* And this was something that the fake Claudia—whoever she was—knew too.

"Coming here reminds me of our night together," Drestin said with a wistful sigh. "I can't tell you how many times I've thought back on those moments we had. I remember it with such clarity that I can recount the location of each and every beauty mark on your body. There's no other woman who can do this to me but you." After he guided her to sit on the sofa, he knelt low enough for his hair to tickle her ankle. He acted like a pet needling its master for affection.

I have to assume that's the dynamic this fake Claudia used with him. Claudia was aware of these sorts of fetishes; it was why she

had taken the role of the domineering, strong-willed type for the party. But just to test the waters, she lifted her foot and pressed her heel down on Drestin's thigh. It should have been painful, but his face contorted with pleasure.

Everyone had their own predilections in the bedroom, and Claudia respected that. Lestea, on the other hand, was glaring daggers at Drestin. Impressively, she kept her voice even despite her very real contempt for him. "My deepest apologies, but as I told you earlier, we don't have much time. My lady has come here at great risk to herself, as you must understand, Lord Drestin."

Drestin's blissful expression disappeared instantly. His lips warped and his nose wrinkled, like he had eaten something bitter. There was real enmity in his eyes. "I get it. That tyrant Sylvester is trying to control you again, isn't he? Oh yes, I know he's coming out here for an inspection."

"Which is precisely why my lady came here to see you—for some much-needed reprieve," Lestea added, skillfully crafting her narrative around his responses.

To match the excuse, Claudia reached out and gently stroked Drestin's green hair. She needed him to drop his guard, encouraging him to speak more.

He made no attempt to hide his elation at the show of affection from her, bringing his head to rest against her knee. His brown eyes seemed to melt more and more each time her pale fingers threaded through his hair. The tension left the room, and with it gone, he murmured, "Soon, Mistress. Very soon. Once Lady Niamilia becomes that tyrant's betrothed, you will at last be free."

"Yes, but my lady cannot shake her apprehension," Lestea said.

"Please, you don't need to feel anxious. With you and the Bendins working in tandem, I'm confident you'll be able to accomplish your objective. My father's also eager to assist. It won't be long until the two of us can finally marry. Oh, I can hardly wait!" His hand slid toward her thigh, but she promptly smacked him away with her folding fan. That only pleased him more. "I'm a bad, bad boy, aren't I? Then you'll just have to—"

Claudia shot Lestea a pleading look. They couldn't risk him getting carried away more than he already had.

“We’re out of time,” Lestea declared.

“Wait, already?!”

“Time flies when you’re having fun. We’ll have to excuse ourselves here.” Lestea coaxed Claudia out of her seat and the two hurried out, leaving Drestin behind. They both wanted to get as far away from him as possible.

“This was a huge leap of progress in our investigation, but it’s all such a shock that my thoughts are a mess,” said Claudia.

“You should take a bath as soon as we get home. Let’s inform Brian we’re heading back first.” As soon as they returned to the main party hall, she flagged down a waiter to pass the message along. Claudia couldn’t afford to stay any longer, not with Drestin here, so she had no trouble ignoring anyone who tried to flag her down for a conversation.

After shaking off the people who had taken an interest in her, she emerged in the hallway leading outside. It took her only a few steps to pause and realize something was very, very off.

The whole area was deserted. The hour for welcoming new visitors had long since passed, so there was no one around. Save for Lestea, who was supposed to be right behind Claudia.

When did she grow so silent? Claudia wondered. For her part, Claudia hadn’t spoken a word since they returned to the party venue. Lestea had been the one to shoo off any would-be admirers. But when had her voice gone so quiet? Claudia was sure she’d heard it ringing out behind her while they were cutting through the event hall to get to the door.

It had grown eerily quiet since then without her noticing. Maybe she had just been tuning Lestea out the whole time. But even if that were the case, there was something noticeably different about the presence that now lingered behind her.

A chill slithered down her spine.

Claudia hoped she was just being paranoid because of what had happened with Drestin, but as the presence behind her closed in, she knew it wasn’t Lestea. Her fingers tightened on the folding fan in her hand. Before she could do anything, a calloused hand—which meant it most definitely wasn’t Lestea’s—seized hers.

“I thought I told you not to overdo it,” came a familiar, husky voice in her ear.

Her body relaxed instantly. “Don’t scare me like that!” She glanced over her shoulder to find two mischievous golden eyes staring back at her. Sylvester was wearing a disguise much like Lestea’s, but he was all too recognizable because of his eyes. “When did the two of you change places?”

“The moment you stepped out of the event hall. Though I hardly think what I did is as noteworthy as the adventures *you* seem to be having.”

“I didn’t overdo it,” she huffed. Claudia wasn’t exposing herself to danger simply by attending a ball. It wasn’t as if she’d come uninvited. She hadn’t anticipated the situation with Drestin, but Lestea had been there with her from beginning to end. “Anyway, what are *you* doing here, Syl?”

“I ordered my shadow to report to me if you made a move, and thanks to them I was able to rush here by horse the moment I heard.” By the way he spoke, he had only reached the border region a couple of hours ago. “I bought my way to an invitation. Their security leaves something to be desired.”

Claudia and Brian had received their invitations rather easily through the merchants’ guild. It occurred to her that perhaps Drestin had made the party so widely accessible because he hoped for the fake Claudia to attend.

“I suppose it’s not very secure if people can switch places the way you did,” Claudia said.

“Or for a duke’s daughter to disguise herself and attend. Were you able to find out anything?”

She nodded. “I was, though I need some time to get my thoughts straight.”

Thank goodness he waited until the end to switch places with Lestea. If Sylvester had seen the way she interacted with Drestin, she could only imagine how he would’ve reacted. She let out a muted breath of relief and faced Sylvester head-on. He was wearing a black wig and a dark-red suit. It was uncanny that he wore the same disguise as Lestea but looked completely different in it.

Claudia had experienced something similar when Sylvester wore his academy uniform. His uniform was the same as any of the other male students’, but there was something about him that

stood out. The royal family had a commanding presence, an elegance that couldn't be masked no matter how they tried.

Sylvester gazed down at her with such gentle affection that her cheeks started to heat up. He reached for her hand and lifted it, asking in a sultry whisper, "Won't you dance with me?"

"I would love to."

The music from the event hall didn't reach this hallway. It was silent and deserted save for the two of them. That didn't bother them one bit; they were happy as long as they had each other. Since she was a duke's daughter and he a crown prince, their bodies remembered the tempo of the music even if it wasn't playing in the background.

Her heels clacked against the stone floors as she moved, the hem of her black dress dancing with the shadows on the floor.

"Are you free after this?" Claudia asked.

"As long as you don't shoo me away."

"Of course I won't," she said. "But I'm afraid it won't be a romantic night for us."

They had bigger priorities. Most importantly, she needed to relay to Sylvester everything she had heard from Drestin. If the Bendins were involved, they could limit the scope of their search in Parte.

Regrettably, even with all they had learned, the fake Claudia was still a mystery. What was the imposter trying to accomplish by making a deal with the Bendins and securing Niamilia as Sylvester's betrothed? The only real clue they had that might lead them to the culprit was Claudia's perfume. It was a custom-made mixture sold only to her.

Claudia and Sylvester held hands as they headed outside the fortress. Stars twinkled in the night sky above, and the fortress slowly receded into the darkness behind them.

I need to discuss what I found with Brian and see if he learned anything. It was a shame she hadn't been able to enjoy the dress more. She had especially hoped to spend more time with Helen, since it was a rare opportunity for them to attend a dance together as equals.

"Dia, are you all right?" Sylvester cut in. He squeezed her shoulders, as if he could sense the growing anxiety inside her.

“Absolutely, now that you’re here with me.” Claudia leaned her head against his shoulder. His presence brought her such comfort that all the unneeded tension in her body disappeared.

I know he must be incredibly busy. Busier than she was, for certain, yet he had rushed all the way here for her.

Claudia reached up to the hand he had planted on her shoulder and squeezed it. She hoped she could at least communicate her appreciation to him. They had a long night ahead.

Chapter 12:
The Eldest Bridal Candidate Laments the Future

IT BEGAN WITH a warning from a merchant.

“Hubert, is it true that something strange is happening up north?” she asked.

“Well, to be precise, whatever’s happening extends into the United Kingdom of Arakaner as well. I went and saw it for myself, so it’s not a mere rumor.”

A merchant who had long been affiliated with Wendy’s family had introduced Hubert as a promising up-and-comer. He primarily peddled his wares in northern Harland. Hubert had amber hair, which made for a beautiful contrast with his porcelain skin. His eyes were as blue as the sky. Unlike most who dealt in mercantile affairs, he was such a well-kempt gentleman that Wendy would have believed someone if they had introduced him instead as an aristocratic lord. It didn’t surprise her that many of his clients were, in fact, aristocrats; most of them were very particular about appearances.

Hubert was deeply knowledgeable not only about business but about the arts too. That was probably why they never ran out of things to talk about. In fact, since the two were so close in age, it took no time at all for them to grow comfortable with each other. Wendy was never good at maintaining conversation, so she admired Hubert’s communication skills.

“It’s best if you don’t mention such things to anyone else. I would hate for you to be punished,” Wendy said.

“You are the first and only person I’ve told, my lady. I couldn’t keep it to myself any longer, and I—” He stopped himself and shook his head. “I’m sorry. You must be so disappointed in me.”

“No, not at all!” Wendy shook her head vigorously. She had never seen the normally cheerful Hubert look so misty-eyed before. Actually, the more she thought about it, this was the first time she had ever seen any man so visibly anguished.

No man shared his vulnerabilities with her, not even her own father. Everyone did their best to protect her because she was so meek and timid.

But Hubert relies on me for support.

"I'm being childish, letting you comfort me like this. Please forget this ever happened," said Hubert.

"No, please don't say that! There's nothing immature about this. You're only five years older than me."

He looked startled. "You remembered my age…" There were still some tears left in his eyes as he said that, but his lips pulled into a full smile.

Wendy's heart pounded in her chest. Her embarrassment grew until she had to tear her gaze away. "I remember everything you have ever told me."

Although Hubert was accustomed to serving members of the upper crust, his life was full of adventure. Wendy wasn't the only one who waited anxiously for him to regale her with a new tale; the maids were on tenterhooks too. He was so popular at her family's estate that her father had gone out of his way to warn her away from him. *The man may be talented at what he does, but he is still a commoner,* Wendy recited to herself, remembering what her father had said. *While I am Crown Prince Sylvester's bridal candidate.*

She understood—logically at least—that the two of them needed to maintain a professional relationship. Hubert was a merchant, and she was his customer. Nothing more. Yet a part of her insisted that surely they could be friends.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I remember everything you've told me too, my lady." He studied her a moment and added, "Such as the fact that you love violets, which are the same color as your hair." He offered her a tender smile, the melancholy gone from his face. But a beat later, he said, "I'm sorry. I thought you would be willing to hear me out, so I… No. I'm just making excuses."

"Oh, no. If something's bothering you, I hope you'll feel comfortable enough to tell me. I was just being a little too sensitive earlier."

Wendy hated herself for being such a coward. Hubert had plucked up his courage to be honest with her about what he was feeling.

"I knew I could rely on you, my lady," he said. "I cannot begin to tell you how grateful I am that you show me such empathy

even though I'm a commoner." His eyes filled with such emotion that it made her heart ache.

Prior to today, he had been nothing but confident and self-assured. She hadn't known he had a sensitive side until he shared his worries with her.

I really am far too ignorant about the world. All Wendy had was surface-level knowledge. It wasn't enough to truly understand anything. She knew that everyone had their own worries to deal with, but it didn't truly sink in until she saw how upset Hubert was. *If Lady Claudia were here, I'm sure she would be able to help Hubert much more than I can.*

Claudia was a fellow bridal candidate, renowned for being the picture-perfect representation of what every noble lady should be. She commanded attention. Not only was she beautiful, but as the academy students had come to realize, she had a wonderful personality too. Claudia treated everyone at the academy as equals, regardless of their political affiliation, which fit perfectly with the neutral position her family maintained between the two factions. Since Wendy was a year older, she had only attended one year at the academy with Claudia before graduating, but her underclassmen still sang Claudia's praises.

The way Hubert looked at Wendy, it was as if he could see straight through her. Perhaps the reason that unnerved her so much was because she felt inferior, knowing that someone far better than her—Claudia—was out there.

"You were right about what you said," Hubert admitted after a period of silence. "It's not something I should speak about openly. So, um, having said that, if you would be comfortable with it, I'd like to send you letters. Would that be all right? If you're worried about the optics of it, I can pass them off as merchandise catalogs." He gave her pleading, puppy-dog eyes as he spoke, and her thoughts ground to a halt.

I-it would be rude of me to find him cute, wouldn't it? This was yet another side of him that she had never seen before.

Wendy looked away, too embarrassed to meet his gaze. "O-of course you can!" she stammered. "Send letters, I mean. Or, um, merchandise catalogs. I'll be looking forward to them." Her cheeks were on fire, the heat traveling all the way up to her ears.

She wasn’t sure how they parted ways after that. Everything became a blur. All she remembered for certain were the warm looks her maids had given her.

“Perhaps what he said about something suspicious happening was just an excuse to catch your attention, my lady,” one of them said.

How nice it would have been if she was right.

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Hubert’s first letter came two days later. In it, he updated Wendy on what was happening and elaborated on what he meant by what he’d said last time. He started by explaining that he sensed something was off, but the more he went on, the more alarming his letter became. His panic became all the more evident by the time she finished scanning the entirety of his letter. He was so worried, in fact, that he asked her to meet with him privately.

Wendy hesitated at first, but she couldn’t abandon Hubert. She pretended she was meeting with a friend, and the two met up in a private room at a cafe.

“Hubert, what in the world happened?!” she blurted the moment she spotted him.

He had grown gaunt since their previous encounter, which told her that everything he’d described in his letters had to be true. “I’m sorry I don’t look more well put together. I wanted to tell you the truth of what I’ve discovered.”

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “Have you eaten? Have you been getting proper rest?”

“No, for the past several days there’s been no time for it. This might even be the last time we’re able to meet.”

His response was so unexpected that any response she might’ve given lodged in her throat. What could possibly be happening to him that he would say such a thing?

“I have no intention of dragging you into this,” he went on. “But I would like you to know the truth in case I don’t succeed. I want you to know that my cause was just.”

What Hubert went on to tell her after that was nothing short of shocking. She struggled to believe it all.

“I never could have imagined such a gruesome truth lay behind the cardinal’s dismissal,” she said at last.

“It’s no coincidence that the two of them visited the United Kingdom of Arakaner at the same time. There’s no doubt in my mind that the cardinal figured out what Lady Claudia was up to.”

Wendy numbly shook her head. “But from what I heard, the cardinal was dismissed because of the scandalous dealings of his direct subordinates.”

The faithful who worked under Cardinal Nigel had been running an illegal casino. Nigel was called to take responsibility for their actions and was subsequently forced to leave Harland.

“At a glance, I’m sure it seems there’s no connection there, but it’s all connected, I assure you,” said Hubert. “Surely you must know that the cardinal’s only crime was failure to manage the people under his command sufficiently. Had he run the casinos himself, his subordinates would have reported him.”

She nodded slowly. That made sense; the faithful would have no obligation to protect him if he’d perpetrated the crimes.

“Moreover,” Hubert went on, “no one would know how to run an illegal casino unless they had connections to the underworld. So how could the faithful of the church possibly handle it all on their own?”

“Perhaps a syndicate was involved, then,” Wendy suggested.

“Clever, you’re exactly right. And I suspect that this syndicate is connected to Lady Claudia.”

“No, that can’t be true.”

“I know. It’s hard to believe, isn’t it? Honestly, I don’t want to believe it either. How could a duke’s daughter, who is supposed to be a representative of our country, be involved in a crime of this magnitude?” His face pinched, as if he too struggled with where his investigations had led him.

I guess that’s why he’s been so busy and lost all that weight.

Hubert leaned forward in his seat. “I’ll bet that Lady Claudia was instigated by this syndicate. No matter how prosperous a duke’s house is, all of his assets are passed to his heir, Lady

Claudia's older brother. She isn't given access to most of their fortune. I think they used that fact to entice her." And once she was in their clutches, there was no going back. "I found out slaves are being sent from the United Kingdom of Arakaner to Harland. No doubt this syndicate was responsible for that too. But Lady Claudia was the one who approved of it. She's obviously lost sight of what's wrong and what's right. I beg of you, Lady Wendy, don't let yourself be fooled by her."

Wendy couldn't refuse him when he entreated her so, but her heart throbbed painfully. *Am I a fool for wanting to still believe in Lady Claudia despite everything he's told me?* And would he be disgusted with her if he knew? Wendy felt pathetic for not being able to compartmentalize her feelings better, but she didn't have much time to contemplate it. Outside their room, a sudden commotion buzzed throughout the café. The authorities had arrived.

Across from her, Hubert went pale. "They might've found out about me."

"What do you mean?"

"We're dealing with someone powerful enough to get a cardinal dismissed. I wouldn't be surprised if they figured out I've been sniffing about, seeking proof of their crimes. Did you tell anyone else you were meeting me here today?"

"My maids know I'm here...but I didn't tell anyone about you, Hubert!"

His face relaxed a little. "So you kept me a secret. Thank you. But I'm afraid you should be wary of your maids from now on, for your own safety." He shot out of his seat. "I should get going."

"We'll be able to see each other again, won't we?" Wendy asked.

"Let's not. I don't want to get you involved in this."

"Are you telling me to just abandon you?!"

His eyes swam with tears.

His spirit is so obviously worn thin, Wendy realized with a start.

Hubert flinched, hesitating, before he lowered himself to one knee in front of her. He looked like a knight swearing his loyalty. He took her hand and planted a chaste kiss on the back of it. "As a commoner, I know I shouldn't have these feelings for you," he

said, “but I cannot hide them anymore. Lady Wendy, I’m in love with you.”

His admission came out of nowhere, but then again, she knew exactly why he had chosen to divulge his feelings now. He intended for this to be their final farewell.

“I know just how powerless I am, but at least let me protect you,” Hubert added.

Voice shaking, she began, “I-if we publicize her crimes now…”

Hubert shook his head. “If we don’t have concrete proof to demonstrate her involvement, no one will take it seriously. No, this evil is too great and has too much influence for us to combat it head-on right now.”

“Then what will you do?”

“Fortunately, I have allies who believe in me and what I’m trying to accomplish. If you want to do something to help us, then I hope you’ll pray that we’re rewarded for our efforts.”

Wendy’s face fell. “Is that really the only thing I can do for you?”

“Yes, for your own protection. You mustn’t tell anyone else about what we discussed today. Be wary of your maids too. Remember that the cardinal’s own subordinates turned on him. There’s no telling who might be secretly working for Lady Claudia.”

Before leaving, he brushed his soft, warm lips briefly against her cheek. Wendy reached for him as he vanished through the door, but she didn’t give chase.

I’m so utterly powerless, she thought.

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Wendy’s heart was so gloomy, it was like a clouded sky with never-ending rain. She debated going to her father with her concerns, but then she remembered how easily the cardinal had been dismissed.

With Claudia’s ties to the underworld, she had more power than Wendy could even begin to fathom. Still, Wendy would eventually invite suspicion on herself if she tried to hold it in

forever. Every day she forced herself to smile, and at night she curled up in bed, a hand over her mouth to stifle her sobs.

Hubert, please…please stay safe.

All she could do was heed Hubert's warnings by putting distance between herself and her maids while praying for his well-being. Her self-condemnation grew with each day that passed.

A turning point came when she summoned a merchant—who had an established relationship with her family—back to their estate to purchase wares for the summer. He was the one responsible for introducing her to Hubert. But of course, Hubert wasn't with him when he visited this time. Wendy knew better than to hope he would be, yet she found herself wanting to sigh in disappointment all the while. That is, until she sensed one of the merchant's servants staring at her. The merchant was quick to reprimand him for his impudence.

"My apologies! I was simply reminded of violet flowers when I looked at you," said the man. He must have really loved them to be ogling her so openly.

"I'm quite fond of them myself," she said. "Why don't you tell me why violets are so special to you, if you don't mind?"

The servant's face lit up when she took an interest. "Actually, you see, it was my first love's favorite flower! I told her how I felt at a café, but that was the last time I ever saw her."

"At a café?" she murmured back.

The man glanced at her, and she knew instantly what he was talking about. It took everything she had not to break character. Her first thought was of how she had parted ways with Hubert. "That's a heartbreaking story. If you have some more uplifting episodes you could share with me, I'd love to hear them." She turned to the merchant. "Would you mind if I borrowed him for a bit?"

The merchant was eager to agree to her request, relieved his subordinate's rudeness hadn't offended her.

Wendy invited the merchant's servant to tea, whereupon he handed her a gift. "It's from my master," he said. "Please open it."

She lifted the lid of the intricate wooden box to find a violet flower brooch inside. It was adorned with a beautiful aquamarine

that shone brilliantly in the light. The color of it reminded her of Hubert's eyes.

"He said there was a deeper meaning to the box itself. When you have time later, take a closer look at it," the servant advised.

Wendy was eager to check it right then and there. She had to remind herself not to be hasty. There was no telling what action of hers, however inconsequential it seemed, might tip off Hubert's enemies and put him in danger.

After that brief exchange, she and the servant engaged in some small talk until at last she excused herself and returned to her bedroom, dismissing all of her maids. It wasn't until she was completely alone that she felt comfortable searching the box. Beneath the velvet base where the brooch had rested was a letter.

"This must be...!" Her breath caught in her throat. The moment she saw the writing, she recognized it as Hubert's penmanship. Her eyes filled with tears as she read about how he was doing. "Thank goodness. I'm so glad you're safe."

Unfavorable as his situation was, Hubert had managed to pin down the warehouse where the captured slaves were being held. He had withheld the specifics in case someone intercepted his letter, but from what he described, the slaves were only being held there temporarily after leaving Arakaner.

At the end of his letter, Hubert asked if she could come meet him in the north, prefacing his request with an acknowledgment that he was asking the impossible. Out of consideration for her status and position, he'd recommended a place that could pass for a simple summer getaway. No one would suspect she had other intentions.

After all this time and all this worrying, Wendy didn't hesitate. "I'll finally be able to see Hubert again!"

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The city Wendy visited in early summer was a popular retreat for the hotter months, and many other aristocrats had traveled here just like her. *Good. No one will find my presence here odd, then.*

Wendy stayed at a hotel, to which Hubert eventually sent someone to contact her. She was instructed to go to the

confessional in a nearby church. This was where the devout confessed their sins, and only the faithful could access the area. She waited there anxiously, wondering what she was supposed to do—until the screen dividing her side of the room from the other half rattled open. It was normally kept there for the protection and privacy of both parties. Standing on the other side was none other than Hubert, dressed in a priest's vestments.

Wendy flew out of her seat, and Hubert wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her tight. "Forgive my imprudence, my lady," he said, voice thick with passion.

Her heart thrummed loudly. This was the first time any man besides her father had held her. Dazed, Wendy craned her neck to peer up at Hubert.

He smiled wanly back at her. "If you keep looking at me like that, I won't be able to resist you." He pecked her earlobe as he said that, sending a wave of heat through her entire body. It didn't help that he was wearing priest robes, which made this feel all the more salacious.

"Uh, um…" That was as much as she managed before words failed her.

"I'm sorry. I was so happy to see you again, my lady, that I let myself get carried away. That brooch suits you perfectly." His eyes moved to where it was pinned on her chest. Wendy had been wearing it every day since she received it.

"Wearing it helps me remember you…" she began, then swallowed her words. "Goodness, what am I saying?"

He chuckled. "I hoped you'd like it."

Wendy had blurted out her feelings without thinking better of it. She shrank back, embarrassed, and slumped into her seat again. As strongly as she felt the loss of his body heat when she wasn't in his embrace, she didn't have the courage to tell him.

"People might grow suspicious if we linger here too long, so I'll get straight to the point," he said, his expression solemn.

Wendy sat up a little straighter.

"My comrades and I are going to go save the slaves soon."

"But isn't that…" *Dangerous?* she was about to say, but she refrained upon realizing how foolish it was. Of course it was dangerous; why else had he been working undercover?

Why am I such a fool? Wendy dropped her gaze to her lap.

Hubert reached over to squeeze her hand. “Thank you. I appreciate your concern for me. It will definitely be dangerous, but I can’t just abandon those slaves.”

When she lifted her gaze again, she found him staring earnestly back at her. His many past adventures were proof of how courageous he was. Wendy simply hadn’t noticed it until now. It made her wonder: was it really all right for her to remain as she was? To go back to crying alone at night, clutching her hands in prayer, unable to do anything else?

“Hubert,” she said, making up her mind in that instant. “Please let me help.”

“You can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

“But you’re doing it in spite of that, aren’t you?”

He shook his head, vehement in his refusal. “I cannot involve you in this.”

“Please do,” Wendy insisted, her voice straining. “Lean on me, I beg you!” *Just like you did when you first told me about all of this.*

“Lady Wendy…” His eyes welled up, full of emotion. Hubert pressed his hands together as if in prayer and bowed his head toward her. “To be honest with you, the warehouse where the slaves are being kept is close to here.”

“It is?!”

“I can see why you’d be shocked. It’s hard to believe that these villains would hide slaves somewhere so close to the city. But my comrades and I *will* see this through, no matter what. Aside from the merchant friends I’ve made, there are some devotees here at this church who are willing to help out too. Thanks to them, we’ve been able to sleep at night without worrying we might be found out.”

Now that he mentioned it, she noticed his cheeks had more color than when she last saw him. He’d restored his spirits to the point of making time to actually meet her.

“Remember how I said a moment ago that we would be freeing those slaves soon? Well, once we do, they’ll stay here at

the church for the time being. If possible, I'd love to have your assistance."

Wendy leaned forward and nodded eagerly. "Absolutely. What can I do to help?"

"I'd like you to donate to the church. They don't have enough funds on their own to fully provide for all the slaves. It doesn't even have to be money. It could be food or clothing."

"Of course, I'll see to it. Is there anything else?"

"That will be more than enough," Hubert said. "First we have to save the slaves." As he explained it, he and the rest of his comrades doing the rescuing would attempt to gather any evidence they could while they were there.

Anxiety swelled in her chest, growing and growing, but Wendy understood exactly why she couldn't accompany him to the scene.

"If anyone catches wind of our plan ahead of time, all of our lives will be in danger. Please keep all of this a secret until we're ready to go public with it," Hubert told her.

"All right."

The two of them met in secret several times after that. Hubert gave her progress updates, and Wendy was glad to hear that her own contributions were making a difference. On the day of the actual mission, she was forced to wait at the hotel, even though her stomach was in knots and she could think of nothing else but Hubert's safety. She kept imagining the worst. It was impossible to keep herself together. Before she knew it, she was taking out her emotions on her maids. When at last Wendy saw Hubert's face at the church, she dissolved into tears.

Any lingering faith and respect Wendy had in Claudia vanished the moment she saw the child slaves whom Hubert had rescued. *Look at how skinny they are! How could anyone do something so cruel?* It defied belief.

Claudia was supposed to be the perfect noble lady. Everyone in high society looked to her as a role model. Even Wendy had long compared herself to Claudia and felt inferior. She'd even envied Claudia.

I can't believe that the same woman who surrounds herself with so many people and smiles so beautifully for them is secretly

committing crimes against humanity behind the scenes. The perfect noble lady had never existed. No, she had been an absolute fiend this entire time.

Wendy trembled with fear and disgust as the realization set in. Hubert pulled her into his embrace to keep her upright.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you see any of this,” he said. “Look at how terrified you are.”

“No, no,” she choked out, numbly shaking her head. “I’m glad I learned the truth. I’m only ashamed of how ignorant I’ve been.”

“There’s nothing for you to be ashamed of!” Hubert shouted. “You are noble in both character and status. These crimes should be far outside the notice of a lady such as yourself. It’s my fault for depending on you so much that you have to bear witness to it all.”

No, Hubert was the real hero here for saving those slaves despite the risks. The king might even give him recognition for it when the full truth came to light.

“Regrettably, we didn’t uncover any evidence that can link Lady Claudia to these crimes,” said Hubert.

“Isn’t testimony from the men, women, and children who were enslaved enough?”

“They only know the faces of the people directly responsible, not the puppet master behind it. Besides…” His voice trailed off, and a shadow fell over his expression. Wendy couldn’t understand why; she thought everything would change for the better now that he had rescued the slaves.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “If you need more donations __”

“No. You have contributed more than enough. I cannot even begin to express my gratitude in words. And that’s also why I feel so pathetic.”

“Why would you say that? There’s nothing pathetic about you.”

“Lady Wendy, there’s something I need to tell you.” His brow furrowed, and his whole face pinched with anguish. Wendy desperately wanted to take away whatever it was that burdened him. But then he said, “I’ve committed crimes.”

She tilted her head, confused. “You have?”

“We would be here forever if I listed off all of my misdeeds. I’ve trespassed on private property to gather information on people. I even deceived others to further my goals.”

“Yes, but you did all of that to free those slaves, didn’t you?”

“I did. To combat this level of evil, I sometimes had to stoop to less-than-savory means.”

Wendy understood that breaking the law wasn’t right, but these children would still be slaves if he hadn’t. With his noble intentions, she didn’t think what he did deserved to be called a crime.

“Maybe,” Hubert went on, “a judge would be willing to consider the extenuating circumstances, but we’re up against someone with enough power and influence to dismiss a cardinal. If I don’t have something really solid to pin down Lady Claudia’s involvement, then no one—the judge included—will believe me. They’ll only see me as a criminal. It wouldn’t matter if the people I saved protested on my behalf.” The way Hubert told it, those with power could bend the truth in a way that benefited them and escape justice.

Wendy was a marquess’s daughter. As an aristocrat, she had been blessed with power and influence from the very moment of her birth, and that was probably also why she felt such strong indignation.

“Someone with power like that should use it for the greater good!”

“You must’ve heard of other nobles using the position for evil ends before,” said Hubert. “This case just happens to be worse than all others. And if I’m to take on this level of evil, I’ll have to continue breaking laws.”

Her head shot up. “I’ll act as your witness! I’ll tell everyone how just you really are!”

Who was the real evil one here? Not Hubert, that was for sure. Wendy wasn’t about to let Claudia have her way.

“Thank you,” he said. “You are the only person I can turn to, Lady Wendy.” He draped his arms around her and drew her close. Wendy snaked hers around his back and squeezed. She was filled with a desperate desire to save him, to provide whatever assistance she could.

“What scares me the most is that Lady Claudia will go on to marry the crown prince,” said Hubert.

That statement startled her, especially because everyone knew Claudia stood the best chance among the candidates of becoming crown princess.

Hubert explained, “If the two do become officially engaged, and she is named crown princess, it could drag down the entire kingdom.”

“My goodness…”

“Lady Wendy, you and I must do whatever we can to expose her misdeeds and save Harland!”

“Yes!” she agreed readily. “I know you can do it, Hubert. I’ve never met anyone as brave as you.”

“I can only be this brave because I have you with me.” He chuckled sheepishly. “Ha ha, I think part of the reason I’m putting so much effort in is that I want to look good in front of you.”

Seeing his smile up close made her whole face heat. Wendy knew she shouldn’t have the feelings that she did, being one of the prince’s bridal candidates, but she couldn’t bear to let go of the passion she felt for Hubert.

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Wendy spent the summer with Hubert. She used worship as an excuse to visit the church and see him, so they couldn’t see each other as frequently as she might have liked, but she was still plenty happy.

The two were shouldering an enormous burden together. First, they needed to expose Claudia’s many crimes before the rest of the nation. The perfect noble lady was a mere facade, a deception. The real person beneath the treachery wasn’t fit to be called an aristocrat.

Wendy attended many meetings with Hubert and his fellows. Eventually, her words carried enough weight that she was second only to Hubert in having the final say in things. And as much as she didn’t want to think about it, they even discussed what would happen if anything were to befall Hubert.

When Wendy returned to the capital, they continued their written correspondence, using the church as a go-between to keep their connection a secret. Luckily for them, the faithful who had helped them in the north moved to a church closer to the capital.

Hubert was in as much danger as ever, but with Wendy's assistance, he found it much easier to move about. Her influence as a marquess's daughter went a long way.

This is how a noble should use her power, Lady Claudia. It only vexed her that she couldn't say as much to Claudia directly. Wendy had to hide her involvement no matter what, at least until they had solid evidence. If she were to involve herself any more than she already had, it would draw suspicion, especially since she was a bridal candidate.

Hubert was beside himself with worry that if her involvement with him was exposed, it could endanger her too. *How silly. He's in far more danger than I will ever be.* Her fingers clenched around the violet flower brooch he had given her.

Please, please stay safe. May the Capricious God keep close watch over you, Hubert. Wendy stood by the window in her bedroom as she prayed. But no longer was she the same girl she'd been before, able to offer nothing but prayer to Hubert and his allies. She had gone to great lengths to assist them, and they asked for her input more and more. She was now overflowing with confidence and growing as a person, little by little.

With the progress we're making, it won't be long before we can finally condemn Lady Claudia in front of everyone. She knew she and Hubert would succeed.

Yet those days of optimistic determination were soon snuffed out—when Hubert disappeared without a trace.

"Perhaps the enemy finally got to him," suggested the monk who had been acting as their go-between, his face heavy with sorrow.

"No, that can't be!" Wendy cried.

"Hubert has a lot of information on them. While I doubt they'll eliminate him too quickly, we can't get complacent."

Wendy clutched her chest. "Wh-what can I do to save him?"

“We need to expose the enemy’s crimes as soon as possible. We can’t let the law stop us from accomplishing that. Lady Wendy, you have to make the call.” And she had to make it while Hubert was still alive.

Hubert had handed her a bag with a couple of things in it, in case the situation ever arose where she would need them. Inside was a wig made to resemble Claudia’s hair and a bottle of her beloved perfume.

I have to do it, Wendy told herself. She couldn’t let morals get in her way.

“This is the only way to fight back.”

How else could she combat someone so evil, with so much power and influence? Wendy made her move. The cogs were in motion and could no longer be stopped.

“Lady Claudia, I *will* show the world who you truly are.”

And she would save Hubert in the process. She was determined.

Chapter 13:
The Villainess Is Falsely Accused of Yet Another Crime

WHEN CLAUDIA OPENED her bleary eyes, a familiar ceiling hovered above her. Sylvester had returned to the Hoskins' former region to finish putting together everything they had uncovered. As for Claudia herself, she'd gone back to the capital ahead of him.

With so much to consider, Claudia hadn't slept very well. She was still reeling from what she'd learned in the border region. *I never dreamed someone was impersonating me to pull strings behind the scenes.*

Drestin, the marquess's son, was convinced that Niamilia would be Sylvester's betrothed. Also, Brian had been right on the mark with his suspicions about the marquess not preparing for battle. Whoever was responsible for all of this hadn't merely convinced Drestin but his father as well. There was a good chance the marquess had a secret agreement with the Bendins in Parte.

Drestin said everything would go smoothly as long as I—or rather, the fake Claudia—teamed up with the Bendins, but I suspect the marquess is also involved. It only made sense, what with how he was suppressing information from leaving his region by putting pressure on the merchants' guild. He wanted to make sure nothing about the Bendins got out.

While Claudia was trying to coax more information out of Drestin at the party, Brian had mingled with the merchants there and picked up fragments of additional information from them. All the people who participated in the masquerade ball were prominent businessmen. The branch guild must have sent them there, where so many of their best merchants were gathered, to show him that they had no choice but to bend to the marquess's will.

Since those merchants were wealthy and powerful, Brian had to tiptoe around the matter when speaking to them. He had passed along everything he'd learned to Sylvester. This lead gave Sylvester another avenue to investigate on top of what was happening in Parte.

Then there's what Ruki told me. As soon as she had returned to the capital, she went to hear his report on what had happened in

her absence. Claudia still wasn't sure how his discoveries were connected to everything else they had uncovered, but she knew there had to be something.

She was about to sigh when Helen burst in to rouse her. "Oh, my lady. Already awake, are you?"

"My eyes opened on their own. Is something the matter?" Claudia asked, taking stock of Helen's gloomy expression.

"As much as I know this will only darken your mood, especially with it being so early in the morning, there has been another incident," said Helen.

Claudia sat up. "Incident? What happened?"

"Lord Thomas's corpse was discovered in the slums."

"What?!" Claudia cried, voice shrill.

Lord Thomas was widely known as a core member of the royal faction. He didn't think too highly of Claudia or her family, which he had made clear by jumping on Wendy's false claims at the welcoming party for Parte's delegation.

"By 'incident,' I assume you mean he didn't die of natural causes?" Claudia asked.

"Correct. There was evidence of a struggle. The authorities are investigating it as a homicide."

It had been three months since the robbery and murder of that nobleman on his way home from the brothel. Never before had two homicides of such prominent members of society happened in rapid succession.

After targeting a lord from the aristocratic faction, the culprit has switched to the royal faction? Claudia rubbed her forehead as she tried to work this mystery out. *Death was never a foreign concept to me when I was a courtesan, but still.* Her chest weighed heavy, like a black mist had settled over her heart. Her whole body felt like lead.

It was an ill premonition, one which was sadly right on point. As word of Thomas's murder spread, rumors emerged that Claudia was the culprit. After all, both of the victims had been staunch opponents of the Lindsays, and the Lindsays benefitted the most from their deaths. Lord Thomas, in particular, had been enthusiastic about making Niamilia an official bridal candidate for the prince.

Wendy had capitalized on the story to spread her own conspiracy theory that Claudia was manipulating the underworld to her own ends. It was a groundless accusation, needless to say.

The culprit responsible for committing the murder was swiftly apprehended. His subsequent confession only helped to substantiate the rumors. He insisted that he was hired to do it, and he described his employer as a noblewoman with soft ringlets of black hair and a rose-scented perfume. His description was a dead ringer for Claudia. The final touch to his confession was physical proof: a handkerchief embossed with the Lindsays' family emblem.

One thing's for certain: someone is so desperate to take me down that they've stooped to impersonating me. All of this came on the heels of her learning about the fake Claudia in the border region. *And once again, the culprit is using my perfume.*

Claudia's trademark perfume was a custom order. How could the culprit have gotten their hands on it? Only one possibility came to mind: the robbery of Marilyn's shop. The officials had assumed the culprit in that case knew nothing about perfume. They hadn't stolen any of the expensive ingredients in the shop, instead taking items of more easily identifiable value.

What if that was all part of a strategy to throw off the investigation? Claudia wondered. What if the real objective had been Claudia's trademark scent? Even if they couldn't get a bottle of the original, they could reproduce it so long as they had the recipe. *How long has the person responsible been scheming against me?*

This wasn't something they could accomplish in a couple of days. No, the more she thought about how many months this must have spanned, the glummer she felt. It hit her so hard that she wanted to slump over on her desk.

"Lady Claudia," Helen said, preventing her from acting on that impulse, "I've prepared some tea for you."

"Thank you."

The invigorating scent of the leaves tickled her nose. Gazing at the rippling crimson liquid in her cup was far more relaxing than anything else could be. It accomplished what a mountain of

jewels could not. Just breathing in the steam was enough to bring her back down to earth.

No matter how the rumor mill churned in high society, her room looked the same as it always did, with its expensive decorations and clean surfaces (courtesy of her maids' diligent routine). The flowers in her vase and the garden she glimpsed through her window reminded her that the seasons were changing. Wherever she looked, everything was pristine.

I am so blessed. With both wealth and influence. This was a reminder that she possessed something few others did, though it came at the price of her enemies resorting to any means to remove her. And those who opposed her had their own reasons for doing so.

"There's no sign of the rumors dying anytime soon," Claudia said.

Wendy was her loudest opponent, of course. Ever since the culprit made his confession, Wendy had been proclaiming Claudia's guilt most vigorously—as if she had witnessed it firsthand.

"It's ridiculous," Helen grumbled. "You even have an alibi."

"An alibi I can't possibly make public."

On the day of the victim's murder, Claudia had disguised herself as Rose and visited her syndicate's headquarters to hear Ruki's report. If she said as much, it would substantiate Wendy's other claim that she had a link to the underworld.

"It *is* absurd, though," Claudia said. "The murderer isn't even a member of Rose Garden." And that was where the inconsistencies in Wendy's claims started.

Crime syndicates had no strong affiliation with one another. The fact that the culprit was associated with a completely different syndicate made it all the more unreasonable that Claudia could have been responsible.

Claudia frowned. "It doesn't match up. I know rumors aren't always based in reality, but still."

Wendy was doing her utmost to stay far, far away from Claudia, so there was no way for Claudia to demand answers from her. Charlotte had attended the tea party hosted by the aristocratic faction, but she hadn't had any luck either.

“At least they’re just that—rumors,” Helen said. “People don’t fully believe Lady Wendy’s claims.”

“Yes, even the culprit’s admission was so obviously contrived.”

There was nothing consistent about the story. Rumor had it that Claudia was a clever mastermind in charge of an entire criminal syndicate, but according to the culprit’s confession, she was somehow stupid enough to drop a handkerchief with her family’s emblem on it. Someone who was actually intelligent wouldn’t be foolish enough to leave proof like that behind.

Helen was right. Though the gossip spread, few people truly believed she was involved. *For whatever reason, people really enjoy indulging in conspiracy theories.* It was probably because people enjoyed thinking they had special knowledge about something that few others were privy to. People liked drama for the entertainment it provided.

So long as the matter didn’t have a noticeable impact on their honor, the Lindsays weren’t going to react. However, given Wendy’s outrageous behavior, Claudia’s father sent a formal complaint to her father, Lord Lloyd.

“Lord Lloyd seems to have his hands full with Lady Wendy,” Claudia said offhand.

“Actually,” Helen said, leaning in conspiratorially, “I heard from the Lloyds’ maids that he has completely forbidden Lady Wendy from leaving their estate.”

The marquess had insisted his daughter keep her distance from Claudia quite a while ago. A fellow member of the aristocratic faction had teamed up with Fermina to commit a crime against Claudia, which had reflected negatively on their entire faction. Even though Charlotte’s family was also part of the aristocratic faction, they occupied a very different political position than the Lloyds, hence Wendy being forced to steer clear of Claudia. While the marquess obviously wasn’t keen on Claudia or her family, he still recognized that his daughter had overstepped.

“Lady Wendy’s sudden shift in behavior has become a hot topic,” said Helen. “I’ll bet the marquess is beside himself.”

Wendy’s behavior was so out of line that she risked being struck from the list of bridal candidates. It was a huge honor for a

lady and her family to be chosen as a potential bride for the crown prince. Even if she didn't become crown princess at the end of the selection process, she and her family would benefit greatly from the royal family's acknowledgment. On the other hand, if a lady was removed from candidacy before the selection process had concluded, all the positives that came with the honor would turn into negatives instead.

It had to be hard on the marquess. Wendy had always been an obedient daughter, yet she'd begun rebelling against his authority out of the blue.

"It's a shame about Lady Wendy, but I highly doubt her behavior will continue for much longer. Her maids are so fed up with her that they've just about reached their limit. Soon there will be no one left on her side."

Gossip was an important facet of a maid's daily life for many reasons. Through it, a maid could discover better work opportunities or information pertinent to improving upon her work. They were careful to protect their employer's privacy, of course, but a person couldn't *always* hide what they really thought of the family they were working for.

The first thing that popped into Claudia's head was the scene Wendy caused upon her arrival to the tea party at the royal castle. Wendy's maid had injured her leg, and Wendy hadn't even bothered to help the poor woman.

"She hasn't always been like this, has she?" asked Claudia.

"No. It started around the first of this year, from what I've heard. She's grown gradually more estranged from her maids since then. It's reached the point where she doesn't even want them around."

Perhaps something had happened to spur on this change.

As if reading Claudia's mind, Helen asked, "Would you like me to see if I can find out more?"

"Yes, please. I can't help but think there had to be a trigger for all of this."

Helen thumped her chest with a tight fist. "I won't let you down, my lady." And Claudia knew she wouldn't.

Sylvester had said it would take some time to dig into the aristocratic faction to find out more information about Wendy.

Thanks to Helen, they had a chance to get their answers much faster and from a place they'd never expected.

Maids sure are something.

In Claudia's first timeline, she hadn't necessarily mistreated her maids, but she had taken them for granted—as if they were a natural part of her daily life, something below her attention. Most aristocrats were the same; they tended to ignore the help. And as Claudia was now beginning to realize, that was a serious blind spot.

Helen's promise that the situation wouldn't last proved almost prophetic. The true culprit who had ordered Lord Thomas's murder was uncovered quickly enough, thanks in large part to Rose Garden's investigation. The news spread like wildfire among the upper crust, stirring up an even bigger fuss than the rumors about Claudia.

Wendy Lloyd had been the real culprit all along. The woman propagating conspiracy theories against Claudia had, in fact, been the one pulling the strings.

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The unraveling of the truth began much earlier, when Ruki first made his report to Claudia. Upon her return from the border region, she dressed herself as Rose and went to see Ruki at their underground headquarters.

"You're telling me these people from another syndicate you captured were carrying foreign currency?" she asked.

Ruki had been investigating the death of the noble, as she had requested, when there was a clash between an outside group and fellow Rose Garden members.

"Nothin' wrong with outsiders comin' to spend their coin here, but there's somethin' off about them havin' money from another country," he said.

Very few people in Harland Kingdom were in possession of foreign currency. It wouldn't be too unheard of at the border, but the capital was a different story. Even foreign diplomats had their currency promptly exchanged and thus used the local coin.

“We pushed ’em for answers, and they swore up and down that they’re Harland natives.” Ruki sniffed with disdain. “Makes even less sense for them to have foreign currency, then.”

“I assume they can’t divulge the reason.”

He shrugged. “They’ve got some nerve, comin’ and takin’ work here on our turf.”

Unlike most normal folk, syndicates did have a reason to take foreign currency, particularly when they were accepting an assassination request from a client. Said clients often used foreign currency to throw any would-be pursuers off their trail, possibly misleading people into thinking they were a citizen of a different country. Still, most syndicates wouldn’t take these sorts of requests if they involved someone outside their own territory. It would be unwise to encroach on another syndicate’s domain. Only those who were too blinded by the pay would be willing to flout their common sense.

“And what exactly were they asked to do?” Claudia pressed on.

“Yeah, ’bout that! Seems like they were hired to transport stuff.”

“Smugglers?”

Ruki didn’t respond to that question directly and instead continued, “Whatever they were supposed to be carryin’, it was from one part of the city to another, meanin’ it was all on our turf. So why didn’t whoever hired them use us instead? Why’d they go outta their way to hire outsiders?” The more he went on, the more he drew out his words, as if chewing them over only to find they left a sour taste in his mouth. Even his blond hair, which peeked out from beneath his hood, had lost its luster. “I mean, we settled the matter with ’em, sure. But ever since then, I keep seeing the same ugly mug in the back of my mind—the one face I really don’t wanna see ever again.”

“You think the cardinal is involved?”

Again, he shrugged. “No clue. But this whole thing is weighin’ on me. It ain’t like him to come at us in such a roundabout way. Thing is, he’s the only one who’d know who we’ve got connections with.”

Cardinal Nigel had once ruled over Ruki and his fellows with an iron fist. It was only with their assistance that Claudia had been able to move against him. Sylvester was ultimately the one who cornered Nigel and drove him out, but what if he realized Claudia was behind it all?

Could the one who's been feeding Wendy information this whole time really be the cardinal? In that case, it made sense why they avoided using Rose Garden—so as not to tip off Claudia. The puzzle pieces were slowly clicking into place.

"Do you know the details of their mission?" asked Claudia.

"Sure do. They were supposed to deliver stuff to the high-end district." Ruki had managed to get the finer details of their delivery schedule out of the men as well. He said that Rose Garden had settled the matter with the intruding ruffians, which meant they wouldn't be continuing their work in the capital anymore. Whoever their client was, they would likely hire someone else to pick up where the other group left off. Still, the information had value.

"Just to be on the safe side, I think we should keep a close watch in the slums," said Claudia.

He bobbed his head. "Gotcha. I'll let the boys know. Oh, and I've got an update for you on that murder you wanted to know about."

"The nobleman who was killed, you mean?"

"Yep. Looks to me like another syndicate did the job." As they had already established, most syndicates avoided any jobs outside of their turf. But just as the men they had captured were willing to do it for the right price, so too would another syndicate. "It'd make sense why the authorities couldn't track the killer down too. If they went off to the countryside to pawn off the loot they got, the authorities here wouldn't get tipped off."

It was exceedingly rare for a syndicate from an outside region to come all the way to the capital. Unlike in the underworld, the authorities here did have connections to city watches and the like in the countryside, but information didn't flow openly enough for adequate tracking. The relationship between the lords in charge of the region and the capital inevitably came into play.

“I didn’t think that was very likely,” Claudia confessed with a thin smile.

“Just goes to show there’s always idiots out there with no regard for the consequences of their actions.” The four men Ruki had encountered and subsequently captured were a good example of that. If they hadn’t intended to pick a fight, then they should have quietly finished their work and retreated back to their own turf. Instead, they got themselves into a fight before they’d even started their mission.

“You’re certain they weren’t here to challenge Rose Garden?” Claudia asked.

“Nah. There’d be an all-out war right now if that’s what they wanted.” The way Ruki framed it, they were just a couple of fools from another syndicate who wanted to make some extra cash on the side. Their actions didn’t reflect the sentiments of their superiors. “Only idiots would accept a job outside their turf like those guys did.”

True enough, it wasn’t something that someone with a good head on their shoulders would do. Not with the unspoken rule that syndicates didn’t interfere in one another’s territory.

“As for the murder, I don’t think there’s enough of a trail to find out anythin’ else. I asked around with the courtesans, but they didn’t seem to know much. Only thing they said was that they started gettin’ more customers from Parte a while ago.”

Claudia blinked. “You mean before the delegation arrived?”

“Yep. You know all their people are warriors, right? The girls were squealing about how muscular the guys were. Said they’ve got this kinda wild, untamed scent about ’em. Me, I got no idea what they’re talkin’ about.”

Claudia brought a hand to her chin as she took in the information. “Yes, they train daily, so their natural body odor might be more potent than those of us who don’t sweat as much.” She hadn’t noticed that about Niamilia, but it had caught her attention with the delegates. They had a unique scent about them. “Anyway, forget about the murder for the moment. Keep an eye out for whatever group accepts that job to move goods around the capital.”

“You got it. Just to be safe, we’ll keep a close watch on any unfamiliar faces comin’ and goin’.”

Regardless of whether the people taking the work were fools, it would diminish Rose Garden’s reputation if they allowed foreign syndicates to send their people in and take work throughout their stomping grounds. Claudia didn’t even need to make the order; her men were already on the job.

That was when the second murder occurred.

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Rose Garden kept an even more vigilant watch on the high-end district than the authorities had, which was how they discovered what the outside syndicate members had been paid to do: abandon the murder victim’s corpse. It had been a lie that they were only here to “transport goods.” The initial group of four had obviously been hired to assassinate Lord Thomas. Since Ruki had driven them off before they could accomplish the task, their client had no choice but to hire someone else.

Coincidentally, the culprit had ordered the earl’s assassination while Ruki was filling Rose in on what had happened during her absence. The murderer had only been caught so quickly thanks to Rose Garden’s close monitoring of outsiders. They’d gotten their hands on the relevant information to identify and find the killer and inform the authorities.

Aside from the killer’s confession, there was other evidence linking Wendy to the scene to which she’d lured Lord Thomas. Wendy had initially been harassing the authorities, insisting Claudia was involved with the case. Then one of her maids soon came forward to reveal the disguise in Wendy’s possession, along with the perfume she had used when she hired the killer. Wendy had stashed her disguise in a bag to hide it from her maids, but they’d noticed her suspicious behavior. In fact, the maid responsible for exposing it all was the same one Wendy had dressed down the day of the tea party in the castle gardens. The maid couldn’t stand the way Wendy endlessly blamed Claudia for what had happened, not after how kind Claudia had been to her the day of the tea party.

After hearing the full report in her room, Claudia slumped back in her seat and stared up at the ceiling. “The possibility crossed my mind, but I suppose this means the whole time Wendy was painting me with a bad brush, she was actually *doing* all the things she claimed I had done.”

If Wendy really had orchestrated everything—as seemed to be the case—then yes, she was the biggest hypocrite of all. She had gone so far as to hire other syndicates to carry out her dirty work, meanwhile proclaiming to all of high society that Claudia had connections to the underworld and had committed a long list of crimes.

Claudia shook her head in disbelief. “No matter her motivation, how could she not see the irony in what she was doing?”

“She was so desperate to validate her own conspiracy theory, she was willing to commit the crimes herself and have you take the fall,” said Helen.

What could have pushed her to do such a thing?

“I wonder if she’s realized that she was betrayed by her own maid,” Claudia murmured to herself.

“Since her involvement came out, it’s only a matter of time before she puts the pieces together.”

Wendy was the last person to meet with Lord Thomas before his death. The two had ridden in one of her family’s carriages to their destination. She maintained that they parted ways there and went home separately, but there was nothing to suggest Lord Thomas had ever summoned a carriage to retrieve him, and no aristocrat would walk all the way home. If Wendy’s story was true, then he would have sent for someone at some point.

Wendy’s driver had kept his silence when first confronted. After the authorities found Wendy’s disguise and evidence that she had gone to the destination where Thomas subsequently disappeared, the driver admitted everything.

“She was so sloppy about it, they would’ve caught her as the investigation dragged on,” said Helen.

Claudia cocked her head, brow furrowed. “That’s what’s strange, since she managed to leave no evidence behind during the first murder.”

“Maybe her success the first time got to her head, so she wasn’t as cautious with this one.”

The authorities had named her a suspect in the first murder case due to the abundance of evidence tying her to the second one—the murder of Lord Thomas. They thought she had hired an outside syndicate in both cases to try to frame Claudia. Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough proof for her to go to trial for the first murder. But whether there was proof or not, the court of public opinion had already deemed Wendy guilty.

“That’s what I hear, anyway,” continued Helen. “That people get carried away when they get lucky the first time. Beginner’s luck, as it were.”

“Ah, yes. That’s a phenomenon you see frequently in gambling.”

Syndicates ran their own gambling joints, where they would intentionally lose to new players and frame it as beginner’s luck, thereby enticing the newcomer to keep playing even once they started losing. It was a clever way of swindling people.

“Do you believe someone else is responsible for the first murder, then?”

Claudia nodded. “It makes the most sense. Lady Wendy’s amateur hand was all too obvious in the second crime.”

Wendy’s carefully laid plans might have been thrown off because the people she originally hired were disrupted and sent away before they could fulfill her request. *Yet that doesn’t fully explain the discrepancy between the two cases.* Perhaps it was because there was so little evidence left in the first murder. Even Ruki hadn’t found enough of a trail to follow.

Claudia contemplated her options. At length, she said, “I suppose our only recourse is to ask Lady Wendy directly.”

“Do you really think she’ll tell us the truth?”

“I have no idea,” Claudia admitted. “But I do think it’s better to see what she has to say than to assume one way or another.”

Wendy was being held in one of the watch’s prisons. Fortunately, when Claudia put in the request to meet with her, Wendy accepted. Claudia planned to ride out and see her the very next day.

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The watch had a station in the capital, but its main facility was on the outskirts. It took a significant amount of time to ride out there from the Lindsays' estate, so Claudia left in the morning and wouldn't reach her destination until noon.

As the sun reached its zenith, her carriage rolled up to the towering walls. The gate was kept shut at all times and only opened to let traffic through. Claudia had never been to the place before, not even in her previous timeline.

People say the gate cuts the prison off from the rest of the world, but that seems like an exaggeration, she thought. After all, the security guards and other staff came and went daily. She didn't find it half as intimidating as people described.

The building itself had a rectangular shape and no needless adornments. The light that streamed in through the windows highlighted the dust floating through the air, but the place was cleaned well enough.

"I pictured something more solemn and imposing," Helen said, leaning close to Claudia's ear as they walked.

"That's likely because this particular section is for aristocrats."

A thin, plain carpet stretched ahead of them. For as modest as it was, the corridor was quite spacious and not as dank and depressing as they might have imagined. Every part of the complex they had glimpsed thus far was kept pristine too, probably because visitors who came to this area were mostly people of her station. The pamphlet they'd been given explained that the holding area for commoners was in a completely different part of the building.

"This is Wendy Lloyd's room," said the security guard who had escorted them here.

They entered the room with the guard following close behind them. Another guard was already stationed inside to keep a watch on Wendy. Prisoners had their wrists and ankles bound during visits to limit their movement. A distinct line was drawn

through the middle of the floor, and visitors were prohibited from crossing it.

Wendy was emaciated, her cheeks hollow, but she still had enough energy to glower at Claudia. There was no trace of the sheltered noble lady in those hostile, narrowed eyes. “You,” she spat. “You’ve come! You wicked villainess!”

“Not very polite of you to say when we haven’t even exchanged hellos,” Claudia responded, lifting her chin.

Wendy sniffed. “You think I have any interest in a leisurely chat with you?”

“Well, you agreed to meet with me, did you not?” Claudia wouldn’t have been able to enter Wendy’s room otherwise.

“And for good reason! I’m going to expose you and your villainy right here and now!”

“Very well.” Claudia motioned for her to continue. “Lay out my crimes, then.” That was her whole purpose in coming. She wanted to hear straight from the horse’s mouth, without some go-between bending or misconstruing whatever Wendy had to say.

“O-oh yeah? Fine, keep up your bravado. That must be how you pull the wool over so many people’s eyes.” Under her breath, Wendy muttered, “But I know the truth. I *know*.” Her eyes moved back to Claudia, her voice growing in volume. “You’re the one who arranged what happened to Lord Thomas so I would be caught!”

“And how do you propose I arranged that?”

“You used your minions to disrupt my plans! If everything had worked out the way it was supposed to, you would be the one behind bars, not me!”

Claudia nodded slowly. “Then your plan, I assume, was Lord Thomas’s murder. Correct?”

“No. No!” Wendy screamed. “You’re the one who made me kill him! All so you could have me captured!”

Wendy was the one being illogical; if she had orchestrated Lord Thomas’s murder, then she was the one who deserved to be apprehended. The way she tried to twist it in her mind and blame Claudia had the security guard rolling his eyes.

I think I understand what she’s getting at, though. She means to imply that I somehow manipulated her into taking Lord Thomas’s life.

That then raised the question of why and how she had come to believe that in the first place. *There has to be a reason.*

Helen cast a worried glance at her mistress, but Claudia nodded to reassure her that everything was fine. Then she turned back to Wendy. “You said you want to expose me and my crimes, so I’d like you to explain everything from the beginning so I can better understand. First, let me ask you this: why were you suspicious of me to begin with?”

Silence.

Wendy refused to answer, but her eyes darted about as if she was contemplating the question. Finally she asked, “What point is there in asking that?”

“I want to understand where you’re coming from. If you don’t want to tell me, I will not push you.”

“Don’t you mean you’re trying to extract information out of me?” Wendy shot back accusingly.

Claudia shook her head. “You needn’t divulge everything, only what you’re comfortable telling me.”

“I…I wanted to send you to prison. So why…why am I the one here and not you? They’re even blaming me for the other murder!”

Wendy seemed to be having her own conversation, which made it difficult to follow, but at least they were making some progress. Based on the way she spoke, Wendy didn’t accept responsibility for the first murder.

“I get it,” she said. “You’re the one who arranged it that way, aren’t you?! You knew I had discovered your crimes, so to pin everything on me, you had me murder Lord Thomas!”

Claudia ignored her. “So you’re not responsible for the earlier murder. Correct?”

“No! That’s what I’ve been saying this whole time!”

“Yes, but you’re also claiming that *I* am responsible for what happened to Lord Thomas, even though you were the one who orchestrated his murder,” Claudia calmly pointed out.

“I only did it so they would catch you! Don’t pin that other murder on me!”

Anyone else listening in on the conversation wouldn’t put much stock in Wendy’s claims of innocence, but to Claudia’s ears,

Wendy had her own internal logic.

"I figured out that you were the one who ordered the other aristocrat's murder! You can send your minions to try to stop me if you like, but it's too late!" Wendy exclaimed maniacally. "I've taken the person you hired into protective custody, and I'm the only one who knows where. He'll serve as an eyewitness to prove it was you."

Claudia's eyes darted to the security guard beside Wendy. He didn't look the least bit surprised by this revelation, which told her that they had already uncovered this information when they questioned Wendy. *I'll leave that lead for the authorities to chase, then.* They wouldn't leave any stone unturned, and if Wendy was telling the truth about keeping the man responsible for the first murder, he would be captured soon enough.

Still, why do I have such a bad feeling about all of this?

"So to implicate me, you prepared a disguise and a bottle of my perfume?" Claudia asked.

Wendy grinned. "I did. I wouldn't be able to bring you to justice otherwise."

"And how did you manage to get your hands on my perfume?"

"I have no obligation to tell you."

Patiently, Claudia continued, "I assume you know that Marilyn's shop, where I get my perfume, was broken into earlier this year, yes?"

"How dare you! Are you trying to pin that on me as well? Just how corrupt are you?!" Wendy's whole body vibrated with rage. If this was an act, then she was exceedingly talented.

"If you weren't the person involved, then perhaps you could explain how you managed to get your hands on my perfume?"

"A very kind individual gave it to me," Wendy finally answered.

"And you didn't find that suspicious? I'm the only person who can legally purchase that specific blend."

"It was for a just cause! To expose your crimes and condemn you!"

“What you mean is that you were willing to break the law if it meant achieving justice, correct?”

“How else could I hope to stand against a great evil like you? But unlike you, we actually *saved* people!”

Aha. As I thought. The ill premonition stirring in her chest had been well placed, for Wendy had admitted that she hadn’t done all of this alone. There was someone else involved, and not just the person who had actually committed the murder. Wendy couldn’t have possibly done it all on her own. That was obvious, the more Claudia thought about it. Wendy was a sheltered marquess’s daughter. She wasn’t like Claudia, who had experienced a whole lifetime as a courtesan.

Wendy had never been the proactive type. She had always obeyed her father’s orders, steering clear of Claudia after her father demanded it. But there was a single, stark moment in her life when she suddenly changed. Something had triggered that shift. Well, more precisely, *someone* had triggered that shift, and that someone was whomever Wendy had in her mind when she said “we.”

Someone tricked her. They had filled Wendy’s head with lies and completely changed her way of thinking. Worse, they had used her as a pawn.

Anger and sadness raged in Claudia’s chest. Heat built behind her eyes, causing them to mist over. *She’s just like me when I was condemned in my last life, a puppet on strings.* Someone had enticed Wendy to commit these crimes, to cross a line she never would have otherwise.

In a strange twist of irony, Wendy was actually right about being manipulated into killing Lord Thomas. The only part she didn’t realize was that it was not Claudia who had done it but rather the person she had mistakenly put her trust in.

How horrible. How could something like this happen?

From the start, Claudia had a vague notion that someone else was behind Wendy’s abrupt change in behavior, given all the information she seemed to have. Wendy still trusted this mystery figure, believed in their self-proclaimed pursuit of justice. The fact that she had hesitated to speak a moment ago suggested she was also wary of saying too much and giving their involvement away.

I wonder if I can at least figure out who was responsible. As far as Claudia was concerned, that person was the real "great evil." Whomever they were, they couldn't be allowed to go free.

But for the moment, continuing the conversation with Wendy took priority. It was possible Claudia might be able to trick her into revealing more.

"Then those reasons you gave at the party where you first accused me—those are why you want me apprehended?" Claudia asked.

"Yes," Wendy replied with a vigorous nod. "Because I know what you've done!"

Back then, Wendy had mentioned that Claudia had ties to the underworld and that she was conspiring with the United Kingdom of Arakaner. From there, Wendy somehow seemed to think Claudia had also orchestrated the initial nobleman's murder. If nothing else, she had been consistent in her accusations. She hadn't completely lost her grip on reality.

"As you know, Lady Niamilia has been announced as an official bridal candidate. I'd like to ask you this: who, among the candidates, do you think is most suited to be Prince Sylvester's bride?"

"Anyone but you, that much is clear."

"All right," said Claudia. "Aside from me, who do you think would be best?"

There was a short pause before she answered, "Lady Louise would be most proper, I think. Lady Charlotte's family wouldn't be able to manage parliament properly."

"And what about Lady Niamilia?"

Wendy scoffed. "What do you think Parte could possibly contribute to Harland? If not for the growing suspicion toward you, Lady Niamilia would never have found an opening to be considered for crown princess."

"So it's your belief that the reason Lady Niamilia was welcomed into the fold is because the royal family and parliament are mistrustful of me?"

"What other reason could there possibly be?" Wendy glared at her. "If you're that desperate to find some other explanation,

then you're just avoiding reality."

Wendy would have heard the truth by this point—that Niamilia was only accepted because of the growing hostility among the people in Parte—but she acted as though she didn't buy it for a minute. She had tunnel vision; her every thought revolved entirely around Claudia. Yet there was something about her answer that nagged at Claudia.

"What about you, Lady Wendy?" she said.

"I have no idea what you're asking me."

Claudia sighed. "Do you not think yourself fit to be Prince Sylvester's bride? Your father, Lord Lloyd, has enough power to control parliament, no?"

Wendy had been right about Charlotte's family not having as much influence because they didn't have as long of a lineage, but Wendy's and Louise's families were on equal footing in that regard. If she thought Louise was fitting, then why wouldn't she think herself fitting too?

Wendy pursed her lips, an expression Claudia immediately recognized. "I-I..." She faltered, unable to offer a concrete excuse.

"You spoke of justice, but justice for whom? Or what? For Harland?"

"Of course! I won't let you run this kingdom into the ground!"

"Then wouldn't you be the best candidate to marry the prince?"

Wendy went silent. Her gaze dropped to her lap, where she wrung her hands. Either she had a good reason why she couldn't marry the prince, or she simply didn't want to; otherwise, she would have named herself.

Claudia's eyes moved to the violet flower brooch on Wendy's chest. In this environment, Wendy wasn't able to keep up the same tidy appearance she'd had before, and yet her brooch was the one pristine part of her ensemble. *It's obviously very important to her.* Wendy couldn't bring maids into the prison, so she had to take care of everything herself. Her new surroundings were totally foreign to her, yet she had put so much care into a mere accessory.

Claudia thought back to the tea party. Wendy had worn the brooch then as well. *It has to be a gift.* Though she supposed it was

possible Wendy had bought it herself.

“That’s a beautiful brooch,” Claudia said.

“Wh-what about it?!” Wendy sputtered defensively, slapping a hand over the item.

“I just think it looks lovely, that’s all. It really suits you. The person who gave it to you must have a real eye for that sort of thing.” She spread her fan with a flick of her wrist, flashing Wendy a meaningful grin. This was the one instance where her sharp features benefited her. Even when she was trying to smile gently, her expression looked sinister.

Wendy fell for Claudia’s act all too easily. “What have you done to Hubert?!” She had let her imagination get the best of her and assumed the worst. She shot out of her seat, her shackles rattling. The weight of them had to be painful, but Wendy didn’t seem to register it. “If you lay one finger on him, I’ll make you pay!” A wrinkle formed on her brow, her lips peeling back as she gnashed her teeth and howled at Claudia.

The security guard beside Wendy seized her by the shoulders and forced her back into her seat, but there was so much distance between her and Claudia that the latter had never felt threatened in the first place. She was less surprised than she was distraught, her heart aching painfully.

“You love Hubert, don’t you?” she murmured.

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up! Don’t you dare speak his name!” Wendy thrashed about, violet hair fluttering as she tried to break free of the guard’s hold.

Why hadn’t she offered up her name instead of Louise’s? Why had she gone to such lengths to keep her brooch in perfect condition?

Claudia had identified the look of longing on Wendy’s face, and that had given her all the answers she needed. *It’s the same look Lou has on her face when she talks about Lord Tristan.* To be fair, there was a great difference between the two, as Louise insisted it was indecent and improper of her to have such feelings. Both women harbored love in their hearts for another man even though they were supposed to be the crown prince’s bridal candidates.

“Apologies, my lady,” said the guard, his eyes on Claudia. “We will have to cut this visit short.” With Wendy’s erratic behavior, he had no other choice.

“Very well. I’ll see myself out.” Claudia spun around to leave.

“Mark my words, if you do anything to Hubert, you’ll be tightening the noose around your own neck!” Wendy roared behind her. “He’s an incredible man! His cause is just!”

Claudia didn’t bother to glance back at her or respond. She didn’t need to. Wendy’s desperation to protect this “Hubert” no matter what was evident in her voice.

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“Lady Claudia, aren’t you exhausted?” Helen asked.

“Mentally, yes, I suppose I am.”

The two of them left the facility and climbed back into their carriage. Though they typically sat opposite one another, Helen planted herself right beside Claudia this time.

“Please lean on my shoulder and get some rest,” she said.

Claudia did just that. “Thank you.” Helen’s kindness had flushed all the tension and stress from her body. “I really made her angry,” she murmured.

“She was angry from the very beginning.”

“Yes, but for a different reason.”

Wendy being angry over the supposed crimes Claudia had committed was very different from her being angry because she wanted to protect the person she loved. The latter, in particular, was an unnecessary mental burden for Wendy. Claudia hadn’t done anything to this Hubert; she didn’t even know who the man was.

“We should look into when Lady Wendy began distancing herself from her maids, as well as who this ‘Hubert’ is.”

“I shall ask around. After what happened with Lady Wendy, the maids of the Lloyd household are eager to do whatever they can for you.” That was likely their attempt to smooth things over after all the offense Wendy had caused the Lindsays, especially

when Wendy was so obviously the one in the wrong. “Do you think this Hubert fellow is suspicious?”

“At the very least, I think he’s the trigger for the dramatic change in Lady Wendy’s personality. If he isn’t the root of the problem, then he should be easy enough to find and question.” And if, as Wendy claimed, justice really was on his side.

“You mean if he hasn’t done anything wrong, then there’s no reason for him to hide. But if he really is the one who deceived Lady Wendy, then…”

“He’ll already be long gone by now,” Claudia finished for her. If he was cunning enough to manipulate others, then she very much doubted he would leave any evidence behind. “It’s hard to tell how much of all this was his scheme.”

The supposed eyewitness Wendy had in her custody was suspicious too. How would she have located the culprit on her own when neither the authorities nor Ruki could find a trace of them? It seemed to Claudia that this “witness” was actually someone Hubert had prepared to help substantiate his story that Claudia was somehow the root of all evil.

If the authorities couldn’t corroborate Wendy’s story about the hired thug who’d committed the first murder, then she would lose even more credibility.

“I would prefer to avoid letting her take the fall for all of it,” Claudia said.

Hubert was equally culpable, and he deserved judgment for his crimes. But hope for it as Claudia might, her logical brain told her the odds of them apprehending him were next to none. They had no idea where he was, for starters.

I’m certain someone *is behind this, though.* It was the same inkling she had gotten in the border region, where she lacked enough information to pin down who her imposter really was. Being stuck at this impasse frustrated her.

“There were some inconsistencies in her statements, but by and large, Lady Wendy’s accusations against me are the same as they were at that party.”

“That does seem to be true,” agreed Helen. “Do you suppose the only time she ever impersonated you was during the incident with Lord Thomas?”

“I suspect it was. At any rate, I don’t think she’s involved with the imposter we discovered in the border region.”

Wendy insisted she had the real perpetrator of the previous homicide in her custody, but Claudia didn’t put much credence in that. She doubted the person existed in the first place. That matter aside, this was the second time someone had impersonated her. First there was the imposter in the border region, then there was Wendy posing as her when she orchestrated Lord Thomas’s murder.

“I don’t think Lady Wendy has the skill to seduce and manipulate someone like Lord Drestin. She also didn’t really have time to visit the marquess’s territory in the south,” said Claudia.

Marilyn’s shop had been robbed back in April. The fake Claudia likely didn’t appear in the border region until after that—somewhere between the end of spring and beginning of summer. Wendy had spent summer in the north, so if she was the one responsible, she would’ve had to visit the border region in spring. The problem was that Claudia hadn’t heard any word of her ever doing that.

Helen nodded. “That makes sense. With her personality and the way she acts, I doubt she would be able to indulge the whole master-servant relationship that impersonator had with Lord Drestin.”

If Claudia hadn’t experienced those days in the brothel, she wouldn’t have been able to adjust and carry out that roleplay with Drestin. It definitely wasn’t something a sheltered noble lady like Wendy would be capable of.

“Considering the circumstances, the person responsible in the border region must have been a professional,” said Claudia.

Whoever it was, they were an expert in the art of manipulation. The scale of this whole scheme spoke to their level of experience and skills. They had helped form a deal between the Bendins and Lord Sasriel, despite the two being from entirely different nations. On top of this, Claudia would never have found out about the imposter if she hadn’t coincidentally attended that masquerade ball. In both cases, her impersonators had worn her perfume.

Who was the puppet master behind it all?

I have to agree with Ruki. The first face to pop up into my mind is the cardinal's. She could picture him, his eyes narrowed and lips peeled back in a great big grin.

Claudia shook her head, chasing the image away. If she let herself get tunnel vision on Nigel, it might blind her to other possibilities. No, she needed to keep her head straight, especially because this was no longer a domestic issue. Parte Kingdom and, more to the point, the Bendins were involved in this.

"Assuming we make it back before they close, I'd like to stop by Marilyn's shop," said Claudia.

"You want to ask her about the perfume?"

"Yes. She's the only one who knows the exact blend."

Despite how difficult it should have been for anyone else to get their hands on the blend, both Wendy and whoever duped Drestin were in possession of it. It was a custom order, not something sold for the wider market. That could only mean they had both gotten it the same way. A person could make it themselves, provided they knew the recipe. Marilyn was the only one who knew all the intricate details of the blend and how to craft it perfectly, but a novice could concoct something similar.

Claudia knew it would probably be more prudent to save her visit for another day, but after the conversation with Wendy, she was eager to confirm something with Marilyn.

"All right," said Helen. "I shall wake you when we arrive, so please rest until then."

It would take some time for them to travel from the outskirts to Marilyn's shop in the middle of the city. The discussion had helped Claudia organize her thoughts, so she indulged herself and closed her eyes. She was so much more exhausted than she realized and fell asleep almost instantly.

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Claudia awoke when they arrived at Marilyn's shop, which had been entirely renovated since the robbery earlier in the year. The storefront was primarily painted mint green with dark-brown framework and white pillars. It was an unconventional color

combination, but somehow it worked. Perhaps it was the large, dark-brown counter that sat in full view of the enormous window that pulled it all together. Either way, the shop had such an inviting atmosphere that even male clientele would feel comfortable peeking inside.

Dried flower bundles lined the wall. They were part of Marilyn's unique aesthetic.

"Oh my, if it isn't Lady Claudia. Welcome, welcome!" The whole room lit up when Marilyn smiled. Her lustrous beige hair was pinned behind her head. Unlike Claudia, Marilyn had eyes that turned down at the corners, giving her a more welcoming expression by default. Her tall stature gave her the air of a mature adult woman—provided she didn't open her mouth. The moment she spoke, her adorable voice undermined that impression.

"It's been so long," Claudia responded. "How has business been? Have things finally calmed down for you?"

"Thankfully, yes, operations have returned to normal. Have you come for a new bottle of perfume?"

Claudia smiled wanly. "I would be happy to try any recommendations you have, but if you aren't too busy, there's something I would like to discuss with you."

"Certainly. Come this way." Marilyn motioned for Claudia to follow her deeper inside, guiding her into the newly renovated recesses of her shop.

Since Claudia was a duke's daughter, Marilyn ordinarily escorted her to a private room to do business rather than force her to line up at the front counter. It was much easier for Claudia to enjoy shopping when she didn't have to worry about other customers watching her. Marilyn was so sociable and friendly that she always stayed longer than she intended to.

During her brothel days, Claudia had cultivated quite a talent for blending her own perfume, but she was still an amateur. Discussing the trade with an expert like Marilyn was always informative. *Although I should really be paying her for all the knowledge she's offered me.* Marilyn loved having someone to converse with about her passion, so she refused to accept compensation.

The room Marilyn led Claudia to was spacious. There was a sofa and coffee table for guests, with a work table along the wall. What drew her attention the most was a small cabinet on top of the table with dozens of drawers for storing ingredients.

No, she told herself. *I can't forget what I came here for.* Everything was so novel and new that she couldn't help being distracted, but she knew she had to focus.

Marilyn prepared some tea for Claudia, serving her before taking a seat on the opposite sofa. Claudia sat up a little straighter and said, "I apologize for coming here unannounced and demanding your time."

"Please, no need. You are always more than welcome to drop in, Lady Claudia!"

"I'm afraid what I'm here to speak to you about isn't all that pleasant a topic," Claudia admitted haltingly. "I'd like to inquire about the robbery that happened earlier this year, but don't feel obligated if it makes you uncomfortable." It wasn't a polite question, especially given how many months it had been since they last talked, so Claudia couldn't blame Marilyn if she was displeased. It was all a bit selfish of her to barge in and ask these things. Thankfully, Marilyn didn't look the least bit put off.

"I know you better than to think you're inquiring after the robbery solely to sate your curiosity, so I'm happy to answer whatever I can. The authorities grilled me about every little detail of what was stolen, so I'm quite confident I can recount everything easily enough." She threw her head back and let out a genuine laugh, which went a long way to alleviating Claudia's guilt.

"You must have been shocked when it happened, though, right?"

"Oh, I locked myself in my room for several days afterward, but I was able to overcome it thanks to all the support from regulars like you, Lady Claudia. There were parts of the shop that I found inconvenient before, anyway. It was the perfect opportunity to renovate and tailor everything to my tastes." The city watch had insisted on verifying Marilyn's account again and again, and the more she had to revisit the event, the more she had grown determined not to let it get her down.

"The culprit still hasn't been caught, have they?"

Marilyn shook her head. “I’m afraid not. Nor was any evidence found that could give the authorities a lead as to who was responsible. There’s been no trace anywhere in the city of them pawning off the goods they stole either.”

No evidence. The authorities had the same problem with that first aristocrat’s murder.

“I heard the thief didn’t bother any of your ingredients,” said Claudia, “but had they been tampered with at all?”

“Oh, yes. The whole shop had been turned upside down. It was a mess!”

“Is it possible they might have found some of your recipes?” This was what Claudia had been waiting to ask the whole time.

Marilyn froze, her eyes growing wide. “Y-yes,” she answered breathlessly. “You know, it actually didn’t make any sense to me!”

The authorities had insisted, based on their investigation, that the criminal had only been after items of immediate monetary value and that they’d had no interest in her perfumes. Something about that hadn’t sat right with Marilyn. The culprit had ransacked every single room in her shop, including the back room, where nothing of financial value was kept. Only her recipes and documents were stored back there. If a thief had only broken in to make some money, wouldn’t they want in and out as quickly as possible to avoid notice?

“It just struck me as odd that the robber would plunder a room with nothing of interest in it for them.” She paused, a finger on her lips. Her eyes flicked back to Claudia’s. “Goodness, do you think their real intention was to steal my recipes?!”

“I think it’s possible they used robbery as a front to steal information in your possession. That said, I must remind you that this is only supposition on my part.”

It was also possible that the authorities were correct in their assessment that the assailant had turned over the entire place searching anywhere and everywhere for items of value.

Marilyn shook her head. “I quite think you’re onto something, Lady Claudia. Shouldn’t we go to the city watch with this information?”

“Yes, and in fact, I think you should tell them about your own gut feeling that it wasn’t a simple robbery.”

“I will do just that,” Marilyn said, then went still. “Oh!”

“What is it?”

“Well, speaking of gut feelings reminded me of something. I caught the whiff of a strange scent in my shop the day the robbery happened.”

“A strange scent?”

Marilyn bobbed her head. “Yes. I didn’t recognize it immediately. Maybe the mixture of dust in the air after the whole place had been ransacked threw me off. But I smelled something similar recently.”

Claudia furrowed her brow. “And?”

“I’m only telling you this because I know you’re quite sensitive to scents as well, but it smelled awfully similar to the unique body odor those delegates from Parte have.”

Claudia had recently discussed that very subject with Ruki, when he told her how popular it was with the courtesans. *He said that there have been more customers from Parte visiting the brothels for a while now.* The tentative theory forming in her head made her pulse quicken.

“But, um, I’m not absolutely certain of that!” Marilyn blurted out in a panic. “I could be mistaken.”

“True. I’m sure you were shaken the day of the robbery. Still, I trust your sense of smell implicitly, so I doubt you were mistaken.” No one had a more sensitive nose than Marilyn. “But since there is no proof to support your instincts, I shall keep this a secret between the two of us. You needn’t worry.”

“Thank you. I won’t share it with anyone else either.”

Claudia nodded approvingly.

If the culprit were to learn what Marilyn knew, it could expose her to danger. Even more so now that it was becoming increasingly likely that the robber had broken in to steal Marilyn’s recipes and not her valuables. This same person had created a fake Claudia and orchestrated all these schemes behind the scenes. She was beginning to think it wasn’t just someone with links to Parte Kingdom, but rather a coordinated move by the kingdom itself.

I wonder if Lady Niamilia is involved. It was possible she was kept in the dark, if her only purpose was to serve as a pawn and marry the prince. Regardless, if Parte Kingdom's greater goal was to make her crown princess, then the biggest obstacle was none other than Claudia.

Chapter 14:
The Marquess's Daughter Attends the Masquerade Ball

PARTE KINGDOM'S EMBASSY had never been so brightly illuminated as it was tonight. Lights and flowers hung all over the first level, adding a much-needed flourish to the practical but boring design of the building. They were blessed with good weather, so the doors to the garden were thrown open, giving the attendees more space.

The party venue left nothing to be desired—but the brighter something was, the greater the shadows it cast.

A carriage with the Savile family's emblem rolled up to the entrance. A servant rushed to open the door and help the marquess's daughter down. When she looked up to survey the venue, she noticed that the corridors leading away from the main event hall were awfully dark.

I wonder if it's a bad habit of mine, always finding fault somewhere. She took a breath to clear her head, trying to remind herself that this was a masquerade ball and she was in costume. The only part of her ensemble that didn't belong was her beloved folding fan, which she'd been loath to leave behind.

Before she could search for a familiar face, a friend approached her. "Lady Louise, good to see…you?"

"Good to see you as well. Oh dear, does this costume not suit me?" The look of confusion on their face made her drop her gaze. *My maids all assured me it looked good, but what maid wouldn't praise her mistress?*

She had dressed up as a goddess from a fable, with a long white veil over her head and a flowing gown that billowed around her feet. She'd tried to make her outfit accentuate the flowing locks of her golden hair, but perhaps her costume was lacking. She started to worry that she looked silly in this dress.

"No. No! It looks fantastic on you! I was simply caught off guard. I didn't expect you to dress up like this."

Her lips cracked into a smile. "Hee hee, well, I thought I should go all out since it's a special occasion."

“Yes, it was a brilliant idea. Not something you could do at any other party.”

She was pleased to see her friend understood and even enjoyed her costume. Besides, her friend was right; she couldn’t dress up like this anywhere else but here. Regardless of whether she was pulling it off as perfectly as she hoped, she was at least relieved that her friend hadn’t found it off-putting.

After doing the rounds and saying hello to everyone, she paused to scan the venue for a familiar head of long black hair. “Is Lady Claudia still not here?” she asked a nearby guest.

“I spotted her carriage, so she must be here somewhere.”

The two had discussed beforehand that they would arrive at about the same time, but her friend had yet to appear. It was beginning to worry her. *Could something have happened?* An accident, or something of that sort?

This was their first masquerade ball in full costume; perhaps there’d been a problem with the ensemble. All she could do was pray that nothing had gone awry. She scarcely had time to do that before a black mass popped up beside her, nearly forcing a scream out of her.

The newcomer was wearing a bear suit with a tuxedo over it. She cocked her head to the side, bewildered.

“Hm?” said the bear. “You’re…Lady Louise, right?”

“Of course she is,” interjected Lestea, who was dressed as a hunter. “I apologize if this lumbering bear surprised you.”

While she couldn’t see the bear’s face, she recognized his voice. “N-no, it’s fine,” she stammered out. “Prince Raul, you really pulled out all the stops, didn’t you?”

There were always a few people who dressed as animals at a full-costume masquerade ball, and she could understand why a person would go that route. The problem in Raul’s case was that his costume was so realistic, she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was a real, live bear walking around in their midst.

“I figured if I was going to attend, I might as well make an impact. I used a bear hide for the suit, so it turned out quite realistic. The only downside is that it’s hard to see out of it, and just as difficult to breathe.”

That explained it: the head and body were *real*. A professional tailor had surely made some adjustments for the comfort of the wearer, but the way Raul described it was worrying.

“Please don’t force yourself to keep it on for the whole party,” she said.

“Yeah, I’ll take it off after I’ve had the opportunity to enjoy everyone’s reaction.”

Thankfully, the head and body weren’t connected, so he could remove the head for comfort. Still, the whole thing was heavy enough that he needed someone to support him as he moved in it. Lestea was glued to him, doing just that. He was paying quite the price for sporting one of the most amusing costumes at the party.

“All right, well, we’ll see you again later,” said Raul, waddling off in his bear costume.

Not a moment after he was gone, she spotted a familiar head of red hair. She strode up to him, her blonde hair swaying against her back as she went. “Good evening, Lord Tristan.”

“Oh! Lady…Louise?” He studied her as she smiled at him through her veil, the confusion plain in his eyes.

She had looked at herself in the mirror before she left and felt quite proud of how her costume had turned out, but everyone else was initially thrown off when she met them. The one silver lining was that they seemed entertained by the novelty of it.

At ordinary parties, women were expected to dress purely for beauty. There was something uniquely entertaining about a masquerade ball, which had her in high spirits. She had taken such a liking to it that she hoped they would happen more often in high society. Granted, preparing for them was quite the chore.

“That’s right! It’s me, Louise. Did I surprise you?”

“You most certainly did! No one could’ve predicted you’d come dressed like that!” He grinned from ear to ear, nodding emphatically. She couldn’t help but smile too.

Tristan was wearing ceremonial attire typically reserved for knights, along with wolf ears and a tail. He probably meant to look like a wolfman, but given his personality, he looked more like a harmless puppy. Not that she could ever tell him that.

“I’m glad I could entertain you,” she said.

“Have you met Lady Claudia yet?”

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t, actually. But I’d like to find her, and soon.”

“Huh? You haven’t? She got here a little bit ago.” He hastily added, “I saw her carriage roll up.”

“I assume she must be over in the garden?”

The embassy staff couldn’t very well dismantle the walls just for the party, so it was harder to find someone among the guests if they retreated into the other rooms or to the garden. There weren’t any windows with a sweeping view of the garden, so she would have to go out there herself to check.

“Even if she was, I think she would stand out,” she murmured to herself.

Claudia always drew attention thanks to her family’s spot at the top of the aristocratic hierarchy, but all the more so at a ball where people would be anticipating her costume. Yet no matter how much she scanned the room, she saw no sign of her friend.

Both she and Tristan desperately checked the crowd, wondering where she might be. Just as she was beginning to think that she ought to go off and search for her, a scream pierced the air.

“What was that?!” Tristan exclaimed. He raced off toward the source of the sound. She scurried along behind him. The two left the event hall behind, running down a corridor where a crowd had already begun to gather. The scream must have originated from one of the ladies there.

“Help!” cried the man in the middle of the group, his voice trembling with fear. “Lady Claudia is trying to kill me!”

Tristan forced his way through the crowd, rushing to the fallen man. Blood oozed down his face. “You… You’re Lord Sasriel’s son!”

“I’m begging you,” he said. “Help me!”

“Someone send for a doctor immediately! Don’t worry, the wound isn’t very deep.”

Drestin clutched at Tristan’s shirt, smearing blood on it. He must have touched the wound on his head; his injuries weren’t as

serious as he let on, which was why Tristan was so calm. Surprisingly, the very person he'd accused was hovering a short distance behind him. She had white cat ears on her head and a cat mask over her face, but the loose black ringlets that fell around her shoulders were unmistakable. She was wearing the same sort of gown she usually did, which made it even easier for those around to recognize her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Eek! It's her!" Drestin wailed. "She attacked me!" He threw himself at Tristan, clinging to him. All the blood drained from his face, and his whole body shook.

"Who did?" Tristan asked.

"Claudia!" Drestin barked back at him impatiently, as if it should have been obvious. "You see her, she's right there! Arrest her!" Tears ran down his cheeks.

Everyone glanced between him and his alleged attacker, confused.

"Why isn't anyone doing anything? Is it because she's a duke's daughter?!" Drestin shouted.

"No, uh..."

The scene drew more and more attention the louder he howled and screamed.

As Tristan worked to stanch the bleeding, he said, "To clarify, Lord Drestin, you're accusing Lady Louise?"

"What? Didn't you hear me? I said Lady Claudia did it! She's right there!"

"I'm sorry, I should have phrased myself better. Are you accusing Lady Louise, who's dressed up as Lady Claudia?"

Drestin blinked at Tristan. "Huh? What? What're you talking about?" He was struggling to keep up.

Louise—or rather, Claudia, who had been dressed as Louise this entire time—stepped forward to stand beside Tristan. "Allow me to explain," she said. "The 'Claudia' you see over there is actually Lady Louise, wearing a costume to look like me. I am the real Claudia." She reached up and lifted the blonde wig off her head to prove her point.



Chapter 15:
The Villainess Schemes

THE LIGHTS IN THE HALLWAY continued to burn, oblivious to the fuss that had erupted. By contrast, the cacophony of voices hushed the moment she removed her wig to reveal the dark, lustrous ringlets underneath. They stood out against the white dress she had worn, fashioned to look like a goddess's gown. Her blue eyes shone with determination and charisma, drawing everyone's attention. The people waited with bated breath to see what she would do.

Drestin gawked at her, his whole body frozen in place.

"The sun has gone down, leaving shadows everywhere," said Claudia. "So are you claiming it was Lady Louise who attacked you?"

"N-no," he squeaked out desperately. "It was Claudia... Y-you were the one who attacked me."

"You're accusing *me*?"

That was absurd. Everyone had seen her since the moment she arrived in the Savile family's carriage. Some of the very people she'd greeted and spoken with were present in the crowd, and they vouched for her innocence. Drestin was losing all credibility. People began to eye him with suspicion, their sympathy for him as a victim rapidly dissipating.

"I'm not lying! It was most definitely Claudia who attacked me! I-I smelled her perfume! And she had long black hair!"

"What perfume?" Claudia asked.

"Rose perfume! The scent you always wear. You can't fool my nose!"

"This, you mean?" Claudia squatted down and used her folding fan to send some of her scent his way.

The moment his nose caught a whiff, he nodded vigorously. "Yes, that."

"Yes, this is the perfume I always wear. But Lady Louise wasn't wearing this."

Perplexed murmurs flitted through the crowd.

Louise strode forward, the black locks of her wig dancing around her shoulders with each step. “I am wearing the same perfume I always do. It’s my favorite.”

Louise’s perfume was a flowery scent with a warmth to it, reminiscent of walking through a park on a spring day. It was noticeably different from Claudia’s, and everyone understood there was no way for either of them to wash off the scent of their perfumes unless they bathed. An impossible task, considering they both had gone to great lengths dressing up as one another, from makeup to ensemble.

“But I’m sure…” Drestin’s voice trailed off.

“You must have been attacked by someone else dressed like me,” Claudia concluded. “I’m afraid I’ve heard of similar incidents as well.” The most recent one in memory—for all present—was Lord Thomas’s murder, where Wendy had dressed up as Claudia in an attempt to frame her. And though it was not public information, there was also the imposter who had been preying on Drestin.

“That can’t be… Hold on. You and I are…” Drestin babbled, failing to come to terms with the situation. He reached for her, trying to cling to her now instead of Tristan.

“The young lord must be confused after being attacked,” echoed a calm voice behind them. “We should see to it that he’s treated, then give him time to rest.”

Sylvester had arrived with a doctor in tow. He was dressed in all black, a striking departure from his typical pure-white attire. Where his bangs would normally have been slicked back, they were left tousled and unkempt. This rugged transformation might have produced some squeals from the girls if not for the serious atmosphere.

The doctor escorted Drestin away so he could rest in a separate room. Before the two left, Sylvester leaned in briefly to whisper in Drestin’s ear, at which point Drestin snapped his mouth shut and didn’t make another peep.

“What did you say to him?” Claudia asked afterward.

“I only told him that we had evidence of his family’s secret arrangement.” By that, he was referring to the one between Lord Sasriel and Parte Kingdom. It was treasonous to make such a

bargain without input or permission of the king or parliament. Sylvester informed her that they had forced the marquess to comply with an investigation and found a document on his person that served as proof of his deal with Parte. “Well,” he amended, “I should say his deal with the Bendins, not Parte as a whole.”

As the two of them spoke privately, she noticed his gaze had wandered. Claudia followed it, only to find Niamilia standing there with a stony expression.

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Their plan had begun well before the masquerade party. Outside, the sky was crimson as the two of them stood before her mirror. Claudia’s face was already covered by the white veil.

Sylvester scanned her and nodded approvingly. “I wish I could say it’s perfect, but I can’t help feeling something is off.”

“I agree,” she said. “Maybe it’s because I know all the details of Lou’s appearance, but I can’t help seeing all the differences in our faces.”

Claudia was wearing a blonde wig and a white, toga-like dress. Her maids had used makeup to soften her features, and she was wearing a binder to make her breasts a more modest size. She looked the perfect goddess, if she did say so herself, but she hadn’t quite managed to make herself look exactly like Louise. No matter how many times she looked at her reflection, she couldn’t shake the sense that some aspect was incomplete.

“As long as no one looks too closely, it’s good enough to fool them,” Sylvester said.

She nodded slowly. “Yes, I think the hair on its own may be enough to trick some people.” Especially since the overall outline of her figure matched Louise’s quite well. People often mistook a person when looking at them from behind, and that happened on a regular enough basis. Plus, she had one of the Saviles’ carriages waiting for her outside. In return, she had loaned one of her family’s carriages for Louise’s use.

“You came up with quite a bold idea, dressing up as your best friend.”

Claudia smiled at him. “Really? You are the one who did it first, Syl.”

“I suppose I did.”

She was referring to when he switched places with Lestea midway through the masquerade ball in the border region.

“I don’t know how well I’ll be able to fool them, though.”

“It depends on how much you prey upon people’s preconceptions. Those who aren’t very familiar with Lady Louise will assume you’re her the moment you step out of her family’s carriage.” He chuckled. “This will be something of an experiment.”

“Lou won’t be in any danger, will she?”

“I have a shadow guarding her, though I doubt the enemy will attempt to strike against you—or her—at the party.”

It would be one thing if it were a personal squabble between two people, but Parte would take the blame for any injuries incurred at their embassy’s party. If someone did go after Claudia, it would become an international incident. They didn’t anticipate any moves that might negatively impact Niamilia’s position as a bridal candidate.

Perhaps that’s where the answer lies: in who benefits from all this and who doesn’t.

There had been so many incidents—robberies, murders—and then there were Parte’s ulterior motives. After taking it all into account, Claudia and Sylvester had reached the same conclusion: everything stood to benefit Niamilia. Wendy’s arrest painted the rest of the bridal candidates from Harland in a bad light. Whether or not she managed to pull off her scheme and frame Claudia, the culprit still stood to benefit. Claudia’s arrest would have made a bigger impact, but Wendy losing face worked well enough in their favor. *The person behind it didn’t care what happened to Wendy.* Wendy was nothing but a pawn to them.

The ill premonition that had been churning in Claudia’s gut seemed to be right on the mark. The authorities had searched for the culprit whom Wendy swore up and down she had in her custody, yet they couldn’t find the man. Wendy had also claimed there were slaves being trafficked up in the north, but there were no traces of such a thing there either. Naturally, Wendy asserted that was because Claudia had gone to great lengths to hide

evidence of her crimes. The more she spouted her conspiracy theories, the less stock anyone put into what she had to say.

"It still bothers me that we weren't able to figure out who this Hubert really is," she said.

"Wendy's conspiracy theories are actually right, though she's wrong about the culprit. I doubt she'll be able to accept reality."

Helen had inquired with the Lloyds' maids and discovered that Hubert was a merchant Wendy had favored. From there, they went to the merchants' guild where he would be registered to follow up on that lead—except his information had been expertly falsified. He'd even managed to fool the Lloyds' longtime merchant, who in turn had introduced him to Wendy and her family. They took down descriptions of his appearance, but further searches had thus far turned up nothing.

"He's done a commendable job erasing his tracks," Sylvester said, his tone anything but complimentary.

It rankled that Hubert had so brazenly tricked so many people right here in the heart of Harland. His actions had left a stain on the merchants' guild, and they were furious. If he didn't disguise himself well, he wouldn't be safe walking around the capital any longer. In addition to the authorities and the merchants' guild, Rose Garden was keeping an eye out too.

"Our enemy seems much more adept at disguising themselves than we are," said Claudia. She never would have known about the person impersonating her if she hadn't happened to visit the border region.

"He and his entire house are being subjected to a full search. A messenger should reach us with word of the investigation's findings before the end of the night," said Sylvester.

The only reason Sylvester was able to return to the capital was because their investigation had turned up enough for him to leave the rest to his men. Tristan, who had accompanied him, was forced to scramble home to change to make it in time for the masquerade ball.

Sylvester reached out and pinched the fabric of her veil between his fingers, playing with it. "A merchant came forward to tip us off about the document that Lord Sasriel and Lord Bendin had signed, proving their agreement."

Claudia stared back at him, wide-eyed. “One of the local merchants outed him?” Not even Brian had managed to get that out of the merchants he’d spoken to.

“He must have understood the gravity of the situation once I arrived on the scene. He’d be getting no more preferential treatment once the marquess was deposed, so better to put the royal family in his debt by coming forward. Sadly for him, I don’t reward such calculating, self-serving behavior.” Sylvester smiled, but his eyes were ice-cold. The merchant had made the greedy, ill-advised move of trying to fleece Sylvester for the information. As for whatever happened to him afterward, Claudia opted not to ask. “We can assume, based on the marquess’s attitude and the merchants’ actions—or lack thereof—that the deal Lord Sasriel agreed to stipulated there would be no war.”

Preparing for war was an expensive endeavor. It would save the marquess an immense amount of money if he knew beforehand that there would be no such war. He’d grown accustomed to peace. A guarantee of that peace continuing was more than he could ever ask for.

“As for Lord Bendin, he probably thought it would be much easier for him to strike a deal with the marquess and ensure there was no hostility from him while he orchestrated Niamilia’s rise to power.”

It would keep both sides from having unnecessary expenditures. On the other hand, their secret agreement meant there would be no new business opportunities for the local merchants. They would’ve found it suspicious that the marquess wasn’t buying up supplies, then investigated the situation on their own. That was how the merchant who’d tipped Sylvester off found out about the document both parties had signed. The marquess had pressured him and the rest of the merchants into silence.

“If the marquess completely cut ties with a merchant, it could spell the end of their career. Plus, if they knew that no war was happening, then they could continue their businesses unimpeded,” said Sylvester.

“It could have been a peace agreement between our two nations, had it been public and approved by all parties,” Claudia added wistfully.

As things stood, there were no casualties as a result of the agreement. It was harmless, for the most part, which was why the merchants had agreed to stay quiet. The problem was that the marquess had tricked the rest of Harland for his own benefit. That was treasonous.

"If we find more substantial proof, the marquess's life is as good as forfeit." Sylvester frowned. "I cannot say the same for the Bendins, unfortunately."

Even if they tried to expose the Bendins for their interference in Harland's affairs, it would be an international matter. The people still harbored hostility toward Harland, which further complicated the situation. All they could do was pray that the people in Parte got on the same page and handled the matter rationally.

"It's worth pursuing, though," said Sylvester. "Especially since we discovered that the Bendins are responsible for fanning the flames of resentment toward us."

Claudia jumped in surprise. "What, they were?!"

"Yes, as much as it pains me to say." He motioned for her to take a seat. "You don't want to be standing for what else I have to tell you." Though her stomach sank, she took his advice. As soon as she was settled in, Sylvester told her, "We arrested a number of monks. Again."

"Again?" Her voice hitched. "After we had to do the same thing last year?" Claudia couldn't forget all the faithful whom Nigel had abandoned after using them for his own evil ends.

"I didn't want to believe it could be them, but we hadn't found anyone else instigating hostile sentiments, so we widened our search. Unfortunately, that was how we discovered the ones responsible." He reached over and gently stroked her head, trying to alleviate the headache that Claudia felt coming as a result of all this information. Each time his fingers threaded through her hair, her heart grew lighter. "What tipped us off was that the areas where the hostility seemed to originate were where Parte's churches are."

Each church was preaching the same negative message simultaneously, pointing the finger of blame at Harland for Parte's ills. It was one thing for an individual to have misgivings about a

foreign nation, but when other people began professing the same thing, it created a sense of shared dissatisfaction that fostered more resentment. Eventually, those sentiments spread from their area of origin to the rest of the country, snowballing until they became widespread among the citizens. That was why Harland centered their investigation where the negative sentiments were strongest, and the evidence led them to their final answer.

"Prince Seraphim would be pleased to hear about this," said Claudia.

Sylvester shrugged. "He would, if we could publicize it." He sighed, as if expelling a loud breath might also purge his melancholy. "We apprehended the monk chiefly responsible, and he admitted to his involvement, but we conducted this investigation without Parte's approval."

He went on to explain that the monk had acknowledged his ties to Lord Bendin, stating that he'd been paid to express negative sentiments toward Harland. The investigation had also uncovered a written agreement substantiating the monk's testimony. That was concrete enough proof in this case, but Parte hadn't been involved in any step of the investigation. Harland had overstepped enough that if they weren't careful, their actions could be interpreted as political interference, triggering war. Demanding action from the church wouldn't do any good either; they'd just be cutting off the tail of the beast, not its head.

"It won't lead to the result Seraphim would want, that's for certain," said Sylvester.

"Indeed, and exposing the church's involvement would only make the people more distrustful of the institution as a whole."

The situation wasn't black and white, especially since the church's teachings had become a mainstay in Harland as well as its neighboring countries. Aristocrats and commoners alike turned to their faith for emotional support. Attacking the church would pull the rug out from under a huge portion of their population.

At any rate, the church and the religion it represented weren't the source of evil. The real malefactors were the few people in it who sinned without compunction; many more were making invaluable contributions. Even in Harland, there were places where the government's aid couldn't reach the people. It was the church that extended its merciful hand to help them.

“Thankfully, this has helped further my cause,” said Sylvester. While he wasn’t quite as extreme as Seraphim in vouching for restrictions against the church, Sylvester had been advocating for a greater separation between church and state since last year. He claimed it would be safer for everyone. Even if this matter wasn’t made public, the royal family would share what they had learned with the rest of parliament. Sylvester would gain even more support for his future policies. “It seemed to me as if the faithful we apprehended anticipated being caught, but maybe I’m overthinking things.”

“I know exactly what you mean, though.”

Though they didn’t say so aloud, they were both thinking of the same man. That blond hair mixed with gray, those seemingly calm blue eyes. While it was still too early to assume he was involved in all of this, they couldn’t rule it out. Still, they couldn’t shake the feeling there was something even bigger behind all these incidents, perhaps because of their experiences with Nigel last year.

“We can leak the evidence we’ve gathered to Lord Bendin’s enemies, at least.”

“Clever idea, Syl. By doing that, we can force Parte into solving the issue internally without involving us.”

While they might be able to bring Lord Bendin to account for his crimes, his enemies in Parte had no such restrictions. They wouldn’t like how much he stood to benefit if Niamilia became Sylvester’s betrothed. They would be all too happy for the opportunity to undermine Lord Bendin.

“What bothers me,” said Claudia, “is how he was so sure there would be no war after the lengths he went to fanning the public’s resentment toward us. If their hostility hit a fever pitch, they would be beyond his or anyone else’s control.”

Powerful political families in Parte served the same purpose as aristocrats in Harland, but unlike their Harlander counterparts, they had no final say in policy because their country was a republic. Mob rule was an inescapable danger in Parte. That was effectively already happening, or else the delegation wouldn’t have come to warn them about a war in which both sides only stood to lose.

At first glance, it wouldn't seem like Lord Bendin's secret agreement with Lord Sasriel had any connection to the church inciting negativity among the people. That is, unless Lord Bendin had a good reason to believe they really *could* avoid war.

"Lord Bendin must have some means of ensuring Niamilia is chosen as crown princess," Claudia concluded.

"I suspect the same," Sylvester agreed.

The key was probably the agent who had manipulated so much here in Harland. They still hadn't managed to pin down the person's identity, despite knowing someone besides Wendy had been impersonating Claudia. This imposter's existence didn't make sense, particularly given the scale of the rest of this scheme. If the purpose of all of this was to give Niamilia more legitimacy as the next crown princess, then Claudia was the biggest obstacle. The culprit behind all of this hadn't dealt her a significant blow at all, especially now that Wendy was behind bars.

There had to be something more.

Drestin was the biggest hint that they were missing something; why would someone go out of their way to impersonate Claudia and entice him? Even if he publicly claimed there was a relationship between them, no one would buy it if Claudia denied it. After all, she was the most influential bridal candidate to the crown prince. Why would she throw away the kingdom's most desirable bachelor and all the status and privilege that came with it for someone like Drestin? It was too out of character. No one would believe it. So why, then, had the enemy sought to manipulate him?

The answer wasn't an obvious one. At least, Claudia didn't think so.

There was, in fact, an opportunity coming up where the culprit could capitalize on their carefully laid plan: the masquerade ball Niamilia was hosting. Drestin had received an invite as well. He and Claudia would both be in costume for the event, but they would meet at the party. Drestin was convinced he'd spent an intimate night with Claudia. With his personality, he was sure to approach her, and something was bound to happen.

The culprit didn't have much time to make their move. Parte was using the possibility of war to strong-arm Harland, but the

more days that passed, the more likely Harland was to come up with some way to avoid meeting their demands. The culprit needed to do something to ensure Harland couldn't back out of marrying Niamilia to Sylvester before then.

"I wonder if Lady Niamilia is involved," Claudia murmured to herself.

"We'll know in due time."

Lord Bendin's involvement was crystal clear, but there was nothing to suggest Niamilia was in on it too. Despite that, Claudia suspected that Niamilia was the one impersonating her. Not that she could tell anyone else her thoughts, as they were based on pure gut feeling.

"I have a shadow tailing Drestin too," said Sylvester. "Though I don't care one whit what happens to him."

Although Claudia hadn't spoken a word about her interactions with Drestin while she was in the border region, Sylvester detested Drestin even without that ammunition. As he told it, Drestin had been ogling Claudia while he was in the capital before, and Sylvester hadn't liked him since. The only reason he'd ordered a shadow to follow Drestin was to make sure he didn't go after Louise, who was dressed as Claudia. Also, the culprit would surely make contact with Drestin, which would give them an opportunity to unveil the mastermind. They were all but convinced that the culprit would show up and impersonate Claudia again.

"I'm more nervous than ever," Claudia admitted.

"Shall I help you relax?" Sylvester's canines peeked out from his lips as he grinned mischievously at her. He grabbed her hand, coaxing her out of her seat. He swung his arms wide, knocking his cloak open. It fluttered around him like wings. Beneath the cloak, he wore a long black tunic. The dark, shadowy color of his attire contrasted greatly with his porcelain skin and silver hair.

Outside, the sun was beginning to set. The dimming crimson light poured in through the window behind Sylvester, casting an eerie silhouette.

"You cannot escape me, my dear," he said, his long shadow encroaching on her personal space.

Claudia, looking every bit like an ancient goddess, clasped her hands in front of her chest. Anyone who saw her would have thought she was praying for safety from her predator, but she confidently declared, “I have no reason to run.”

“Even though you know I’m about to pounce?” Sylvester looked like a beautiful vampire, his golden eyes narrowed and gleaming with amusement.

As the seconds trickled by, the last of the light retreated behind the horizon. With the natural lighting gone, the temperature began to dip, but the vampire’s gaze was no less feverish than before. There was a hunger in his eyes that made the goddess before him gulp, even as she found it impossible to tear her eyes away. He reached her in quick strides, hands flicking away the pure-white veil that concealed her face.

His warm, calloused fingers stroked her cheek. He touched her as if she were fragile, breakable. The ticklish sensation made her pull back, her long blonde hair like sunlight in the darkness as it fell over her shoulders.

“You’re not afraid.”

“Of course not. I know you wouldn’t be rough with me. Besides…I’m just as eager to touch you,” she replied, voice dropping to deeper notes the more she spoke. The goddess reached a hand up to touch his cheek. He stood perfectly still, letting the warmth of her touch wash over him.

“You shouldn’t put too much faith in my ability to control myself.”

“Goodness, do you mean to imply it’s not just my blood you’re after?”

His lips tugged upward. “As if you even need to ask. You already know it’s you I have fallen for, not merely your blood.” The vampire lunged toward her, his arm snaking around her waist, pulling her flush against him. The strength of his embrace had her heart hammering in her chest.

The moment their noses brushed, she could contain her embarrassment no longer and turned her head away. Her eyes landed on the nearby mirror. In the same moment, she gasped as his teeth pressed against the soft, sensitive skin of her neck, sending a pleasant chill through her.

“Mm, Syl, you can’t,” she whined. “You’ll leave a mark.”

As sweetly and ineffectively as she protested, she was a defenseless little bird in the jaws of the beast. He latched on to her neck, appearing in the mirror exactly like a vampire drinking its victim’s blood, until the sweet sensation caused her legs to give out.



Chapter 16:
The Villainess Discovers the Truth

AFTER THE FUSS at the masquerade ball, Claudia and Sylvester found themselves in Niamilia's private quarters. Niamilia and her middle-aged chamberlain were across from them, and a number of Harland's knights formed a human wall between.

"There's no talking your way out of this," said Sylvester.

Niamilia hung her head. Sylvester and his knights had already recovered the burnt remains of a disguise from her fireplace. She was the one who had posed as Claudia and attacked Drestin; the shadow Sylvester had tailing Drestin had confirmed as much. Though perhaps the biggest evidence of her guilt was the lingering scent of Claudia's rose perfume in the air.

This was how it had all started:

Niamilia, dressed as Claudia, had summoned Drestin to a private room, where she then attacked him. She purposefully let him go so he could run wailing to the rest of the upper crust that she had accosted him. In the meantime, Louise, who was also dressed as Claudia, was led by a servant through a separate entrance. She was to receive special treatment because she was a duke's daughter, they had told her. The route they had her take would buy them some time so she would have no alibi when Drestin accused her.

"You were also the one who impersonated me in the border region, weren't you?" Claudia asked her.

Drestin had claimed he remembered their night together vividly, including the locations of even the tiniest beauty marks on her body. They had questioned him about that and confirmed his description matched Niamilia.

Niamilia smiled sadly back at her and said, "I'm surprised he couldn't see through the disguise but managed to remember such minor details about my body." Her navy-blue eyes studied Claudia for a moment before she asked, "What tipped you off about me?"

"Honestly, I wasn't entirely certain it was you." Someone else might very well have been impersonating her. "But deep down, I thought you were perfectly equipped to pull it off."

Claudia couldn't fully pass herself off as Louise because their body types were too different. There was one other important aspect required to pull off an impersonation: mimicking the person's gestures. Claudia was known widely as the perfect noble lady, her every moment so graceful that she was seen as a role model by her peers. Only someone able to imitate her impeccable etiquette could conceivably trick people into thinking they were her. It might not have been necessary to trick someone who didn't know Claudia, but Drestin did. The person who deceived him had to be as refined as Claudia.

"Plus, our eye colors are similar enough," Claudia added.

Where Claudia's eyes were a purer blue, Niamilia's were a deep navy. Yet in the darkness, most wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Anyone could wear a wig to copy Claudia's hair or use makeup to recreate her appearance, but they could not change the color of their eyes. Even a mask could only do so much. Considering all the requirements to succeed in such an elaborate disguise, there were very few people out there who could accomplish it.

Although it was possible the Bendins had someone highly trained in espionage who could have done it rather than Lady Niamilia herself.

"You're exactly right," Niamilia admitted with a shrug.

"Are you also responsible for the murder of that noble from the aristocratic faction?"

"Isn't Lady Wendy the one who did that?"

"The court of public opinion has deemed her guilty, yes, but there's no proof connecting her to it. Lady Wendy denies she was involved."

"And you believe what she says?"

Claudia smiled. "Even if the rest of the world does not, I do, yes."

She believed Wendy even if Wendy thought she was the source of all evil. No matter how twisted Wendy had become, she still wasn't as rotten to the core as someone else Claudia knew. Fermina and Wendy were similar in that they both thought themselves just and engaged in their own "vigilantism," but there was something very different about the two. Wendy believed her

actions to be for the welfare of the entire kingdom and for the man she loved. Fermina had only acted in her own self-interest. That was probably why Claudia couldn't bring herself to hate Wendy, especially now that she knew someone had tricked her. Claudia could only hope that Wendy would eventually recognize her crimes and repent for them.

"How kind of you." Niamilia smiled weakly. "I wish I were more like you, that I could stick to my principles and bow to no one. I know I can never be forgiven for what I've done, but I had no choice if I wanted to survive." A single tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek. "I cannot disobey Lord Bendin. I..." Her voice trembled, and a dam seemed to break within her, the tears falling faster. "I'm not Niamilia. I'm an imitation of Lord Bendin's making!" Her voice boomed with the admission.

What Niamilia shared with them after that came as such a shock, Claudia and Sylvester were left speechless.

Chapter 17:
A Young Girl Is Raised to Be a Villainess

BEFORE SHE BECAME Niamilia, she was Nina. The fact that the two names were a bit similar was entirely coincidence.

Nina grew up in squalor, living in the conflict region. Impoverished as her family was, they found a way to survive. Her mother was terrifying when she was angry. Her father was always too indulgent with his children. Her little brother was insufferable but adorable all the same.

Since she was born in the conflict zone, the harsh conditions there were normal for her. Her family worked together, splitting any food they had among themselves and doing their best to get by.

Everything changed when the Bendins expressed an interest in taking Nina into their care. Nina didn't want to leave her family behind, but she also couldn't refuse the money the Bendins had offered. It was an opportunity to move the rest of her family somewhere safer. And so she agreed, boarding the carriage they brought to take her away.

Around the time the carriage crossed the border into Parte, she was beset by an indescribable fear. The way she was forced to leave her family and her home felt as raw as having the very skin torn from her body. She snapped her eyes shut and slapped her hands over her ears to block out the world, yet her body wouldn't stop trembling. All she could do was pray that the terror would pass.

The head of the Bendin household had no sympathy for her when she arrived. He laughed and proclaimed this the work of the Capricious God. Nina had only been welcomed into their household because the real Niamilia had died at the tender age of three, and Nina was to take her place.

"Ahh, sweet Niamilia, where have you been? I was so worried about you."

The lord's wife had always been a sickly woman, and her daughter's death had broken her. She deluded herself into thinking Niamilia was still alive, and no one and nothing could convince her otherwise. The lord loved her so much, he'd asked

around to see if some girl out there resembled his daughter enough that he could make his wife's delusions a reality.

"My beloved Niamilia, stay by my side always."

His wife left her door cracked open for her daughter to come visit. The light that spilled out into the corridor at night became a symbol of the twisted love the woman held for her daughter. It also became a source of trauma for Nina.

I can't believe she can't differentiate between a stranger and her own daughter. Part of her was dismayed by it, and another part of her was terrified of the woman's unconditional love. It was so different from the cold, piercing looks the lord gave her.

"You will not disobey me," he said. "Don't forget, I can do whatever I like to your family if you refuse."

Nina was only ever a convenient tool to him. He had forced her to learn aristocratic etiquette as well as subterfuge. While other ladies of her station were exempted from the rigorous training forced on the masses, Lord Bendin insisted she undergo it too. The regimen was so strict, she found herself sometimes wishing for death. But with Lord Bendin using her family as hostages, she couldn't afford to die. The only way for her to protect her loved ones was to obey him.

Chapter 18:
The Other Villainess Faces Reality

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since Nina was put under house arrest in the embassy. She wasn't allowed to leave her room until the royal family decided on her punishment. Guards were posted outside her door around the clock. Only her chamberlain, Darton, was allowed entry because he was the one looking after her. Yet the moment he left her room, a knight would follow him anywhere he went.

As night fell, Nina gazed out her window, wondering how many more meaningless hours she would have to waste waiting around. There were even knights standing watch out in the garden.

"I wonder if they believed me when I said this was all Lord Bendin's idea."

"You weren't lying," said Darton.

"No," she agreed. "I wasn't."

Everything Nina had told Claudia was true. But it wasn't the *whole* truth.

Nina reached up and played with a lock of her wavy red hair. *You have something you want to say, but you can't bring yourself to spit it out. I guess you still have some shame left in you,* she thought, brimming with self-mockery.

When she lifted her gaze, her eyes landed on Darton and the white strands mixed in with his otherwise black hair. *Reminds me of that man.* The other person who popped into her head was aging as well, but his hair was golden blond. No matter how many gray hairs sprouted from his head, they didn't diminish the vibrancy of his remaining flaxen strands.

There were similarities between this other man and Darton. *Still, Darton's very different from him.*

Nina didn't know how to label the emotions churning inside her chest, but when she'd first laid eyes on the other man, it was probably fear she had felt.

"You'll stare a hole through me at the rate you're going," said Darton.

“Not possible, not for you. ‘Fragile’ has never been used to describe you.”

His lips pulled into a smile when she said that. Their time together was peaceful and calm. Even the subtle rustle of clothing whenever either of them moved sounded pleasant to her ears. Her pulse gradually quickened.

“Say, Darton…” Her voice trailed off for a brief moment before she continued, “Why don’t you make a woman of me?”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“No need to play coy. Surely you know that even though I’ve had plenty of opportunities, I have never actually slept with a man,” said Nina.

It’s not because I’ve been trying to protect my chastity either. Foreplay was enough to satisfy Drestin, and he fell asleep before we could do more. It made it all the more ironic—and in her mind, unfair—that he’d managed to memorize where her beauty marks were despite the two never sleeping together.

“That’s because you’re so skilled at manipulating men,” said Darton.

She let out a short, dry chuckle. “All men except you.”

“I’m a withered-up old coot.”

“I doubt that. You just aren’t interested in a girl like me, are you?” Nina had heard plenty of rumors about how much he’d messed around with other women. “What’s wrong with us crossing the line? Can’t you grant my final wish?” It had taken her great courage to suggest it. She reached over, her fingers grazing over the back of his veiny hand. “After all, I’m going to die, aren’t I?”

Darton’s hand was covered in calluses and old scars. Nina had always liked them. She threaded her dainty fingers through his thicker ones.

“I am glad, at least, that you’ll be the one killing me.” She laughed. “Oh, did you think I hadn’t realized? You were sent here to silence me in case our plan fell through, right? Looks like I really do know too much.”

She looked up into his blue eyes, which again reminded her of that other aged man. One who seemed kinder than anyone

else, but possessed more cruelty than anyone she had ever met before. The person who taught her that this was a dog-eat-dog world.

"I can think for myself, you know," Nina said. *Even though Lord Bendin believes I'm nothing but a puppet he can freely control.* "No matter how skilled a warrior is, he can't become a butler without the proper education and training."

People often hired skilled warriors in Parte, but they were almost always assigned somewhere adjacent to a battlefield. Given their skillset, it only made sense.

"You experienced all sorts of battles as a mercenary. Where would you have received the education to become a butler?" Nina gave him a stony look.

Much like Harland, Parte lacked a public education system for its common people. Those from powerful political families had the funds to hire private tutors, but if Darton hailed from such a family, he would have found a more prestigious career than mercenary. As much as Parte prided itself on ensuring its citizens were trained well enough to be warriors, none of them ran to the battlefield out of a genuine desire to put their lives at risk. No, the common people had no other skills they could market, so they became mercenaries out of necessity. If they had more options, they would surely choose something else. All of this brought her back to the same question: how did a mercenary like Darton become a butler for the Bendins?

"There is one place that accepts anyone and everyone," said Nina. "The monastery."

The church was always anxious for more people and provided them with a comprehensive education. The specific skills they were taught were carefully tailored to their natural strengths.

"Thus," she continued, "the only place in Parte where you could've picked up those skills is the monastery."

"You think I am one of the faithful?"

"At the very least, you have some ties to the cardinal, don't you? This whole scheme was of his making."

The reason Lord Bendin was so sure there would be no war was that he had close connections to the church—specifically to Cardinal Nigel. Even if the people's animosity spurred them into

waging war, the church could mediate and resolve the matter before it got too out of hand.

"Lord Bendin thinks he's the one manipulating the church for his own ends, but he's the one dancing in the palm of the cardinal's hand," said Nina.

Nigel was the one who suggested marrying Nina to Sylvester and told Lord Bendin that now was the ideal time to strike.

"I'm impressed you realized all of that. I can see why you caught His Eminence's attention," said Darton.

"I bet he was also the one who told Lord Bendin to hire you as a butler. Probably told him you would be willing to undertake any unsavory tasks he wanted handled. And he must be the one who told Lord Bendin that there was a girl in the conflict zone who closely resembled his late daughter—me."

Nigel was like a shadow that hung over the Bendins, influencing everything they did.

"Did Lord Bendin tell you?" Darton asked.

She shook her head. "I went to a lot of trouble snooping around unnoticed to uncover the truth." At first she had thought Lord Bendin responsible for everything that happened to her, but the more time passed by, the more she began to notice Nigel's involvement in every little affair. To Nigel, she and Lord Bendin were both puppets to be used. He'd sent Darton to act as their butler only so he could keep a close eye on them. "Was it also on his order that I be trained in areas no ordinary lady would?"

"You needed to be able to protect yourself. It would be inconvenient for us if you died."

Ladies from powerful and influential families were exempt from all of the combat training most citizens were ordered to do—but not Nina. On top of learning how to survive on the battlefield, she was taught subterfuge and similar espionage-adjacent skills.

"You are an exceptional lady," Darton told her. "His Eminence was pleased with your work."

"Of course. He made me do all sorts of things."

Nigel had given her a number of orders, all delivered through Lord Bendin. He had Darton to keep a close eye on her, which was why he'd asked her to do a number of inside jobs. It was through that sort of maneuvering that he managed to

increase the number of pawns at his disposal. Thinking about it sent a chill through her.

Darton's bony finger stroked her cheek. Even as old as he was now, he still possessed enough strength to snap a person's neck easily enough. Those eyes of his blazed with an emotion she had never seen in him before. Nina closed her eyes.

Silence stretched between them, the air growing unusually tense.

Darton's hand fell to her shoulder and slid down. Her heart pounded in her ears as she waited, wondering where he would touch her next. But when it ended up being the last place she expected, her eyes snapped open.

"Darton?"

"Right here and now, I swear my allegiance to you, Lady Nina." Darton had knelt to the ground, planting a kiss on top of her foot.

"What are you doing?"

"Exactly what I said." When he stood back up again, he turned and headed toward the brick chimney along the way. He snatched the metal poker and pressed it firmly against one of the bricks. There was a low rumble that echoed from deep inside the chimney. "You're still young. You have plenty of chances to make a better life for yourself."

"What? Darton, what's this all about?"

"Please survive."

Nina understood he was trying to give her a chance to escape, but she couldn't understand why.

"And what do you plan to do?"

"I will stay here and fight the assassin he's surely sent."

"But why?!" Nina cried, voice growing shrill.

He ignored the question and said instead, "You know he will have sent one. He doesn't trust anybody." That was true. Nigel would have accounted for the possibility that Darton might betray him. It wouldn't be surprising if he really had sent an assassin to take care of Nina, just in case. "And knowing him, he will have noticed you aren't just a puppet to Lord Bendin anymore."

Now that Nina had failed, she was a liability to Nigel. Just as he had used her so long as she benefited him, he would throw her away the moment she stopped serving a purpose. She would pose a danger to him if she fell into Harland's hands.

"So why don't the two of us run away together?! Especially if you're swearing allegiance to me!" Her throat had grown so hoarse that she couldn't shout at him as loudly as she might have liked, probably because she already knew he would refuse her.

"As soon as the assassin realizes we aren't here, he will call in reinforcements. I have to stay behind so I can silence him and buy you more time."

"Then I'll stay and—"

Before she could finish her sentence, a strange sound echoed outside the walls of her room.

"I cannot fight at full strength if I have to protect you." Darton seized her by the arm, hauled her toward the chimney, and shoved her inside.

Nina couldn't very well argue the point with him. Even with all the training he had given her, she would only hold him back. *But still, what point is there in me surviving after everything we've done?*

She had developed ambitions of her own. That was the real reason she had followed the orders she was given. And her ambitions were finally about to come to fruition. She could die without any regrets. Nina had resolved herself to her fate, so why was Darton telling her to live?

Nina stood frozen in the chimney.

"Private Nina!" Darton bellowed at her.

"Yes, sir!" Nina responded instinctively, flinching. His voice was like a crack of thunder, like a boulder that had slammed into her head. This was how he spoke to her when he was in his demonic instructor mode. She couldn't help but fall in line.

"You bonehead!" he snapped at her. "Quit dawdling and get moving!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Her heart protested most vigorously, but her body moved on its own. Nina had been taught to follow her instructor's orders no matter what. There was no room for

thinking on her own; she just needed to do as he told her. Those lessons had been so firmly ingrained in her that she couldn't defy them.

The chimney led to a secret tunnel. With no source of light, she felt along the walls and stumbled her way forward.

Why? Why is this happening?

Emotion welled up inside of her, tears pricking at her eyes and pouring down her cheeks.

Nina had never once been free, not since Lord Bendin ripped her away from her family. What point was there in living now? Especially without Darton. *Please don't leave me all alone.* Nina understood that he'd only been with her to keep watch, but he was also the only person who ever called her by her real name. *If you die on me, I'll never forgive you!*

Darton was strong. Before she came along, he'd taken care of all the Bendins' dirty work. He was much older now, but he was powerful enough that no normal warrior could fell him. That said, Nigel would've selected an experienced assassin; he didn't fully trust Darton's loyalty.

Please, oh please. She knew how futile it was to hope, yet she clung to hope all the same.

She was covered in soot and dust by the time she made it out, and she emerged in a forested park near the capital's high-end district. Despite how close this was to the embassy, she couldn't believe how easily her countrymen had managed to carve this tunnel.

The park was carefully maintained, so there were no dangerous wild animals to worry about. On the other hand, it would be simple for questionable characters to use the cover of darkness it provided.

Nina refused to let the fear seep in. She had undergone strict training to deal with situations just like this.

"Doesn't look like this is going to work out, though."

The enemy must have found out about the secret tunnel from the embassy. From what she could sense through the darkness, there were already dozens of people surrounding her. She gave in.

If I'm going to be killed anyway, I wish Darton would have been the one to do it. Unfortunately, that particular wish wasn't going to come true.

Nina steeled herself. If the end result was going to be the same, the least she could do was put up a good fight.

No sooner had she made her decision than a flash of bright light fell upon her. She squinted. *Are they trying to blind me?!* She reached for the hem of her dress and raised it in front of her face to block some of the light. When her vision finally adjusted, she was shocked to see a woman with long, wavy dark hair standing there stoically, lantern in hand.

"Why are you—?!" Nina blurted out, too stunned to say more.

When Nina first encountered Claudia, she wasn't surprised by what she saw. Claudia was exactly as the reports had stated: elegant and overflowing with confidence, the perfect noble lady. She also had an adorable smile. That was something Nina had noticed while they were at the tea party together.

But she's the one who figured everything out. If anything, Nina was surprised that she hadn't seen it coming sooner. She had been too preoccupied when they were all at the embassy together, trying to spin herself as the tragic heroine. It was painfully obvious now that Claudia had beaten her at her own game.

She met Claudia's gaze. Those pure blue eyes stared straight through her.

"Please," Nina begged. "Please save Darton!"

Before she realized it, the words had burst from her lips in a desperate cry. With everything she knew about Claudia, she was sure Claudia would see justice done.



Chapter 19:
The Villainess Welcomes the Other Villainess to Her Side

CLAUDIA AND SYLVESTER stood together at a corner of the forested park next to the high-end district, watching as the matter was brought to a swift conclusion.

"Seems the information that old chamberlain gave us was true," said Sylvester.

She frowned. "Yes, and the cardinal was responsible yet again."

Nigel had manipulated the Bendins and orchestrated the entire mess that had befallen them. He was a bitter enemy Sylvester and Claudia would not soon forget. Darton had warned them ahead of time that the cardinal would send an assassin to take out Nina since she knew too much.

"How can he live with himself, playing with people's lives the way he does?" Sylvester gritted his teeth, his voice straining with anger.

For all their frustrations with Nigel, saving Nina came first. Darton had sworn to put his life on the line and fight for her. He'd come to them for mercy after they put Nina under house arrest. He'd sent a note through one of the knights watching them, promising to divulge information on Cardinal Nigel. He told them all about the special education Nina had undergone. With everything they knew about Nigel, Darton's warning about him wanting to silence Nina seemed plausible. They had agreed to protect her after they confirmed Nigel really had sent an assassin.

"I will prove it to you by taking this assassin on personally," Darton had declared.

He trusted Sylvester and Claudia greatly to leave Nina in their care. From what he'd seen, he thought they might be the only people capable of combating the cardinal.

Sure enough, as Darton had warned them, an assassin did appear. As much as they wanted to see how the rest of it played out, Sylvester sent in the soldiers he'd had in hiding. Nina, meanwhile, had appeared exactly where Darton said she would,

covered in soot and dust. And the first words out of her mouth were…

“Please… Please save Darton!” Tears streamed down her face as her shrill voice echoed around them. It was clear how much the two meant to each other.

“It’s all right,” Claudia told her. “We’re here to rescue you.”

“What?” Nina pulled a face, struggling to keep up.

A knight arrived then, escorting Darton to the scene. As soon as Nina saw the old butler, she rushed over and flung herself at him.

“If you knew we would be saved, you should have said something!”

“My apologies,” he replied. “I couldn’t be certain that Lady Claudia would truly intervene to help us.” He had hoped they would save Nina, of course, but he was shocked that they had saved him as well. He’d intended to put his life at risk exposing the assassin if it meant earning their trust.

Claudia didn’t deem that necessary. The mere presence of the assassin was enough to substantiate his claims.

Nina peered up at Darton. “Why would you go this far for me?”

“I did only what I was capable of. No more, no less.”

“That’s not an answer!”

“I did it because you are precious to me, my lady.” He peeled her off of him and bowed his head low. “You helped me experience normal human emotions again. I wanted to protect you.”

Nina gradually regained her composure now that the danger had passed. And since they had worked out their issues, there was something Claudia had been anxious to ask them.

“Lord Bendin threatened you to keep you under control, didn’t he? So why didn’t the cardinal do the same?” It had been bothering her, frankly. Why not use blackmail instead of sending an assassin to keep her quiet?

“I wasn’t lying to you about him threatening me, but that wasn’t the full truth,” Nina admitted. She forced a smile, her gaze

shaded with melancholy. “Lord Bendin had my family killed a long time ago.”

Claudia froze. “He did what?”

“I only found out by sheer coincidence.” Nina glanced at Darton. “Well, not exactly.”

“That is how His Eminence conducts his business,” he said, referring to the massacre of Nina’s family.

“That’s right,” Nina said. “He was also the one who told Lord Bendin about me in the first place.”

Darton grimaced, eyes shutting firmly.

“I’ll explain everything,” she promised Claudia.

The three of them returned to the embassy together and took their seats. Darton stood dutifully behind Nina.

“Lord Bendin assured me he would guarantee my family’s safety if I took the real Niamilia’s place, but he never fulfilled that promise,” she said.

As soon as Nina was ripped away from them, her father, mother, and even her baby brother were killed. She only discovered the truth when she was carrying out a mission for Lord Bendin. Her family’s old home wasn’t too far away, so she asked Darton for permission to stop by. She had been so anxious to see them again, only to find that they weren’t there anymore.

Of course, she had told herself. According to her deal with Lord Bendin, they would be moved somewhere safer. Nina felt silly for rushing there, thinking they would still live in the same place. She tried to keep a level head and sought to ask around their old neighborhood, but she didn’t recognize any of the faces there. She’d begun to lose hope.

Then she remembered there was a small church nearby. Church officials stayed in the same location until they were promoted to a higher position. Nina suspected that, since her family was involved with someone as influential and powerful as Lord Bendin, the local official might know something about where they had gone.

“I was right about that,” she said. “In the worst possible way.”

The official did, in fact, remember her family. Mostly because they had been massacred.

The news filled Nina with resentment for Lord Bendin. She wanted to kill him herself, and as quickly as possible. It was at this point, when she had lost all hope and her world plummeted into darkness, that Nigel appeared before her. The cardinal preached to her that death was inevitable for all.

“Man only experiences true hell so long as he is alive,” said the cardinal as he held out his hand to her in an offer of salvation. There was something so kind about the way he smiled. Yet the real reason she couldn’t tear her gaze from him was that his blue eyes held not even a hint of sympathy. “Unfortunately, the weak have no way to fight against the strong in this world.” That wasn’t only true for humans specifically; it was nature’s law. And that was why Nigel told her to become stronger.

“That was the day I began to harbor my own ambitions,” said Nina. “I wanted to become stronger than Lord Bendin so I could make him experience that ‘true hell’ the cardinal spoke of.”

In retrospect, she realized she’d only been dancing to the cardinal’s tune the entire time.

“I thought that if I became the crown princess of Harland, I would have more influence than Lord Bendin. And even if I failed, I could pin the scheme on the Bendins, and he would lose his position once his involvement was made public.”

Planting evidence to link Lord Bendin to everything was insurance in case she wasn’t able to marry Sylvester and have her vengeance that way.

“This was the biggest mission the cardinal had ever charged me with, so I knew my life would be forfeit if I could not succeed. I was the one who killed Lord Bendin’s wife. I poisoned her. I knew that so long as she was around, they would never let me marry.”

The poor woman wanted to have her daughter at her side forever. When she died, Lord Bendin had been utterly distraught, but his pain was not enough to slake Nina’s thirst for revenge.

“My wish was granted when you figured out that the Bendins were involved with everything. That’s why I had no regrets.” Nina glanced back at Darton. “If you want me to survive and keep living, then you need to do the same.”

“Your wish is my command, my lady.”

She turned back to Claudia, determination shining in her navy-blue eyes. “I don’t know if this will count as atonement, but our lives are in your hands. Use us however you see fit. If you want to send us after the cardinal to get back at him, we will obey your orders, but I don’t think we’ll succeed.”

Nigel had many allies. He had pulled the wool over many of the top officials’ eyes, including the pope.

“He has countless pawns like me out there.” Nina cocked a brow. “Are you two serious about taking him on?”

Nigel was the sort of person who could manipulate others and feel nothing for it. However much Nina resented Lord Bendin for the role he played in her family’s tragedy, she had no desire to make an enemy of Nigel.

Claudia paused and faced Sylvester. His golden eyes stared straight back at her, reflecting the same conviction she felt. Certain that they were of one mind, she turned back to Nina. “The cardinal is no god. If he’s capable of calculating everything perfectly, then how are you two here alive?”

Nigel might have suspected that Darton would care too much for Nina to carry out his duty, thereby betraying the cardinal—but he hadn’t foreseen that Darton would turn to Claudia and Sylvester for protection, had he? Something similar had happened in Arakaner last year. Nigel’s plans had ended in failure then too. He was as human as anyone else.

“People only fear him because he lacks a conscience. He doesn’t understand human emotion, thinking it useless and inefficient. His inability to operate within our understanding is what makes him so terrifying.” It made him impossible to comprehend. “But in the end, even the cardinal cannot outmaneuver basic human emotions.” Her gaze moved to Darton. The cardinal couldn’t predict the lengths Darton would go to in order to protect Nina. “And that’s why I am not afraid of him.”

There was such strength in Claudia’s voice. In the silence of the room, her voice was like the clear ringing of a bell. She was steadfast, like a bright ray of hope—one so bright that Nina had to squint to avoid being blinded.

“All right,” said Nina. “If Darton and I are proof that the cardinal is fallible after all, nothing could make me happier. And I

won’t be afraid either.”

Darton gave a silent bow behind her.

“Excuse me for changing the subject so suddenly, but would the two of you happen to know anything about Hubert?” Claudia asked.

“Hubert?” Nina blinked slowly, as if racking her brain to figure out why the name sounded so familiar. “Oh, you’re referring to the incident with Wendy. Hubert isn’t one of my minions, so I honestly don’t know where he is or what he’s doing.” She further explained that Hubert only obeyed the cardinal, and that he had been sent here to assist her in her mission. “I don’t know much about the north, but I do know a few hideouts in the south where you might be able to find him. But I must say, don’t you think Lady Wendy would be much happier believing his lies?”

“Regardless of her happiness, I cannot allow him to run loose. It will be up to Lady Wendy to decide how and if she wants to face the truth,” said Claudia.

Only Wendy knew what would make her happiest, but she could not escape her sins.

“You’re right,” Nina acknowledged with a nod. “Is there anything else you wish to ask me?” She was eager to prove herself useful after Claudia and Sylvester had saved her.

Sylvester leaned forward in his seat. “Do you have any idea as to how we might suppress your countrymen’s animosity toward us?”

Exposing the Bendins’ scheme wouldn’t be enough to quiet the negative sentiment the people already held. Nigel’s involvement meant Lord Bendin’s confidence that there would be no war was entirely misplaced; he’d been nothing but a puppet the whole time. If they didn’t act wisely, they risked a real war breaking out, and only Nigel stood to benefit from that.

“I think there is a way, yes, provided you keep me as a bridal candidate for the time being,” said Nina. She could be a public speaker in Harland’s favor and visit different areas of Parte to sing its praises. “I’ll meet with the people one by one and convince them. If the faithful can stoke negative sentiments in the populace, then I ought to be able to reverse the damage.”

As she had told them earlier, she had been taught how to appeal to people's emotions.

"Right now, they're emotionally volatile," she went on. "But once they calm down and see reason, it will be much easier to talk to them. I don't think it will be difficult, as long as we create an opportunity for them to cool their heads." She bowed her head. "Please let me handle this for you."

As Nina further explained, she didn't think the cardinal's end goal was war anyway. If that had been his aim, he could have had Nina assassinated the moment she entered Harland. An international incident like that would have been the perfect final push.

"I think he had only one goal: to take down Lady Claudia."

Claudia tilted her head. "Why me?" If anything, she would've assumed he was after Sylvester. Or had he chosen her because she was the easier target? This was turning out exactly the way Sylvester had feared it would last summer. A painful pang stung her chest.

Sylvester seemed to sense what she was feeling. He reached toward Claudia and cupped his hand over hers. "It's not your fault, Dia. I'll make sure you're safe." The light glimmering in those golden eyes seemed to envelop her. Feelings were intangible, she knew, but somehow the way he looked at her was enough to fill her entire body with such warmth that the pain in her chest vanished instantly.

Following their conversation, the royal family assigned someone to keep an eye on Nina and protect her from Nigel's assassins. They agreed to keep her as a bridal candidate for the moment.

It was perhaps a foregone conclusion, but Nina would never be allowed full freedom again. Once she fulfilled her purpose and quieted her people's fears, they would pass details of the Bendins' interference in Harland's politics to their enemies in Parte, thereby bringing Lord Bendin to justice. With that, her candidacy for crown princess would be revoked.

Claudia and Sylvester left the embassy, walking side by side. When they made it out of the building, Sylvester paused to look

up at the night sky. Claudia followed his gaze, expecting to see stars twinkling above them, but no. It was pure darkness.

A temporary silence settled over them.

Sylvester closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them next and turned to her, she thought—with their golden hue—that they looked like the twinkling stars she hadn't found overhead.

"I won't let him keep interfering with us," Sylvester said firmly. "As soon as this issue with Parte is resolved, let's officially announce our engagement and move things along."

Nigel's objective was clear to them now: he wanted to disrupt Claudia's growing influence. If they continued dawdling and drawing things out, they would leave another opening for him to exploit, and they would find themselves on the back foot again.

"Once people find out the cardinal was the one behind all of this, those against our union—including the people Raul has been trying to curry favor with to support his bid to be with you—will have no choice but to accept our engagement."

Chasing Nigel out of Harland had done nothing to discourage his incorrigible behavior. He would continue to be a thorn in their side. They needed to ensure they had no vulnerabilities he could target.

Claudia nodded, agreeing with Sylvester. There was nothing particularly romantic about the moment, but Claudia could feel the strong trust they shared in each other. Or, well, she thought there was nothing romantic about it until Sylvester grabbed her hand and kissed her fingertips.

"Finally, my wish will be granted," he murmured against her skin.

"So you proposed making our engagement official for your own ends?" Claudia teased with a knowing smile.

"It just so happens that the best course of action is exactly what I want." He didn't sound the least bit ashamed to admit it either, which made her laugh. Sylvester was always so steadfast no matter the situation, which gave her a strong sense of security.

In her heart of hearts, Claudia was unnerved that Nigel had come after them again, and so soon after the last time. But as

long as she had Sylvester beside her, she was certain she could overcome any obstacle.

Bonus Chapter:
The Villainess Confronts the Facts

AS AUTUMN MARCHED onward and the trees changed color, their verdant green giving way to an array of red, yellow, and brown, Hubert was finally apprehended. The authorities had found him in southern Harland, at one of the hideouts Nina had tipped them off about. With this, she had proven her value as an informant already.

Sylvester sat across from Claudia, a satisfied smile on his face thanks to the news. The light streaming through the carriage window highlighted the silver strands of his hair. The pair of them were headed to the city watch's prison on the outskirts with a particular purpose in mind.

"Knowing that her information is accurate is a great boon," said Sylvester.

Claudia shifted in her seat. "Yes, but the cardinal must know she's working against him by now."

After the assassin he sent was taken out and Harland assigned their best security to Nina, Nigel would know she wasn't working for him anymore—that she was working for Harland now. It wasn't as if Claudia doubted Nina, of course, but it still bothered her.

"Why wouldn't he have abandoned that hideout sooner?" she asked. Any normal person would have done so the moment they knew—or even suspected—their secrets had been exposed to the enemy.

"It depends on who makes those calls," said Sylvester. "If the cardinal has the final say on all things, then there's bound to be a delay when information is relayed back to him and his orders are handed down."

"Right, and he cannot enter Harland anymore."

She and Sylvester were basically eyewitnesses to everything, since they were right here in the heart of Harland, but *someone* had to pass that information all the way back to Nigel. Even with the fastest horse, that would take time. At least a few days, considering he couldn't enter Harland.

“It’s possible that we managed to apprehend Hubert before the cardinal had a chance to make his move. Nina thinks it’s more likely that he abandoned Hubert,” said Sylvester.

With the royal family keeping such a close watch over Nina, Claudia couldn’t interact with her freely. Sylvester was passing notes to Nina to get her input.

“If Nigel ordered them to abandon those hideouts, it would mean moving all of his men. My family already has people out there keeping a close lookout, so anything they do could catch our eye. He probably thought it safer to do nothing instead.”

“So he chose inaction and abandoned his men along with his hideouts?” Claudia asked, horrified. It matched what they knew of Nigel’s character. He was the type to toss his people aside without compunction.

Speaking of merciless, I’ve heard the same of the king of Bari, she thought to herself. The king was said to be a pragmatic man with little interest in emotion. Claudia had never met him before, but she understood what sort of person he was based on the descriptions she’d heard. His own younger brother—Raul—had told Claudia all she needed to know about him.

The king of Bari and Cardinal Nigel were similar in the way they viewed things. *But why is it that the cardinal feels so much colder to me?*

Lestea had told her that the king refused to look at Raul even when the two were in the same room. He had even chased Raul out of the kingdom. To anyone else, the king would seem as cold and unfeeling as Nigel. *Yet the king is still someone you can sit down and have a levelheaded conversation with.*

Claudia understood what motivated Bari’s king. He was always thinking of his country first. Well, actually, he was *only* ever thinking about his country. The king took his duty to see his country prosper and continue very seriously. If there was a better alternative to his current path, he would be willing to discuss it as long as there was evidence to back it up.

Raul had even managed to wrangle an apology out of his brother. *He could have condemned his brother for his misjudgment, but true to his character, Prince Raul chose to have a peaceful discussion instead.* While Bari had interfered in Harland’s domestic

affairs, at least they were able to solve their own internal problems without bloodshed.

Bari's king was cold and calculating, but not in a way that sent a chill down her spine. She could understand where he was coming from. Moreover, she too loved her country.

By contrast, Cardinal Nigel considered even his fellow faithful to be disposable pawns. She couldn't understand him at all. It was like he valued nothing, like he had no one he wanted to protect.

"From what I hear, the cardinal is still supposed to be under suspension," said Claudia.

"It's been exactly one year since we expelled him. They're already discussing removing his suspension."

She frowned. "It doesn't feel like he ever was suspended in the first place."

According to Nina, Nigel had come to her last winter. It wasn't hard to picture him continuing business as usual even after he was sent back to the church's grand cathedral. Anytime Claudia thought about him, she found herself wanting to sigh.

She lifted her chin, glancing over at Sylvester. A frigid air rolled off of him. "Syl?"

"We get rid of one eyesore, and he sends another to mess with us. Tristan tells me I'm wasting my time worrying about it." He smiled calmly, but there was another emotion hidden behind his cultivated mask. She wasn't sure if it was anger, resentment, or perhaps both. The scariest part was that anyone who wasn't familiar with Sylvester would assume his smile was sincere.

When he met her gaze, his eyes softened. They were like two pools of golden honey, drawing her in and captivating her. His deep affection froze her thoughts and sent blood rushing to her cheeks.

"No matter how much status a person has, the rest of the world has a mind of its own and refuses to bend." He chuckled. "Fortunately, that's where your endless potential comes into play."

Sylvester's smile changed, lifting in genuine amusement. She couldn't look away even if she wanted to. There was something boyish and adorable about his expression that sent her heart racing.

“Even I can’t begin to predict how far that potential might take you,” he said. “You only went to the border region to observe the situation there, but you somehow came away with pivotal information. Looking back on all the issues we’ve faced, there have been countless other episodes like that. You always surprise me, and each time, I fall for you even harder. But above all that…”

His fingers grazed hers, and she instinctively held out the back of her hand for him.

“I love how steadfast you are. No matter how rough the seas ahead, you stand firm. And yet, there is a weakness hidden beneath all that strength.” He studied her hard. “There’s something weighing on you today, isn’t there?”

Her eyes went round. She hadn’t expected him to notice. Sylvester was right, of course. There were two main things on her mind: their visit to the prison and the issues with Cardinal Nigel. If she let herself think about them, her mind would spiral.

“I can’t hide anything from you, can I?” It was hard to suppress the tremor that threatened to come out in her voice. Not because she was surprised he’d seen through her, but because she was moved that he cared and paid enough attention to notice.

Sylvester’s thin, soft lips pressed against the back of her hand. When he slowly pulled himself away, she got a brief glimpse of the way his bottom lip clung to her skin. A wave of heat shot to her head. When was this ridiculously innocent body going to grow accustomed to these sorts of things? She was so embarrassed that she wanted to avert her gaze, but there was something about the way he peered up at her that prevented her from doing so.

“There’s no need to hide how you’re feeling. Whether you are strong or vulnerable, I swear to do everything in my power to protect you.” His fingers on hers sent a jolt of heat through her skin. He was being so sincere. All she could do was numbly nod.

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When Claudia first laid eyes on Hubert, only one word came to mind: plain. He had amber hair and blue eyes. His face was handsome enough, though not to the point that it would draw much attention.

Maybe I'm spoiled by Syl's looks. Sylvester also wasn't the only handsome man around her. Many aristocrats put an awful lot of time and effort into keeping up their appearance. Even her brother, who had little interest in beauty and cosmetics, attracted a great deal of attention wherever he went.

I shouldn't be too surprised. He can't keep up his hygiene here in prison. Hubert's clothes were covered in a thin layer of filth. He hadn't been able to change since he was apprehended.

Hubert's most striking characteristic was his eyes, as well as the unwavering strength she saw in them—a sign that he still held fast to his faith. He wasn't like the other faithful they had apprehended last year, whose families were being held as potential hostages against them. The authorities had given up on trying to get information about Nigel out of him. Interrogation was pointless with someone when they would rather die than spill any information.

Even if he wouldn't be cooperative on that matter, there was something that Claudia needed him to do. They had already struck a bargain with him. He would do as they asked, provided they allowed church officials to perform a prayer for him after his death. Such prayers were typically only performed during funerals, and criminals who were executed forfeited that privilege. They would instead be cremated and buried in a mass grave. Hubert probably knew that was the fate awaiting him too, which was why he'd made that his condition for cooperation. Claudia and Sylvester had agreed after checking the law to make sure it was feasible. In return, he would tell Wendy the truth.

Sylvester and Claudia had come to the prison to witness his meeting with Wendy, but first Claudia wanted to see what kind of a person Hubert was. Once she accomplished that, they were escorted to a rear door that led to the meeting room. A large partition was set up to block them off from the rest of the space. The guards used it to allow people to sit in on meetings without being seen, and it was best that she and Sylvester remain unseen for this.

So Wendy's behind that screen, thought Claudia. She could sense her presence, meaning she'd been brought in ahead of Sylvester and herself.

Hubert's arrival was a bit delayed, likely because he needed to clean up first. Sylvester had made special arrangements, as it would only make Wendy feel for him more if he was filthy. No, better for him to look his best to emphasize how unaffected he was after making her worry for him all this time.

When the door finally swung open, he entered with a loud rattling of chains.

Wendy gasped. "Hubert!"

"Sit," commanded the guard in charge of her. She must have tried to stand up, and they weren't going to allow that.

"Thank goodness you're safe," said Wendy.

"Indeed. Seems like *you've* had a rather rough time of it, though."

"No, in the pursuit of justice, this is a small price to pay."

The excitement in Wendy's voice made Claudia's heart ache. Sensing how it affected her, Sylvester reached over and squeezed her hand reassuringly. *We decided to be here for this, so I need to see it through to the end.* She sat up a little straighter in her chair and stared at the screen.

Nina had said that Wendy might be happier not knowing the truth. She'd probably said that because she thought Claudia was doing all of this for Wendy's sake. Claudia wouldn't deny she had Wendy in mind, but the real reason she wanted to catch Hubert was that he was culpable for these crimes too. Every criminal needed to be judged under the law.

After discussing the matter, the courts had agreed with Claudia and Sylvester that Wendy deserved to know the truth since she had perpetrated her crimes due to Hubert's deceit. The best way to accomplish that was to have him tell her the truth directly. His involvement had already been revealed to the rest of the upper crust, but no one from Lord Thomas's family had been interested in watching this meeting.

"Let me ask you something, Lady Wendy," said Hubert. "How would you feel if the justice you spoke of was all a lie?"

"Really? You're going to use that line on me too? Claudia must have threatened you into—"

Hubert resettled in his chair, his jangling chains effectively interrupting her mid-sentence. “Don’t you see these shackles on me?” After he was allowed to clean himself up, the guards had clapped him in chains again. He was wearing the same ones she had on. It proved he too was a criminal.

“The justice I raved about with you was a pretense for taking down Lady Claudia. It was all lies,” said Hubert.

“Why would you say something like that? We have proof of her crimes!”

“No,” Hubert corrected her, “we don’t have any proof. Surely you must know that too. You gave all that testimony to the authorities, and they haven’t found a single thing.”

“That’s because Lady Claudia erased everything!” Wendy snapped at him.

“What about the church we stayed in together? The authorities went there, just like you told them, but they didn’t find any evidence that we’d kept rescued slaves there. Of course they didn’t. There never were any slaves to begin with.” Hubert added that all the rescued slaves she thought she’d seen were local vagrants he’d dragged in to fool her. He went on and on, revealing how he’d managed to trick her at each and every turn. The more he spoke, the less Wendy protested.

At the end of it all, he said, “The reason why I targeted you, Lady Wendy, and not Lord Savile’s daughter or Lord Roger’s daughter, is because I knew you would be easier to deceive. There was no other reason. You were as gullible as I expected you would be.”

There was a short pause. “So all of it was a lie?”

“Yes. The reason I looked so gaunt was because I used makeup. Look at me, Lady Wendy, and tell me what you think. Do I look like a man of justice going up against a great evil? Do I look like I’ve been through a lot of hardship?”

“No, this can’t be…”

“You must realize the truth, deep down. You just want to deny reality because it’s easier to keep believing the lie. It’s easier for you to blame Lady Claudia because she’s so perfect and you feel inferior. Tell me I’m wrong.”

That was why Wendy was always so emotional about Claudia rather than calm and logical: because she was jealous.

“I know I’m right,” Hubert continued curtly. “That’s the vulnerability I exploited so I could manipulate you. You aren’t the only one to experience intense envy. Lots of people envy those who accomplish more than they do.”

Being a duke’s daughter was very prestigious, especially when so many praised Claudia as the perfect noble lady. Support for her had spread beyond the borders to neighboring countries like Arakaner.

“But there are few people out there who have absolutely everything, like Lady Claudia does. Yes, you can’t forget how beautiful she is on top of everything else. And you know what sort of person she is better than most.”

Ironic words coming from Hubert, since he had never really met Claudia before.

“People like her stand far above the likes of you and me,” he said. “People have a habit of dealing with people they envy in one particular way. Can you guess how?”

Wendy didn’t answer him. Because of the partition, it was impossible to tell whether she genuinely didn’t know the answer or whether he had hit a sore spot and she didn’t want to admit the truth.

“They try to drag that person down to their level,” Hubert answered for her. “They try to find flaws in them. Try to exaggerate any shortcomings they see, to reassure themselves that they’re on the same level as the person they envy. Or maybe even better than them. That’s how they console themselves for not being as great. Some people keep those negative sentiments locked away in their hearts, while others go around spreading their negativity.”

Such a phenomenon was ever present in all parts of society, regardless of class.

“Lady Wendy, you want to believe in ‘justice’ because you don’t want to admit your own sins. But think about it logically for a minute. If you commit murder, no matter if it’s in the name of justice, you are still a criminal.”

“But justice sometimes requires sacrifice,” Wendy tried to argue.

“And if the end justifies the means, you shouldn’t have to account for your own evils?” He paused. “Well, I guess I was the one who put that in your head. I’m a scam artist, Lady Wendy. You’re just a naive, sheltered noble lady who was tricked by a scam artist.”

“B-but I…!” Whatever she wanted to say, the words wouldn’t come out.

Hubert’s chair screeched against the floor. “I have nothing more to say to you.” He was attempting to leave now that he’d fulfilled his obligations.

“W-wait!” Wendy cried after him. “What about all the time we spent together? Was that a lie too?” Her voice was hoarse, strained from all the emotion. She was clinging to this one final hope. Unfortunately for her, reality was cruel.

“Yes, it was. I never felt anything for you. It was all to deceive you.” Hubert didn’t wait for her to respond; he let himself out, and the door slammed shut behind him. His actions, even more than his words, had revealed how little he cared about Wendy.

Claudia and Sylvester promptly left too. There was no point in lingering.

Though Claudia had known what to expect going in, she was still overwhelmed with a vast range of emotions now that it was over. “Lady Wendy must be… No.” She shook her head. “There’s no point in talking about it.”

“What she does next is up to her,” Sylvester agreed.

Speculating would get them nowhere. Only Wendy knew what she thought and how she felt about everything. Claudia understood that there was no reason to empathize with her any further, but her heart ached nonetheless. She leaned into Sylvester’s chest. His strong arms wrapped around her, and she found herself on the brink of tears.

This was exactly what Wendy must have wanted, to be with the man she loved. Claudia understood that all too well. And she too hated evil. *Also…* She saw so much of herself—her old self, from before her brothel days—in Wendy.

The severity of their crimes were nothing alike, but they had taken similar paths. They were both tricked by others, and without taking the time to reflect on their own foolishness, they'd resorted to crime to achieve their goals. They could have stopped at any time. There were plenty of opportunities to repent, but they ignored them. They abandoned all of their values.

In her previous timeline, Claudia had been green with envy. She held a deep, deep grudge against Fermina for getting all the love her father hadn't given her. At her core, she hadn't been much different from Wendy. She'd been ignorant and imprudent.

That must be why my heart aches so much. Claudia had no reason to empathize with criminals unless she identified with them, as she did with Wendy.

Claudia had never doubted her cause back then. Each time her attempts to bully Fermina succeeded, she experienced a thrill, one she could still remember all these years later. There was a very real part of her that derived pleasure from hurting Fermina.

She clutched at her chest, fingers digging into the fabric of her dress. It felt like an old wound had reopened and was festering with pus. Wendy would have to experience far more painful emotions than these now that she knew the truth.

When they stepped out of the prison, a cool breeze swept over her skin. Fallen leaves danced around her feet, crackly and yellow—a reminder that autumn was giving way to winter.

Wendy's criminal offenses led to Lord Lloyd and his family being stripped of their status. They would be exiled along with her, sent off to a village in a northern region that was directly under the royal family's control. The area had yet to be developed, and fewer people lived there than anywhere else in the entire kingdom. Wendy and her family would soon have to face the cruelty of winter on their own.

Wendy was lucky to have avoided the death penalty because the judge took into account the way she'd been deceived, but it didn't erase the fact that she'd ordered another aristocrat's murder. It wasn't Claudia's place to forgive Wendy or wish her and her family well. The only people with that right were the victim's family. But if Claudia was allowed one thing, then she hoped that Wendy would reflect on what she had done. That she would hold

herself together even through the coming hardships and one day repent.

Now that Wendy's punishment had been handed down, she had an opportunity to improve as a person, and Claudia hoped she would do just that. And with that wish, she packed up the matter in her mind and stepped away from it.

One of our noble houses has fallen because of all this. That was the one cold, hard fact that remained. And the person responsible was the one who'd been orchestrating it all behind the scenes. It was as if being chased out of Harland had meant absolutely nothing to Nigel. He was perfectly capable of exercising his power from outside their borders.

She could still picture his face. The kind, innocent smile that reflected no malice, making him appear the perfect gentleman. Nigel had failed to bring her down, but he had hurt Harland.

Sylvester peered at her face as soon as they settled down inside the carriage. "Dia, are you all right?"

Her silence must have caught his attention. He took the seat beside her this time, rather than sit across from her as he had on their journey here. When he stroked her head, all the tension left her.

Claudia couldn't help but smile. "Yes, I was just lost in thought."

His face softened with relief. His expression was so gentle that she wanted to indulge herself in his kindness. She leaned her head against his chest, and his arms immediately slid around her. The lingering chill from the outside air quickly vanished thanks to his body heat.

"It's rare for you to show such vulnerability. Was this meeting too much for you after all?"

"I came because I wanted to," said Claudia. "I knew what to expect, but somehow my emotions still got the best of me."

Sylvester kissed her forehead. "I know exactly how you feel."

"It bothered you too?"

"Nothing can erase what she did. But there was so much sadness and pain in her voice, I don't think I'll be forgetting it anytime soon."

The person Wendy loved most had betrayed her, and worse yet, he had never loved her to begin with. As much as she was a perpetrator, she had been a victim too.

"Many people think she's at fault for being deceived so easily," said Sylvester.

It was common for people to kiss up to aristocrats, hoping to benefit from the connection. That was why so many lords and ladies were taught from an early age to be wary of others' intentions. Those who'd never been tricked before had no problem pointing the finger at Wendy and dismissing her as a foolish, gullible girl.

"Lady Wendy will serve as an example for many people. We can note down all the tricks Hubert used to con her into believing his conspiracy theories, then use that as a cautionary tale for the rest of the upper crust," said Claudia.

The case with Hubert was a bit of an exception, but there was much people could learn from it to avoid other scams. Using romantic relationships to extract information from people was a common tactic among aristocrats.

"If we share what sort of people tend to be the most gullible and the most likely to be targeted, perhaps we can encourage people to watch out for one another. They can take note of the signs that someone's being deceived early on and intervene."

Not long ago, a spy from Bari had infiltrated one of Harland's harbor cities with the local populace none the wiser. The spy pretended to be an elderly woman's grandchild who had moved away to the capital. Not knowing any better, the woman allowed the spy to live with her.

In dealing with the aftermath of that ordeal, Sylvester hadn't neglected to take countermeasures to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future. More attention was paid to ensure families who moved away could keep in better contact with the loved ones they left behind. Now, more mail than ever was leaving the capital.

Even when incidents like that happened, it was important to use them as a learning opportunity to improve. Harland wasn't content to take a blow and stay down. Proof of that was right in

front of her; Sylvester encompassed the very spirit of their kingdom.

Claudia nuzzled against Sylvester's neck. Her heart beat faster from the growing tangle of emotions inside her. She snaked her arms around his back, wanting something to cling to.

This whole ordeal had been painful, especially because Wendy was only a pawn in a greater scheme to strike a blow against Claudia. Sylvester's presence was the exact assurance she needed to know that everything would be okay. As long as she had him, she could keep moving forward.

Nina had asked before if they really planned to take on Nigel. The reason Claudia could answer that question with such confidence was because she had Sylvester there with her.

Her hot breath spilled out against Sylvester's exposed skin, and he froze instantly. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I just want you to know how much I love you."

"That's not something to apologize for. Not at all. I love you too, Dia. But for your own good, I would advise you not to test my ability to control myself." He choked out the words with some difficulty, voice straining.

Claudia couldn't help but laugh. When was the last time she had seen him this flustered?

"This is no laughing matter," he warned her.

"For as strong as you think I am, even I have times when I like to be comforted and supported."

"I'm more than happy to provide that for you, but..." His hands groped at the empty air, tightening into fists. He was doing his best to hold back.

It was so adorable that Claudia just had to peck him on the cheek. She wouldn't soon forget the dumbfounded look on his face afterward.

Side Story:
The King's Younger Brother Meets a Winter Fairy

"SHE LOOKED INCREDIBLE dressed as a goddess at the masquerade ball, but I can't forget the gravitas she showed when we attended the ball in Lord Sasriel's region." Lestea's voice took on an airy quality as she lost herself in the memory. She had been like this ever since she returned to the capital. Heat concentrated in her cheeks the more she rambled on.

Raul raked a hand through his dark-brown hair, tousling it as he listened to her.

There had been a commotion at the party Niamilia had hosted as well, but Lestea paid it no heed. She was far more fixated on the time she had spent with Claudia in the border region. It was little wonder why, considering she had been allowed to escort Claudia at the party there.

"Lady Claudia wasn't able to speak for herself after what Drestin said to her, so I had to talk on her behalf. It was like we had a telepathic understanding. I cannot even begin to describe how exhilarating it was for our hearts to be connected the way they were!"

Raul had heard this story so many times by now, it was tiring to even grunt in response. Instead, he let out a deep sigh and grumbled out his own regrets about the situation. "I wish I could have gone too."

"That's the way it had to be. You couldn't leave the capital at the time."

When Parte first forced a bridal candidate into the crown princess selection process, Bari Kingdom needed more information. Talk of a potential war required them to act; they couldn't sit idly by and wait to see how it played out. Raul had to stay at the embassy to receive reports from their countrymen. He couldn't disappear off to the countryside like everyone else.

"Besides," continued Lestea, "if you had followed us, it could've caused a misunderstanding."

Harland was still wary of Raul because there was always the possibility that the two kingdoms might one day be enemies. They

had worked tirelessly to foster friendship between their nations, but as Parte had demonstrated, that relationship could crumble to dust if suspicion arose among their people. He had to be discreet while he was here in Harland.

"Don't forget, that's what I'm here for: to take action when you can't," said Lestea.

He sniffed at her. "That would be reassuring if you were more trustworthy."

Raul already knew someone else had sunk their claws into Lestea to control her, and in a way he'd never been capable of. *After everything she did, I know better than to believe Sylvester would let her off scot-free.* As for why he kept her around despite knowing she was an agent for Harland, well, that was an exercise in self-condemnation. She served as his reminder never to make the same mistake again. Furthermore, Lestea was an incredibly competent subordinate.

In her presence, Raul was careful to only divulge information he didn't mind getting back to Harland. She'd also proven useful in going to the border region on his behalf. *Though I'm sure Harland hides anything from her that they wouldn't want me knowing about.* Still, the realization that she was working for them made her easier to handle.

What pisses me off is knowing this is Sylvester's way of testing me. Sylvester was aware that Raul had grasped Lestea's loyalty to Harland. There was no need for them to address it verbally; this indirect way of testing one another was all too common for royalty. It was a challenge: could Raul successfully use her even though she was working for Sylvester?

Raul knew he had made a mistake showing such weakness to Sylvester. This was his opportunity to prove how worthy he was of the position he held.

"I'm on your side, you know," Lestea said. "If there is some way to convince Lady Claudia to come back with us to Bari Kingdom, I'll support you with everything I have."

"Funny, coming from someone who failed to convince her once already."

Lestea smiled blithely back at him. "I did, and that's why I'm putting her feelings above anything else. If she wanted me to, I

would happily combat Prince Sylvester for her."

He stared at her. "What I'm getting out of this is that you're on Claudia's side, not mine."

"Oh dear." Lestea feigned surprise, holding a hand over her mouth. "Did I let my real feelings slip out?"

"Don't. Not in front of me."

Lestea was utterly devoted to Claudia. Raul understood that. But at least on the surface, they were supposed to be lord and retainer. He wished she'd keep up that appearance.

"Well, sorry. But I *am* still on your side," Lestea said, flashing a genuine smile at him. He knew she wasn't lying.

"Great, and I'll refrain from asking who you prioritize more."

"That's wise. You would only be disappointed."

He glared at her. "You really are incorrigible." Why did she always have to make these unnecessary remarks?

Raul rose to his feet. Blood was rushing to his head, and he needed to calm down. He could tell his temper was growing short. *Normally, I could let whatever she says roll off my back.* Lestea had always been like this, even before Harland claimed her. If anything, her life had to be far more oppressive than his. She had a lot of grit to be able to bounce back the way she did after everything that had happened.

It makes me feel all the more pathetic for letting her trivial comments get to me. It was a cruel reminder that he was still very immature.

Lestea tilted her head, sensing something was off about him. "Feeling fatigued?"

"Maybe. Think I'll drink some coffee then head to the library for a change of pace."

"Don't forget to take your cloak. It's been cold lately." She bowed and excused herself. The two of them had been friends for long enough that she could tell when he wanted to be alone.

***

The royal library was inside Harland's castle. It boasted the biggest collection in the country, including books published locally as well as abroad. Only a select few were allowed to carry books off the premises, but all aristocrats could use the library freely. Even Raul was welcomed inside its halls.

A frigid wind nipped at his exposed neck on his walk to the library. Raul was so used to wearing shirts with loose collars that even though his skin was chilled, it didn't bother him much. Upon reaching the front steps, he stopped and looked up.

The library had been constructed somewhat like a cathedral. There were rows of pillars at the entrance, supporting a hefty gable roof. The solid brick building was perfectly symmetrical, which somehow made it all the more imposing. It didn't have the same ostentatious decoration as the capital's cathedral, however. Only the entrance hall had an abundance of natural light.

Once Raul was inside, the ceiling curved up into a dome. At its very center was a large piece of blue stained glass. Some sunlight filtered in, but the place was still awfully dark, due in part to the lack of windows for a building of this size. Some areas had to be lit by lanterns even during daylight hours.

Past the front entrance hall was the reception area, which dealt with visitors. A librarian was always present and willing to guide any visitors who got lost in the maze of bookcases. Noise was generally prohibited within the library. People were strongly urged to whisper if they had to speak. Most visitors had research they wanted to focus on, so the rules were in place to prevent people from quarreling with one another about disruptions.

The silence that settled over the library was an oppressive one, but Raul didn't dislike it. In fact, it helped him relax. The people of Bari were often called "lively," likely owing to their preference for free-flowing attire over formal clothes, but no one wanted energetic optimism all the time. Least of all Raul.

Whenever Raul wished to be alone with his thoughts, he would retreat to the library. That was true even when he lived in Bari. There was something about the orderly arrangement of books on their shelves that soothed him.

Gliding his finger along the spines of the dictionaries made him feel like he was touching the physical manifestation of man's intelligence. He plucked one off the shelf, weighing the hefty tome

in his arm. There were desks provided for guests to read at, but he didn't bother with them. He found a nearby stepladder and planted himself on it, skimming the book's pages.

There wasn't anything in particular that Raul wanted to read. When the weight of the tome became too much, he would close it and put it back. *That said, I do sometimes lose myself in the pages of a book.* Harland's books contained perspectives that differed greatly from books published in Bari, so he often lost track of time while reading them. Even if the subject matter was the same as a book he'd read before, he found it fascinating to learn how someone else approached the matter. *It makes you realize how vastly different our cultures are.*

Although Harland and Bari were neighboring kingdoms, they were separated by the continent's largest mountain range. Diplomacy between them only began in earnest once they had a stable maritime route to reach one another. While they might very well be enemies in the future, they were allies in the present—and during their long and storied history, there had been marriages between their royal families. But for all they had in common, much still separated them. That would always be the case, as Raul saw it.

Since I came here to study abroad, I often forget that. It sometimes made him feel like a stranger here. Like he was reaching out to grasp something right in front of him, yet his hand only caught empty air.

Raul snapped the thick book shut.

I can't shake the negativity. He'd come here for a change of pace, but he hadn't managed to find it. *I thought I'd feel better if I had some alone time. Some peace and quiet.*

He let out a long sigh and leaned his head against the nearest bookcase. This wasn't a particularly popular corner of the library, so no one else was around. He was thankful for that, at least. As a prince, Raul couldn't let anyone see him looking this depressed. Should word get out, Sylvester would say something to him. He was sure of it.

Raul sought out the library because it provided an environment that the embassy lacked. There was something breathtaking about the vast number of books stretching out as far as the eye could see. In fact, there were so many wooden shelves

lining the walls that you couldn't even see the white stone, and it continued like this all the way to the second floor and its corridors.

Just a little bit longer, Raul told himself.

If he sensed someone else's presence, he would straighten himself immediately and plaster a smile on his face. He was used to masking his feelings; it was an essential skill to anyone in the royal family. Most of the time, he didn't have to put on an act, but he only showed true vulnerability in front of a select few people.

Since the library's interior was so dark, it was easy to forget what time it was. He sat there until his thoughts ground to a halt and his awareness of his surroundings returned. For a moment, he wondered if he'd fallen asleep with his eyes open. He was glad he hadn't dropped the book, but his arm had grown numb from the weight of it.

Raul returned the book and stretched his arms. Judging by the light streaming in from a far window, not nearly as much time had passed as he'd thought.

He started forward, intending to visit another corner of the library—then spotted a fluttering piece of white fabric. The hem of a skirt, he assumed. Normally such a thing wouldn't catch his attention, but it did this time. It was only once he chased after the wearer that he realized why.

As Raul gazed up at the second floor, where he'd spotted the person, he finally got a better view of her: soft black ringlets cascaded down her back. He recognized her instantly. How could he not, when she occupied so many of his thoughts?

Claudia must have sensed him too. She turned around, and her blue eyes met his. Her expression was naturally stern, the angle of her eyes sharp, yet her whole expression softened the moment she saw him. He knew she was just happy to see a friend, but for a moment, she stole his breath away.

Claudia was wearing a white dress, with a white cape over top to keep her warm. Both were made of incredibly soft fabric, and their pure color reminded him of freshly fallen snow. Fluffy, adorable white pom-poms were threaded through narrow holes to fix her cape in place. Claudia's thick skirt was embroidered with golden thread, which shimmered where it caught the light. Her hair was a calming shade of black that contrasted with her translucent skin. Everything from her features to her snow-colored

garments made her look even more fairylike—especially in the dim light of the library, where she seemed to shine so much brighter than everything else.

"Good afternoon, Prince Raul," she said, performing an elegant curtsy for him. Her voice finally brought him back to his senses.

"Afternoon. It's nice to hear your voice. You look so beautiful today that for a moment I thought a winter fairy was gracing me with her presence."

"Goodness. I suppose I've since corrected that misunderstanding?" she said with amusement.

Raul nodded, grinning back at her. He wasn't capable of the pompous smiles that Sylvester and Lestea always wore, but at least his was genuine and representative of who he was.

"Yep," he said. "It's just the beautiful Claudia in front of me."

She hesitated, taken aback by his compliment. "Such flattery."

This wasn't her usual response, which caught his attention. The two had spent more and more time together at the academy and were close enough to tease each other when the situation called for it. Claudia was forever dodging his attempts to cajole her, but her attitude toward him had never changed. When was the last time she'd looked flustered in front of him?

I guess my good looks still have an effect on her. It was a bittersweet thought, one that never would have popped in his head before. Raul had long shied away from the women who approached him for his looks or his status. And while he still wasn't generally fond of the opposite sex, his feelings for Claudia had made her an exception.

Claudia's gaze dropped to his neck. "Aren't you cold? Bari's winter isn't nearly as harsh as ours, is it?"

"I'll take the cold over the oppressive atmosphere. *That* isn't something I can get used to. I won't be able to enjoy the cold anymore after our graduation party, anyway."

The maritime route between their nations didn't freeze even in midwinter, so it could still be traversed. But this year's graduation party was for Raul and the rest of his classmates.

There would be no more school terms, so he would have no cause to return in the spring.

Claudia's face clouded over. She must have realized the implication.

Is she at least a little reluctant to part with me? Excited as he was by the prospect, it made his heart ache. Her feelings toward him weren't the same as his toward her. Nevertheless, he'd resolved not to give up. She was the one who had changed his way of thinking.

I think it's my growing impatience that's to blame for my mood. Time was quickly running out. *That must be why I couldn't just ignore Lestea's comments like I usually do.*

Raul's gaze moved to the books around them. "Bari has a very temperate climate. It's much more pleasant there this time of year."

"Yes, I know."

"I can vouch for how easy the trip is there and back too. You're welcome to come anytime you wish. We'd love to have you." Raul knew it wasn't a fair way to frame his invitation, but he wasn't looking for an answer from her anyway.

I feel so pitiful that this is the only thing I can do for her. All he had going for him was his status as prince. Claudia, meanwhile, had gained Arakaner's acceptance and shown incredible strength, even as a new rival appeared in the form of an additional bridal candidate. She'd probably come to the library to better herself and learn something.

Since the fall of Marquess Lloyd and his house, the aristocratic faction had lost its leader and was crumbling from the inside. The hope was that Charlotte's father, Earl Roger, could step in and take the marquess's place, but he lacked the power and influence to unify the rest of the faction. More and more people were looking to Duke Lindsay and his house for protection because they were a neutral party. Keeping the balance of power steady required careful attention, and not just from the duke.

"Well, I'm sure you came to read," said Raul. "Sorry for interrupting you."

"No. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I'm not really here for the books."

“Oh? You’re here for something else?” A wrinkle formed in his brow. The only other thing he could think of was that Sylvester might’ve arranged to meet her here. He couldn’t possibly have predicted the answer she gave him.

“I came for a change of pace,” she said. “I find the atmosphere here in the library much calmer than anywhere else, since it’s so quiet.”

“That’s a surprise,” Raul blurted out, unthinking.

Claudia smiled wanly at him. “I’m sorry to disappoint.”

“No! I mean it in a good way. Really, there’s no need to apologize. I came here for the exact same reason, so your answer caught me off guard.”

“You’re here for a change of pace too?”

“I couldn’t listen to one more word of Lestea’s endless banter. Guess we were both thinking the same thing at the exact same time, huh?”

There were other quiet places they could have gone, but somehow they had both chosen the library. It warmed his heart to have this in common with her. Their similar way of thinking was probably why he felt so comfortable around her.

But if given the opportunity, I’d like to look good in front of her. And surely no one could blame him for trying, right?

“Well, if you want to be alone, I should excuse myself,” Raul said. “Thanks to you, I already feel much better.”

Claudia shook her head. “You don’t have to leave. Although, if I do happen to find an interesting book, I might get lost in it.”

“I don’t mind. This is a library, after all.”

Since she was giving him the opportunity, he wanted to try to find a book that would capture both their interests so they could discuss it. As long as they were out in public, no one would shame them for spending time together. *What a lucky coincidence.*

Soon they were both immersed in books of their choosing.

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After Raul returned to the embassy, he retired to his room, where he lounged about until Lestea popped in.

“Glad to see you got that change of pace you were looking for,” she said with a knowing smile.

“It’s all thanks to Claudia.”

“What?! Why didn’t you invite me along?!”

“You’re the one who sent me off. You only have yourself to blame for not coming with me.”

“That’s incredibly unfair.” Lestea pouted. “I’ve done a lot more for her than you have!”

“I think this is fate’s way of saying you haven’t done enough.” He found that talking with Lestea didn’t grate on him nearly as much as it had earlier. Savoring this rare stroke of luck in his favor, he sipped his coffee in delight.

Thanks to the crackling wood in the fireplace, it was warm and cozy inside, but winter was nearly upon them. *I wonder where we’ll be when spring comes.* His mind flashed back to the fairy he’d seen at the library. She wouldn’t vanish even with the changing of seasons, and that at least brought him some comfort.

Bonus Chapter:
The Villainess Celebrates Autumn

"IT WILL BE CHILLY TODAY, Lady Claudia, so here's a shawl to keep you warm."

Helen draped the soft, cream-colored fabric over Claudia's shoulders. Despite being rather thin, it instantly warmed her, largely because it had been spun from the fur of an animal from the frigid north.

"I'll be taking my leave, then," Claudia said.

"Have a wonderful day at the academy, my lady."

Claudia climbed into her carriage. It wasn't cold enough outside that she could see her breath, but the servants had already taken measures to keep the carriage interior warm. The seats were covered in thick fabric, and the curtains had been changed out. Furs were pinned to the walls to trap in the heat.

Everything is changing, she thought.

The mountains were dyed in autumn colors as the leaves on the trees withered and fell. Likewise, people and even animals were preparing for winter's arrival.

Helen's white cat, Candy, was growing in a much thicker coat for the cold season. She was fluffier than she'd ever been. Claudia suspected it made brushing that much more difficult for Helen, but Candy looked adorable with her magnificent new mane.

It was shedding season for all the animals to make way for their new winter coats. The servants who tended to the stables and hunting dogs were perpetually covered in fur.

An anxious atmosphere permeated the grounds, a consequence of everyone's hurried preparations. Claudia was no exception, having been flooded with invitations for gatherings and tea parties. One such invitation was penned by Seraphim, the United Kingdom of Arakaner's crown prince. They were farther north than Harland, so as the temperatures dropped, the sea between them would freeze over. Raul and Lestea had also invited her to their southern homeland of Bari, which they happily assured her would be the perfect retreat for the winter.

While Claudia deliberated how to reply to each invitation, the carriage rolled up to the school. The moment she opened the door to climb out, the cold air rushed in, hitting her square in the face. She clutched her shawl tighter. She would definitely be needing it today.

A quick glance around campus revealed that the rest of the female students were sporting similar garments to keep themselves warm, but the male students were not. Perhaps the men just had higher body temperatures. When she arrived at the classroom, she found that not even Sylvester had any form of jacket on.

"Good morning," she greeted him. "Aren't you cold, Syl?"

"Morning. Not particularly, no."

"I suppose men are just more resistant to the cold."

"That could be, but I believe the difference in our attire to be the bigger reason," he said. "Your legs are far less protected from the cold than ours."

That made sense to her. *Skirts are much less effective at keeping a person warm than pants are.* Not to mention that female students had to wear skirts no matter how low the temperatures went. Female students could somewhat compensate when they were seated by draping a blanket over their laps, but they were reexposed to the nipping winds anytime they had to stand or walk around.

"Meanwhile," Lestea interjected, "I'm using both a shawl *and* pants."

Raul sniffed at her. "Despite your looks, you don't handle the cold well at all."

She glowered back at him. "'Despite your looks'? What is that supposed to mean?"

At the sound of their voices, Claudia turned to face them. Lestea was, as she'd said, sporting a black shawl. As soon as she caught Claudia looking, she flashed a beautiful smile and said, "Good morning!"

Most of Bari's people had rich, sun-kissed skin, but Lestea's was pale. Her hair and eyes were a matching wintry blue, so Claudia understood why Raul had made his comment. *When I first invited her to my tea party and saw her, I thought she looked like a*

winter fairy. It had been a chilly winter day then, too, when she gave Lestea a brief guided tour of her family's garden.

"The women here should simply wear pants like I do," said Lestea.

Raul shook his head. "People can't forsake custom so easily."

He was exactly right about that: custom was why the female students wore skirts no matter the weather. The concept of wearing pants outside of horseback riding was completely foreign to them. It went beyond custom at this point. It was a social rule, and wearing pants would be a serious violation.

"What a ridiculous custom," Lestea said with a breathy sigh.

Like Raul, she left the collar of her shirt unbuttoned. Loose-fitting clothing was preferred in Bari, so buttoning the collar would probably make the two of them uncomfortable. If a Harland aristocrat did such a thing, they would be admonished for their sloppy state of dress. Such was the way of customs that they differed in each nation.

"Yes," Claudia said, drawing out the word, "but I do think it might be better to have some options."

Lestea perked up. "I knew you'd understand! Unlike certain people, who are far too narrow-minded."

Claudia smiled thinly back at Lestea. "I think he's actually rather broad-minded." Otherwise, he wouldn't allow Lestea to stay at his side after everything she had done.

"But he has no intention of changing the status quo," Lestea argued. "Oh, bit of a change of topic, but did you realize? My shawl matches my bias's colors."

"Your...bias's colors?" Claudia cocked her head to the side. She'd never hear those words used together before.

"You can wear a combination of colors that matches the person you like or want to support," Lestea explained. "So I chose black and blue."

She studied Lestea's shawl more closely this time. The ends on either side were indeed a dark shade of blue that blended perfectly with the black. It wasn't hard to guess who Lestea's "bias" was supposed to be.

“This is a new product the Evans Company plans to ship out this winter,” Lestea went on. “Brian told me all about it, and I jumped on the opportunity to make a purchase before anyone else got the chance.”

When had the two of them grown close enough for him to share inside information with her?

“I daresay it’ll be the biggest trend of the season,” Lestea said, nodding to herself. “There will be a number of color schemes available in their store, and if anyone wants something different than what’s available, they can make it to order.”

Brian had apparently come up with the idea based on couples wearing each other’s colors. Claudia had previously embroidered a handkerchief with black and blue thread for Sylvester.

Raul pulled a face at Lestea, who had left him out of the loop until now. “I get the intention behind it, but isn’t it kind of inappropriate?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please, as if you don’t want one too. Also, you don’t *have* to wear it if you don’t want to. Lady Charlotte said she would be pinning her shawl up in her room next to Lady Claudia’s portrait.”

It sounded like Charlotte had been present for this discussion and purchase, whenever it was. Something else in the conversation caught Claudia’s attention. *Hold on, Charlotte has a portrait of me?!* It wasn’t that unusual for someone to keep a portrait of a person they admired. In fact, Charlotte affectionately referred to Claudia as an older sister all the time, so it would be more surprising if she *didn’t* have such a portrait in her possession. Yet Claudia had never really thought about it before, and hearing it now made her self-conscious.

“The store has a similar display for its shawls, so I figure most people will keep their purchases in their room as opposed to using them.”

“Pardon,” Claudia cut in, “but could you elaborate on this ‘similar display’?”

“Don’t worry—they don’t have a portrait of you, if that’s what you’re concerned about. But they do have a painting of a black cat

with blue eyes," said Lestea. "There's another painting beside it of a silver cat with golden eyes."

It wasn't hard to guess who the two cats were supposed to represent, but it was abstract enough that Claudia couldn't very well complain about it.

"Brian said they planned to have a variety of smaller goods like handkerchiefs available as well," Lestea added.

"A very business-minded approach," Claudia said, impressed.

"Hm." Beside her, Sylvester nodded to himself. "It was smart to limit the color scheme to two colors. Black and blue could just as easily symbolize Virgil."

Silver and gold were, likewise, colors associated with the entire royal family. Having a limited color scheme left room for interpretation, giving the company and its customers a viable excuse if any questions ever arose. Plus, there were bound to be black cats out there with blue eyes. No one could complain of infringement when the concept was so vague. *Indeed, Brian and his family considered every angle of their new catalog.*

With that in mind, Claudia decided she would buy one of every item they had in Sylvester's colors.

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As noon rolled around, Claudia and her usual group of friends made their way to the dining hall, which served as both a cafeteria and a café. It was already bustling with activity. Amid the cacophony was group chatter and the clang of cutlery. Claudia had found it jarring when she first came here. She was used to gatherings and tea parties and all the noises associated with them, but she had never sat down to eat in such an enormous dining hall with so many people. Since she was in her final year, she was accustomed to it now.

"Big Sister!" Charlotte called out to her. "Today's special is the chicken and apple sauté."

"Then I suppose I'll have that."

The dining hall provided two options: set meals with side dishes or an open buffet. When Claudia first began attending,

she'd mostly opted for the buffet. However, it took significant effort to plan out which dishes would make for a fully nutritious meal, so she pivoted to the set meals instead. The menu changed often enough that she never tired of it.

I owe so much to the cooks here, she thought. The whole buffet experience had made her grateful not only to them but to the chefs at her family's estate as well. It was hard work, coming up with a new tasty spread every day that was also nutritionally balanced. She hadn't realized that until she had tried to do it herself with the buffet, ultimately developing a habit of picking the same exact things to avoid the hassle until she switched to the set menu.

There were more than enough seats in the dining hall for everyone to find a spot, but the same places were always conspicuously unoccupied. In the summer, they were the shaded areas. In the winter, they were the sunnier spots. These were the most desirable spots, but the other students avoided them out of consideration for Sylvester and Raul—even though the two princes had never asked it of them.

Everyone in the group made their preferred orders before taking their usual seats, trays in hand. Louise settled in beside Claudia with her risotto. The aroma of the creamy sauce and mushrooms wafted up to Claudia's nose, teasing her.

It's strange how the meals other people ordered somehow look even more delicious than my own. She made a mental note to order the risotto tomorrow as she focused on her chicken and apple sauté. Steam rose from the plate, carrying with it the sweet yet tart scent of the apples. Combined with the crisp, light-brown chicken, it made Claudia eager to dig in. Beneath the spiced chicken was barely visible potato galette.

Unable to wait a moment longer, she grabbed her utensils and loaded a bite onto her fork, lifting it to her lips. There was an initial crunch followed by the smooth texture of the meat, all the flavors combined and spreading through her mouth. It tasted of sheer happiness.

Mm, this is delicious!

Chickens tasted best during a harsh winter, once they had gained a sufficient amount of weight, but the leaner meat prior to this season was sufficiently delicious—especially when fried in

butter and combined with the galette. The apples had been cut into cubes and scattered around the plate. They had been sautéed in butter and sugar, giving them a beautiful yellow color. Biting into one, she thought the chef must have used lemon to tone down the sweetness and add a subtle sour note. The dish was so delectable that she couldn't stop eating. There were caramelized onion slices on the side as well, making it the perfect autumnal dish.

While Claudia savored her meal, the pair of emerald eyes beside her watched closely. "I think I'll order that tomorrow," said Louise.

The grass was always greener on the other side. Apparently even more so when it came to what someone else was eating.

***

Once afternoon classes were over and it was time for the students to head home, Sylvester invited Claudia to take a walk with him. And while he called it a walk, they were staying on school grounds, visiting a secret spot he'd happened to find. He said he wouldn't mind telling everyone else about it later, but he wanted to show it to her first. She readily agreed.

They were seldom alone together at the academy, even though it provided an opportunity for them to spend more time in each other's company. Thus, Sylvester's invitation was more than she could have hoped for.

The spot Sylvester led her to was along the rear entrance to the premises, not far from the area where the carriages came to pick up the students. It made sense why he'd called it a secret, since the rear entrance was always kept hidden. Only members of the royal family were given the privilege of access. That was how he'd stumbled upon it.

"Close your eyes for a few moments," he told her, guiding her gently by the hand.

It seemed they'd almost reached their destination. She kept her eyes firmly shut, vaguely aware that the ground beneath her had transitioned from cobblestone to dirt. As they treaded farther,

she felt a strange cushion beneath her feet—fallen leaves, presumably.

"This should be perfect," he said. "All right, you can look now."

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Wind rushed through the trees, rustling the leaves. Everything around her was a bright crimson. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, at which point she picked out other colors: the blue of the sky and the vivid orange and yellow of the leaves.

It was early enough in the day that the sun was only beginning its descent. The trees in this area were all the same type, their leaves turning at the exact same time. A breeze had the leaves dancing through the air, their amber color turned crimson in the light. That was the source of the illusion she'd seen at first: the sun. For that split second, everything had been red, save for the sky.

"What beautiful autumn leaves," she said.

"A rare sight here in the capital, isn't it? Not even the forested park near the high-end district can offer a sight like this. Its trees are all different varieties."

She glanced at him. "You went and saw them for yourself?"

"Oh, uh, I happened to go by there and saw them."

Gardeners had been hired to help with the upkeep of the park, but by and large, the trees were a natural feature of the scenery there that had been left untouched. Most of the trees on the academy's campus were much the same. Provided they didn't obstruct any buildings or school activities, they were left as is. It was pure luck that so many trees of the same variety had grown in a cluster here.

"It's different from the tree-lined avenues in the city," Claudia said. Since there were no gardeners to tend to this particular area, the leaves piled up at the base of the trees. That had indeed been what cushioned her feet earlier. They were like a plush carpet, comfortable to walk on. But they held fast to the back of her shoe, and the dirt that clung to them filled the air with the scent of damp soil. This—all of this—encapsulated autumn so perfectly.

"I'm glad you like it," said Sylvester. His golden eyes crinkled with the smile that spread across his face. His silver hair stood out

against the crimson canvas of their surroundings.

The way the leaves floated down around him felt so intentional, it was like a scene from a play. As they danced in the thin space between the two, Claudia was beset by an indescribable urge. She clutched her shawl tightly, unsure of whether she could squeeze out the words rising in her throat.

“The scenery is breathtaking, but what makes me happiest of all is enjoying it with you, Syl.” She peered up into his eyes, which widened with surprise at her honest admittance.

Not a second later, she nearly lost balance, the warmth of her shawl overtaken by a different heat when Sylvester pulled her into his embrace. “Me too,” he whispered against her cheek, his hot breath creeping all the way down to her chin.

The moment she felt his body heat against her, the desire within her welled up. Her arms wound around him, hands pressing against the broad planes of his back, pulling him even closer.

“Thank you so much for bringing me here, Syl.”

He didn’t respond, but he pulled back enough for them to stare into each other’s eyes, heightening the passion between them.

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The scenery around them had been like a mirage, yet the ephemeral moment made her heart feel full. As soon as Claudia returned home to her family’s estate, that satisfaction was replaced by loneliness. Her heart ached now that she was apart from Sylvester. She desperately wanted to rush back to him if she could, even though she knew they would see each other again tomorrow.

I’m being far too selfish.

She had brought schoolwork home to finish before tomorrow, but she didn’t feel like sitting down and attending to it. Instead, she asked Helen to bring Candy to her room.

“She hasn’t completely finished shedding, so there may be a lot of fur,” Helen warned her.

“I don’t mind.”

She sat on the sofa, and Helen handed the furball over to her. The feline’s fluffy winter coat was so silky and smooth that merely petting Candy was enough to fill the hole Sylvester’s absence had left in her heart. Candy purred contentedly as Claudia nuzzled her cheek against the cat’s. Claudia didn’t care if she was covered in fur afterward.

“If Prince Sylvester were here, I bet he would be desperately jealous of Candy,” said Helen.

“That seems like an exaggeration.”

“We’re both women, yet even I find myself entranced by the melancholic expression on your face.”

Claudia couldn’t deny her melancholy, but at least Candy was providing her comfort.

“If I told him you looked about ready to kiss the cat, I have no doubt he would fly over to change places with her,” Helen teased. She giggled to herself as she poured Claudia’s tea.

Claudia would have been delighted if that were enough to coax him over, but she also knew he would snatch Candy away from her. She couldn’t abide that. Furthermore, Helen wouldn’t contact him for something so trivial, nor would he come for such a ridiculous reason. So she decided to have her kiss anyway. Some cats disliked such physical affection, but Candy continued to purr without complaint, making her all the more adorable.

“I have fur on my lips,” Claudia realized.

“That’s why I warned you earlier.” Helen reached over to pluck it off since Claudia had her hands full, the maid’s touch gentle and careful.

Before she could think better of it, Claudia blurted out, “It’s entitled of me to feel lonely without him when I just saw him earlier, isn’t it?”

“I think he would be delighted if you told him how you feel.”

Claudia frowned and shook her head. “He’d be disappointed in me.” She wasn’t a child. Even she realized how ridiculous she was being. She sighed.

Helen gave her a judgmental look. “I can’t believe you’re so clueless in this area.”

“If you have something to say, would you please give it to me straight?”

“No, I know better than to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong,” Helen said. “Besides, it’s adorable watching you pine.”

Claudia knew Helen wasn’t trying to tease her this time, but it still didn’t sit right with her. In her brothel days, she had handled a vast number of male clients, but she had never been in love until now. The fact that Sylvester returned her affections did nothing to quell her desire for him.

“You are most definitely in love,” said Helen.

“And what about you?”

“What about me? There’s nothing to discuss,” the maid said, expertly dodging the question.

Claudia’s heart ached for Brian, but she already had her hands full with her own romantic life. “It must be seasonal,” she said. “Autumn is always lonely.”

“Indeed, especially with the temperatures dropping.”

When she saw Sylvester the next day, she wasn’t so much worried about him being disappointed as she was simply too embarrassed to confess her honest feelings to him. Thus, she kept her loneliness to herself.

Afterword

GOOD MORNING, good afternoon, or good evening wherever you are! I am Bakufu Narayama. I often find myself wondering how you're all doing when I'm eating lunch or when I'm focused on a good book at night. In this day and age of digital books, it's much easier to find spare moments to read. I'm glad that I don't have to carry around hefty volumes anymore. It used to tire my eyes out reading on a smartphone, but it's become much easier thanks to recent innovations.

Maybe my eyes have grown weaker, though, because I much prefer reading horizontal text than the vertical type in Japanese manga. There was a time when all I ever read was webcomics, but it's nice to find works with horizontal script.

At first I found it hard to get used to how all digital publications are vertical when I primarily read works on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, where the text is always horizontal. It bothers me less now, though. I'm happy to read novels, regardless of how they're formatted.

Sorry for that long preface, but here we are at Volume 4! As you can probably tell from the cover, this volume was all about the women. Yay! Seeing the cover fills me with joy since Ebisushi-san is so talented at drawing women as well as men. They're all so gorgeous! The front-page illustration was particularly captivating. Not something we could let Sylvester see, that's for sure! Really gets the blood pumping, doesn't it?

Sometimes I imagine myself becoming one of the background characters and asking one of the leading ladies to step on me. In these fantasies, I try to forget about the men in their lives because it's terrifying to think how they'd react to that. But it's pretty fun to imagine it. I think Claudia would humor me. And our new female character, Nina, is merciless enough that she would do it. I think even though she'd be flustered, Louise would indulge me too.

Ebisushi-san and Kitaguni-san's art really makes it fun to imagine all sorts of things! I picture the story in my head as I'm writing, but seeing it realized on the page adds so much more definition to it. In the manga, you get to see lots of different

expressions from the characters. The second volume of the manga for *Condemned Villainess* had me drooling everywhere. I hope you readers can find your own ways of enjoying the story and its characters.

I want to thank my readers for their endless support, as well as my family. Another thanks to my publisher and everyone working there for helping this series take shape. I hope all of you will continue to support me. I pray we will meet again in a future volume.

Yours,

BAKUFU NARAYAMA

FROM THE AUTHOR

Bakufu Narayama

This time, the cover's full of gorgeous girls! Thank you, Ebisushi. My mind was overwhelmed when I first saw it: Ah, so cute! Beautiful! Gorgeous! You've got me drooling all over myself. I can't thank you enough!

FROM THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ebisushi

Once again, I had the honor of doing the illustrations for this volume. It was so much fun drawing all sorts of outfits for the masquerade ball! I hope you all enjoy this new, previously unexplored side of Claudia and Sylvester too!



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