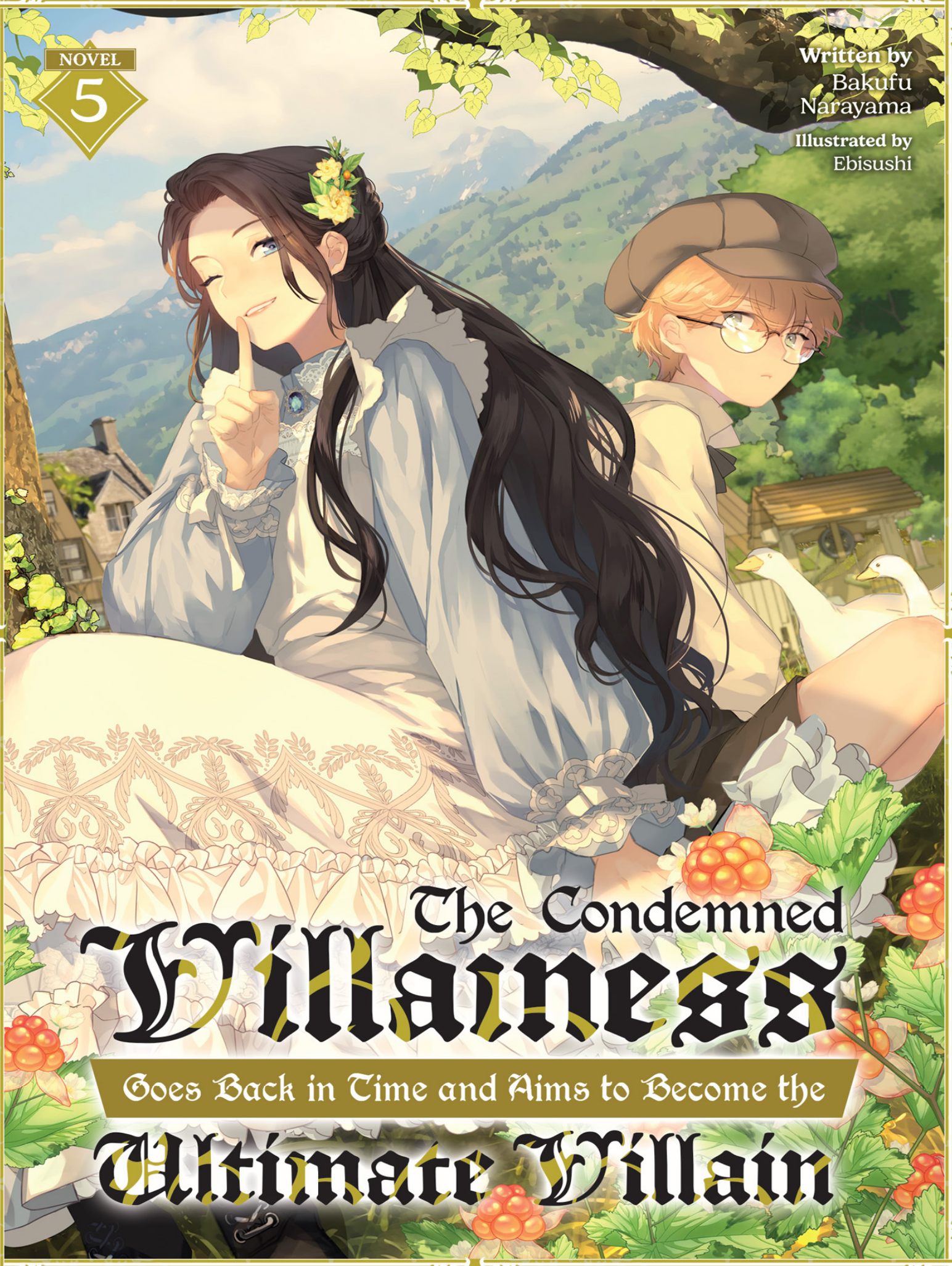

NOVEL
5
Written by
Bakufu
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Illustrated by
Ebisushi
The Condemned
Villainess
Goes Back in Time and Aims to Become the
Ultimate Villain

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Afterword

# The Condemned Villainess Goes Back in Time and Aims to Become the Ultimate Villain

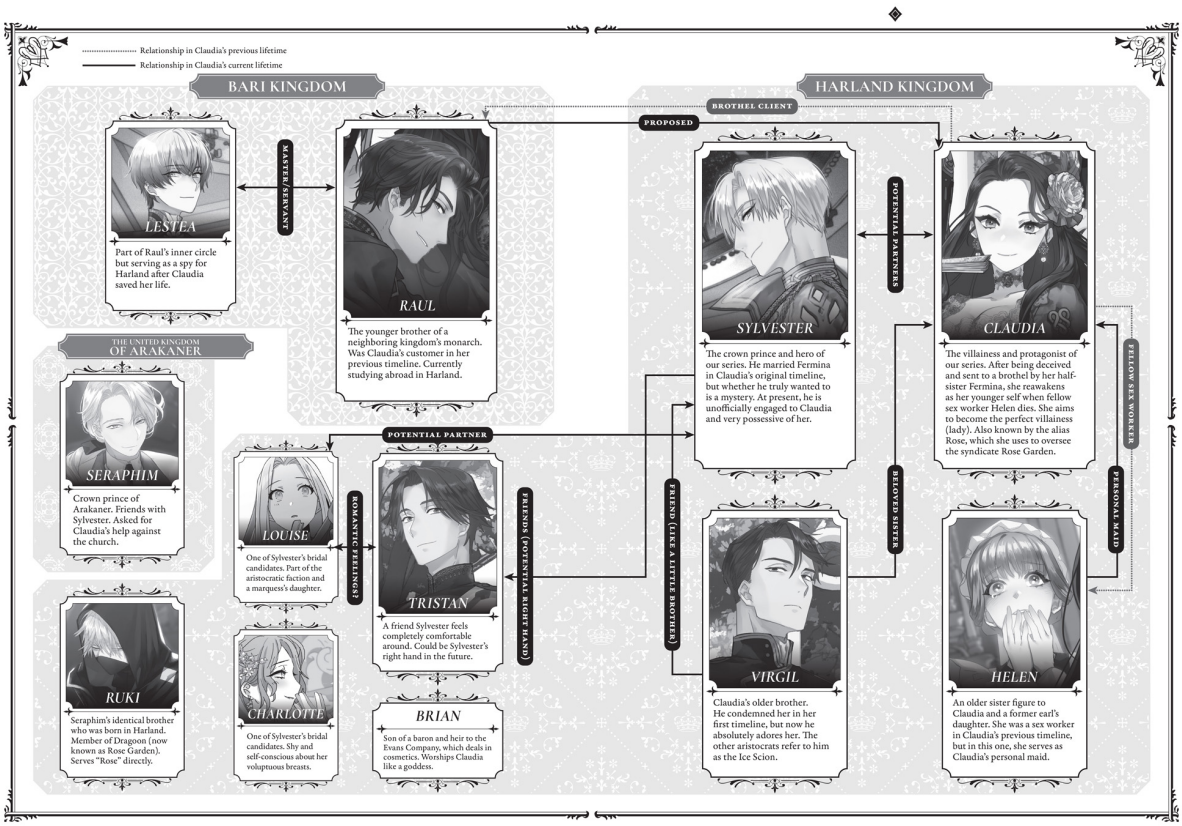
NOVEL 5

WRITTEN BY
Bakufu Narayama

ILLUSTRATED BY
Ebisushi

Airship

*Seven Seas Entertainment*


Relationship in Claudia's previous lifetime
Relationship in Claudia's current lifetime
BARI KINGDOM
HARLAND KINGDOM
THE UNITED KINGDOM OF ARAKANER
BROTHEL CLIENT
PROPOSED
MASTER/SERVANT
POTENTIAL PARTNERS
POTENTIAL PARTNER
ROMANTIC FEELINGS?
FRIENDS (POTENTIAL RIGHT HAND)
FRIEND (LIKE A LITTLE BROTHER)
BELOVED SISTER
FELLOW SEX WORKER
PERSONAL MAID
LESTEA
Part of Raul's inner circle but serving as a spy for Harland after Claudia saved her life.
RAUL
The younger brother of a neighboring kingdom's monarch. Was Claudia's customer in her previous timeline. Currently studying abroad in Harland.
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.
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.
SERAPHIM
Crown prince of Arakaner. Friends with Sylvester. Asked for Claudia's help against the church.
LOUISE
One of Sylvester's bridal candidates. Part of the aristocratic faction and a marquess's daughter.
TRISTAN
A friend Sylvester feels completely comfortable around. Could be Sylvester's right hand in the future.
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.
RUKI
Seraphim's identical brother who was born in Harland. Member of Dragoon (now known as Rose Garden). Serves "Rose" directly.
CHARLOTTE
One of Sylvester's bridal candidates. Shy and self-conscious about her voluptuous breasts.
BRIAN
Son of a baron and heir to the Evans Company, which deals in cosmetics. Worships Claudia like a goddess.

The Condemned Villainess Goes Back in Time and
Aims to Become the Ultimate Villain (Light Novel) VOL. 5
Written by Bakufu Narayama
Illustrations by Ebisushi
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## Chapter 1:
## The Crown Prince Meets with the King

WHEN ONE HEARS THE WORDS "royal castle," what does one usually picture? Perhaps a king's residence, located at the heart of the country? One might even have an ostentatious image of huge ballrooms where soirees are held or vast, carefully maintained gardens in which to host tea parties. Or one might simply picture a resplendent residence for the country's royal family.

Whatever one's immediate interpretation, they are all correct. An aristocrat who has visited a royal castle before might be able to provide a more detailed description, but in general, it would differ little from the imagination of the average citizen.

Harland's castle sat atop a plateau overlooking the rest of the royal capital, including both the high-end district and the downtown area. A tower was connected to the castle, its roof like the tipped end of a spear jutting up to pierce the heavens above. Altogether, it stood as a symbol of the royal family's power and influence. Anyone and everyone recognized its majesty. People instinctively lowered their heads before it.

The exterior wasn't the only impressive part of the royal castle. Its halls and walls and pillars were kept so pristinely polished that they reflected the faces of their visitors. Sunlight poured in through the windows, revealing not even a single mote of dust hovering in the air.

A figure stepped into the seeping sunbeams as he strode down a corridor. The young man had the same silver hair and golden eyes as the king. Neither the castle's daunting exterior nor its interior, carefully designed by an expert artisan, were special to him; he'd grown too accustomed to them over the years.

This young man was himself like a walking work of art. His skin was silky and smooth as porcelain, his hair like the finest silver threads that captured the light in the room, sparkling as they swayed against his forehead with each movement and drawing the attention of anyone who looked his way.

His nose was perfectly proportioned, sitting just above his faintly rose-colored lips. Anyone who found themselves staring—and many a person did—would immediately blush when they realized what they were doing. And if they lifted their gaze from his lips, they would find themselves entranced by his golden eyes, framed by silver lashes.

Sylvester Harland was possessed of a rare natural beauty. As Harland's crown prince, he thought nothing of all the extravagant architecture and ornate decor he passed as he made his way down a long corridor to have an audience with his father. His leather shoes made a rhythmic clapping noise that echoed around him with each step he took.

He was still far from his destination: the king's office. He would need to turn several more corners and traverse more indistinguishable hallways before he arrived. It was muscle memory that guided him at this point. His mind was elsewhere; it annoyed him that he had to

waste so much time reaching his father's office when their conversation would be over in mere minutes.

The distance and mazelike halls were an intentional part of the castle's design, intended to be a security measure against intruders. Sylvester understood as much, but that didn't make it any less burdensome. All of the corridors were identical. While this helped prevent any would-be infiltrators from finding the king so easily, it also confused *anyone* unfamiliar with the layout. The only upside was that once someone knew the place like the back of their hand, as Sylvester did, it provided extra time to sort their thoughts.

*It seems the unrest in Parte Kingdom has finally settled down.*

Parte Kingdom was a small nation on Harland's southwestern border, which acted as a buffer between Harland and the conflict zone to the west. Harland had been paying a share of fees for the defense that Parte provided and had also cut a favorable trade deal with them to lower tariffs.

The two countries had enjoyed good relations until last year, when cracks began to form. The growing hostility hit a crescendo, at which point the people were ready to commit to all-out war. Every citizen of Parte was raised to be a warrior in their own right, a fact that had likely added to the friction. Parte's citizens were ready to take up arms even though there would be nothing to gain from the conflict.

Parte also happened to be one of the few neighboring nations with a democratic government. The latest incident had shown some of the vulnerabilities of such a system. Policies could be swayed based

on emotional whims, as was the case with this latest incident, forcing Harland into a difficult decision: engage Parte in war or marry one of its people to reinforce political alliances. Unwilling to do either, Harland opted for a third choice: accepting a lady from Parte as a potential bridal candidate for the crown prince to buy themselves time to figure out another solution.

It was later discovered that the whole thing had been a scheme concocted by one of Parte's great and powerful families, the Bendins, along with Cardinal Nigel. Unfortunately, by that point, so much negative sentiment had been stoked among Parte's citizenry that they had no choice but to reassure the people to dissuade potential conflict. To that end, the bridal candidate Parte had sent, Niamilia Bendin—or Nina, which was her real name—proved how vital an ally she could be.

Nina had been adopted by the head of the Bendins and trained to be Cardinal Nigel's underling. Under the cardinal's orders, her aim had been to drag Claudia's name through the mud, but she failed. She now operated under Harland's direct supervision. Unlike Nigel's usual pawns, whom he rarely offered any critical information, Nina was deeply involved in his operations. The intel she had on him was so vital that Harland had decided to keep her in its care.

Sylvester wasn't entirely pleased with Nina, given the nature of her original mission in Harland, but he was pragmatic enough to see how useful she could be, even if his stomach roiled with resentment for the part she'd played. He could swallow his complaints if it meant having a useful chess piece with which to corner Cardinal Nigel.

Nina was the one who proposed fighting Cardinal Nigel's propaganda with some of their own. Her appointment as a bridal candidate had helped soothe her people's discontent to a degree, and she had capitalized on the opportunity to alleviate any misgivings they had about the friendship between Parte and Harland.

*According to the reports she gave, she actually took people aside one by one to change their minds.*

It might be a shortcoming of democracy that people's emotional whims could dictate policy, but the people weren't idiots. Once they'd had enough time to calm down, they realized how ill-advised war would be. They could keep their dignity while maintaining friendly relations—the best of both worlds, really.

The head of the Bendins didn't try to impede Nina's efforts. As much as he'd been involved in the scheme to make Nina a candidate, war was in no way beneficial to him. Nigel had been the primary culprit behind stoking discontent among the people, and it was his movements Sylvester was most interested in. Regrettably, since his plans had been ruined, he'd made no further contact with Lord Bendin—the family head—as far as Harland could tell.

*We expected as much, though.*

The prince thought back to the brief meeting he'd had with Nina and Claudia before Nina set off to return to Parte. Most of their correspondence had been through letters, but an opportunity arose to meet face-to-face. Since Claudia had wanted an update on the situation, he'd arranged for her to join him.

***

Sylvester and Claudia sat on a sofa opposite Nina with a table between them. He'd wanted Claudia beside him, especially in Nina's presence.

"So Cardinal Nigel still won't make a move, even in these circumstances?" he muttered.

Nina nodded. Her long, flowing hair was like the full spectrum of the sunset condensed into a vibrant scarlet. "He's had a long relationship with Lord Bendin, but now that he knows it's a sinking ship, I doubt he'll lift a finger to help."

Claudia leaned forward. "But the cardinal meddled quite heavily in the Bendins' affairs, didn't he? He even went so far as to appoint Darton as your butler to keep watch over you and train you to be his minion. Would he really cut ties with Lord Bendin as easily as he does with his own faithful?" While Claudia expected Nigel was capable of such callousness based on what she knew of him, she wasn't familiar enough with him to do anything but speculate. Only Nina could say for certain.

"Lord Bendin was just a useful puppet in his schemes," Nina answered. "He wouldn't treat him any differently than the low-ranking faithful in the church. Although I'm sure it will displease him to have lost a valuable financial resource."

"Then we're at least divesting him of some power. That said, the way he treats his collaborators gives me a headache." Claudia closed her eyes and massaged her temples. Even such a powerful, influential

family wasn't worthy of Nigel's loyalty. As Nina said, they were nothing but disposable pawns.

"I suspect Lord Bendin still believes that the church will save him, no matter how bad things get for him." Nina's ruby-red lips pulled into a derisive grin, her deep-seated hatred for her adoptive father apparent. No one could blame her for it, given how the man had killed her entire family and used her like a puppet.

The intense malice that lurked in Nina's dark-navy eyes was a reassurance to Sylvester. For many years, she had longed for the fall of the Bendins, so at least until her revenge was complete, she would do her utmost to contribute to Harland's endeavors. There was no need to make any adjustments to their plans. Granted, Nigel had probably expected all of this from the moment that Nina fell into their hands. He'd schemed to his heart's content to make all of this happen, but he would lie low for the time being to avoid them digging any deeper into his business. As anxious as Sylvester was to find some concrete evidence to incriminate the cardinal, he knew better than to expend his resources on that right now, lest it leave him ill-equipped to handle any unexpected trouble the cardinal might send his way.

"As far as I understand it, the cardinal doesn't seem any more eager for war than we are," said Sylvester.

Claudia glanced at him and nodded thoughtfully. "True. As Nina said before, if he really wanted war between our nations, he would have orchestrated an attack on her the moment she entered our borders to ensure that outcome was inescapable." And he hadn't done

that. A vicious war between Parte and Harland would presumably hamper his machinations.

"I suppose every action we've taken is exactly what he wanted us to do," Sylvester said bitterly. Assuming Nigel had foreseen this outcome—and he likely had—they were dancing in the palm of his hand. It infuriated Sylvester. Only Claudia's warmth kept him from knitting his brows and frowning; as she rested her hand on his knee, he reached down to squeeze it. It was mystifying to him how something so simple could make the churning anger in his stomach instantly evaporate.

"He has enough foresight that I'm sure he expected the general outcome of his scheming, but I don't think he could have predicted that Nina would cooperate with us as much as she has." Claudia smiled at him. "Harland has only a few limited options for how to respond, so that makes us easy to predict. The same can't be said of the much smaller cogs within the machine."

Claudia was right when she said they were divesting him of power. Forcing him to keep a low profile was also a notable accomplishment.

"All of this has helped me reconsider my previous stance," said Nina. "As long as you intend to continue fighting, I'll be right there alongside you." She had been reluctant to go against the cardinal and had only changed her mind after seeing how bravely Claudia resolved to stand against him. There was also the very real threat that Harland would dispose of her if she didn't prove useful, but one's willingness—

or lack thereof—had a large impact on the efficiency of their work. Sylvester was glad for her change of heart.

"Once the discontent in Parte has completely subsided, Lord Bendin will face the consequences of his actions. We've already contacted his political rivals," said Sylvester.

Nina sat up straighter, breaking out into a smile. "Oh, I can't wait for that to happen!" She didn't even bother trying to mask her joy.

As soon as the Bendins' crimes were made public, Nina would be disqualified as a bridal candidate. Not that she particularly cared about that part.

"And we'll finally be able to make preparations for our engagement party," said Sylvester.

Sylvester's actions ran so contrary to his words that Claudia couldn't help but laugh. "'Finally'? Why, you already sent the royal modiste to our estate the other day." Her mirth coaxed a grin out of him.

When they had first laid out their plans, the intention was to have Nina spread propaganda to dissuade the people of Parte from war and have Lord Bendin brought to justice. Finally, after all of that was over, they would hold an engagement party.

In reality, all three things were happening at once, in part because it took a substantial amount of time both to lay the groundwork in Parte and to make all the preparations for the engagement party.

Their sudden romantic atmosphere had Nina shrugging with exasperation. “Glad to see you two are as close as ever.”

The sun was still high in the sky, so the room was quite bright. Sylvester could see every intricate feature of Claudia’s face as well as Nina’s, and it left him skeptical how Nina had ever managed to disguise herself as Claudia. They both had impeccable etiquette and carefully maintained figures, though. Even the loose, wavy texture of their hair was exactly alike. Yes, he could see that they had more in common than most people. But would he ever mistake one for the other? No. He was certain he wouldn’t.

*Maybe at a considerable distance I might.* Regardless, he couldn’t help wondering how anyone had thought Nina was Claudia.

***

The meeting with Nina had ended on a friendly note after that.

Sylvester must have been preoccupied thinking about Claudia’s smile the rest of the way to his father’s office; by the time he arrived, he wasn’t anywhere near as tense as usual. *I can’t be* too *relaxed*. He would still be meeting with the most powerful man in their country.

Harland’s ruler was the most exalted person in the kingdom. The people both feared and respected him. He alone carried the weight of responsibility for the entire nation. And when he was working, especially in his office, their familial ties were irrelevant.

Sylvester's father always made a point of coming to breakfast no matter how busy he was. Where Sylvester had grown incredibly jaded and cynical, his father was tenderhearted and well rounded. *As a father, anyway,* he mentally corrected himself.

Regarding the earlier situation with Raul, the king had offered Sylvester emotional support—but as monarch, he'd demanded results that benefited Harland. The king appraised people on their merits rather than their status, and he was content to have Sylvester learn lessons the hard way to ensure the prince could stand on his own. If Sylvester didn't meet his expectations, the king wouldn't hesitate to revoke every last ounce of authority he possessed. Failure was not an option for a member of the royal family.

The king's golden eyes, a trait common to all members of the royal family, were narrowed in a glare meant to cow all before him—even fellow family members. Much like the castle itself, Sylvester realized. *It's as if the castle is a reflection of the king.*

The chamberlain announced his arrival, and after a few moments, the door to the office swung open. Sylvester stepped inside, taking a ninety-degree turn as he entered. The room was quaint compared to the audience chamber's grand hall; it was nearly indistinguishable from any other room in the castle. The flags decorating the wall and the plush, high-quality red carpet that swallowed his shoes as he entered solidified that he really was in the king's office.

The king sat ahead of Sylvester, sunlight pouring in from his back to create a blinding silhouette. His desk stood at an elevated

position. As Sylvester drew closer to take his place before it, he had to crane his neck to look up at the king even as the ruler remained seated.

At the mature age of forty, the king had faint wrinkles beneath his hooded golden eyes. His hair, long enough to reach his collar when left untouched, was slicked back. Since he was on duty, his expression betrayed no emotion. People often told Sylvester he looked like his father, but he had inherited just as much from his mother, so he didn't really see the resemblance.

The king pushed the paperwork he'd been tending to aside and stared hard at his son. The atmosphere grew increasingly tense. "As I understand it, the situation in Parte has finally calmed down."

"Yes. We should be able to hold the engagement ceremony as planned," Sylvester responded. That was the main reason for this meeting, in fact.

Per tradition, he'd been forced to wait until graduation to officially announce his engagement. He had, however, suggested to parliament that they make it a more ostentatious affair than was standard to cement Claudia's position domestically and internationally.

"You realize that there is a select group that still opposes the ceremony."

Sylvester nodded. "I am aware of that, yes."

The problem wasn't the ceremony itself so much as the financial burden it would bring. Sylvester had tried to convince the dissenters it was necessary, but some were stubbornly standing their ground on the issue. The king had the final say on parliamentary matters, so for

as long as he approved of the plan, they could proceed whether all members were on board. Yet one couldn't survive in a world of power and political intrigue without respecting the consequences of too much brute force. Even if the monarch sat at the top of the hierarchy, that hierarchy wouldn't exist without the aristocracy to support it.

"Then do what you must," said the king.

"As you command."

The real meaning beneath his father's words was this: *Don't give those beneath you any room to quibble. Demand their respect.*

In contrast to past royal engagement ceremonies, this one would require much more funding, but not so much that it merited an increase in taxes. Given the kingdom's budget, it was an inconsequential amount.

*Time to bring them to heel, then.*

Although Sylvester was the crown prince, he was still an amateur in the political world. The aristocracy was constantly looking for an opportunity to leash him. He needed to show them who was the master and who was the pet.

*But that can't be his only trial for me.*

The king always gave him difficult challenges to overcome. Experience told Sylvester that cowing the opposition wouldn't be the only task on his list. And at that moment, as expected, a government official who had been silently standing by suddenly handed him some documents.

"Those documents detail a problem that has recently developed," said the king.

Sylvester scanned them, comparing the information within to what he already knew. "This is about those villages where dissidents have been gathering, isn't it?"

"Correct. If you cannot resolve this issue, even if you manage to see this engagement ceremony through, you will have a difficult reign in your future." His eyes, golden like Sylvester's, stared hard enough to bore a hole right through his son.

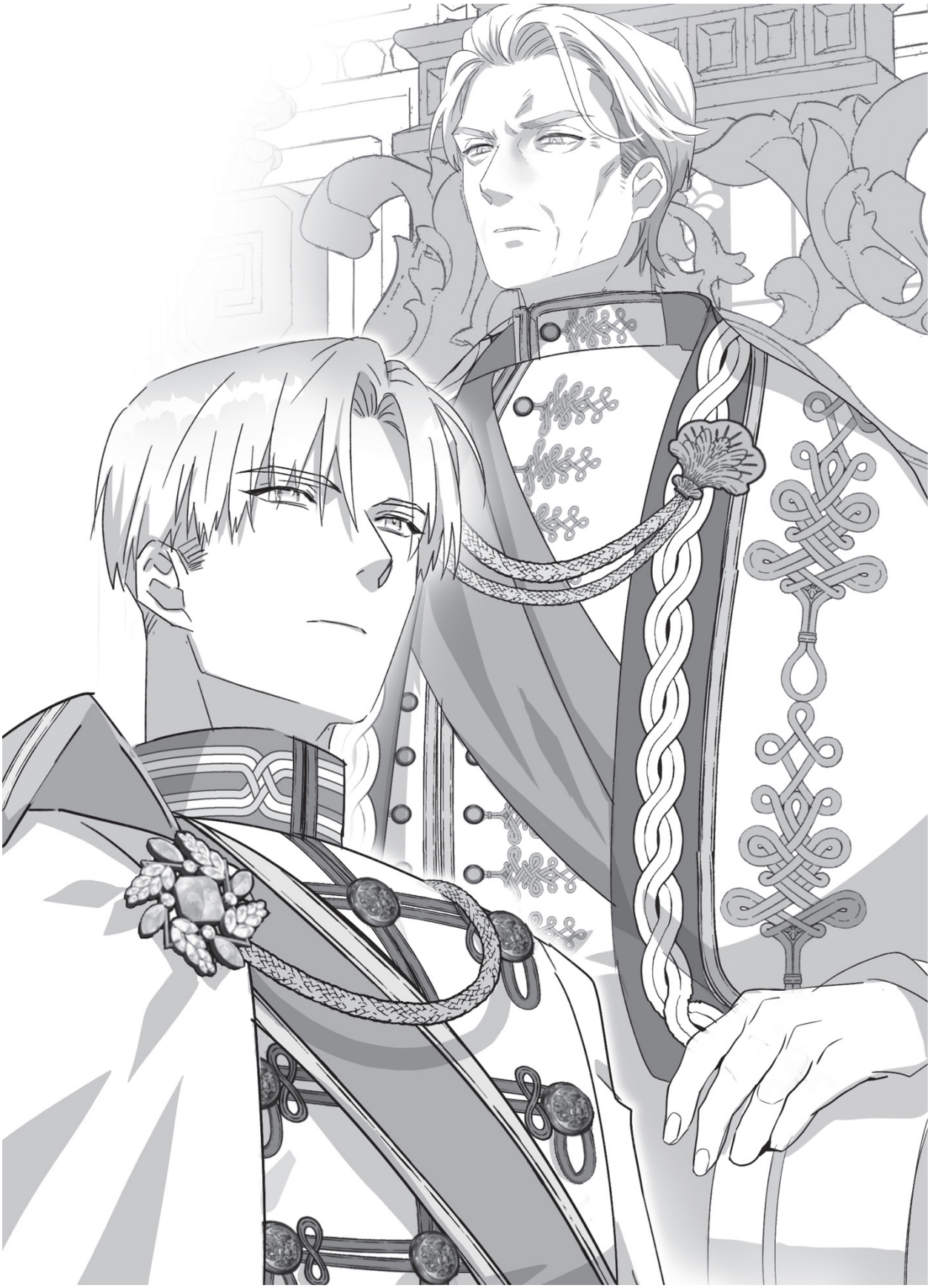
"There is no tranquility for us," his father went on. "We are always balancing a mountain of problems. Show everyone your strength. No matter the situation, defeat is never an option. The future you dream of is something you must create yourself."

"I will take your words to heart," Sylvester promised.

When he was younger, his family had always protected him from any threat that appeared. Now that he was an adult, it was his turn to help protect his kin and country. The people needed faith in their protectors. That was why he had to prove himself—both to his family and to those outside it. He had to show them he had power. If he couldn't, someone stronger would come to take his place. That would be the end of his family line, and such an end could only mean countless casualties, with nothing left in its wake.

Royalty had only one choice: to move forward. No matter what hurdles lay before them, they had to overcome them one way or another. That was Sylvester's fate from the moment he came into this world, right here in this majestic castle. He wasn't allowed to stop or

to look back. He had to keep moving forward constantly. That creed might as well have been etched into his father’s golden eyes.



Sylvester would walk the same path as his father before him. He had no objections to the responsibilities of his birthright.

## Chapter 2:
## A Baron Glimpses a Young Tiger's Teeth

IT WAS EVENING WHEN the summons came from the crown prince. Seeing all the other faces gathered in the meeting room, the baron had the sense there was a common theme among them, so he thought he could guess what this was about. All the men here were dressed in top-quality garments, glimmering gemstones on their fingers. Perhaps that wasn't surprising for a room full of aristocrats, but even those in the upper crust came from a vast range of financial backgrounds—some were poor as commoners despite their noble status.

*But not this lot,* the baron thought to himself. The men present were some of the most prosperous of high society in recent memory. As he studied their faces, he realized they were also all men with great success in maritime trade.

*Birds of a feather, eh?*

It was easy to guess what they had in common, considering he too had struck a deal with the king of Bari's younger brother. Raul had come to them with a request: he wanted them to delay the crown prince's marriage. In return, they were offered trade priority and lowered tariffs within Bari's waters. It was an irresistible deal for any businessman looking to turn a profit. That was likely why those with large territories or from long noble lineages weren't included: the

former in particular were too preoccupied with their domestic businesses.

Anyone with an ounce of foresight—really, anyone with a brain at all—would see how invaluable it was to receive preferential treatment in maritime trade. The deal was limited to Bari's waters and had an expiration date, but it could open future opportunities for them. It could provide clients and connections that were ordinarily out of their reach.

The crown prince was probably here to prod them about their dissension now that the date of his engagement ceremony had been settled. The baron was one of a handful who had opposed the unprecedented cost of the affair, hoping to stall as much as he could.

*I assume he intends to tell us to back down since we've made enough profit at this point.*

Prior to Raul's arrival at Harland's academy to study abroad, the crown prince's wedding was to be held once he graduated. As Claudia was so widely lauded for her upstanding character, that timeline had moved up considerably, thanks in large part to the groundwork Sylvester had laid with the rest of society's upper echelons. But since their engagement hadn't been made public, it left an opening for Raul to strike a deal with the baron and the rest of the men in this room. The resulting delay had merely pushed back the prince's marriage to the traditional timeline, netting the baron and the others a nice profit in the process.

What they had done wasn't severe enough to be considered treason, surely. No doubt some traditionalists would argue otherwise,

but Harland would never have grown so prosperous if "treason" could be interpreted so broadly. The baron knew where to draw the line.

*The crown prince sure is naive, though.*

It was human nature to crave more after getting a taste of something, and that included profit. None of them would back down so easily. If the prince wanted them to fall in line with him, he had to offer something in return.

A glance around the other faces told the baron that everyone else agreed with him on this. And though he was only a low-ranking aristocrat, he'd held his seat in parliament for many years now.

*He really is a political amateur if he thinks he can intimidate us.*

The evening sunlight cast the shape of the window onto the long marble table in front of him. The farthest seat from the door, at the very end of the table, remained empty, waiting for the crown prince to fill it.

After a short while, the servant waiting outside the door announced Sylvester's arrival. Given the nature of this meeting, everyone expected he'd wear a tight expression on his face from start to finish in his bid to intimidate them.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

Everyone stood and bowed to show their respect. When they lifted their heads, they found Sylvester smiling warmly at them, as he always did. Those with decent intuition instantly had their guards up, realizing they'd misread him. The baron was among them.

*What's he planning?* the baron wondered.

Sylvester settled into his seat, seemingly unbothered by the scrutiny of the other men in the room. The dwindling sunbeams hit his translucent silver hair, and his long lashes cast thin shadows on his cheeks. His beauty was bewitching. And when he tilted his head ever so slightly, his silver hair—dyed crimson by the sunlight—slid across his silky-smooth skin. It was easy to imagine the rippling muscles hidden beneath his shirt and jacket. The prince was tall and slender, but there was nothing androgynous about him. Yet he had an utterly sensual and alluring quality to him.

The baron found himself hit with an impulse to draw his tongue along that porcelain neck, much like one would trace their finger along the pure-white petal of a lily. He wanted to explore everything that lay tucked away and hidden beneath the prince's collar.

There was an audible gulp in the room, as if many of the other men present had shared the same fantasy. All the baron knew was that it hadn't come from *him*.

*Calm down,* he told himself. *The prince is the same age as my son, for goodness' sake.*

The men here were of all different ages, but even the youngest were at least twice Sylvester's years. What was wrong with them, letting a teenager get in their heads?

After a substantial silence, Sylvester finally parted his pink-tinged lips to say, "I suspect you gentlemen have already guessed why I have called all of you here. Moreover, I know exactly what it is you want."

*Hm? He's already predicted our demands and is going to open with an offer?* The baron was glad to see the crown prince didn't intend to lean on his authority to pressure them. Still, it was a naive way for him to handle his opponents. An admirable thought, maybe, but poorly planned.

*Does he really think we'll roll over for a bit of coin?* He was treating them like unruly children who could be pacified with a bit of candy. Even if he wasn't being openly condescending, most of those in the room probably took it that way. These were aristocrats with seats in parliament. There was nothing they hated more than clumsy, uninspired attempts at political maneuvering. *Only a commoner would be happy to be simply slapped with a wad of cash.* Not an aristocrat, though. Aristocrats had pride.

Perhaps the crown prince had hoped to settle this peacefully, but no adult appreciated being infantilized. Well, some of them might have such interests in the bedroom, but that was really none of the baron's business.

The king had given his son more and more administrative work over time, but if this was any indication, the prince still lacked experience. Maybe he was just that desperate to ensure his engagement ceremony went through smoothly.

*I guess we'll have to give him some much-needed education.*

All of them—baron included—regarded the crown prince with more than a little contempt until they were each passed a copy of a document.

"Where did you get this?!" came discordant cries from all over the room.

A chill ran down the baron's spine. The document had his name, as well as the exact date and place where he'd met Raul and agreed to his proposal. It even had the precise percentage of tariff reduction he'd received from the deal. *He knows everything!*

His stomach twisted. This was confidential information that only Raul and his close confidants should've had. The only explanation was that the crown prince had slipped a spy into Raul's inner circle. But even with an insider, could he really have come up with information on every single one of them? For the first time, the baron realized the crown prince was far more formidable than any of them had given him credit for.

Throughout the ordeal, Sylvester's warm smile never faltered once. "There should be a date on that paper. I noticed that something significant changed on that day for each one of you. Your actions made ripples that severely damaged our national interests."

"Wh-what are you talking about?" said one of the men.

If Sylvester was referring to the delay of his marriage until after graduation, the accusation was grossly exaggerated.

"Can you not put it together yourselves? If everything had gone the way *I* planned it," said Sylvester, "then my engagement would have been announced much sooner." But he'd been prevented from doing that. "And if it had been, we never would have had to appease Parte by considering a foreign woman for a bridal candidate."

He was obviously referring to Niamilia Bendin, whose father had sent her to Harland in hopes of marrying into a political alliance.

"Please, wait just a moment. Wasn't that a blessing? Having Lady Niamilia as a bridal candidate helped calm the people of Parte," said one of the other dissidents.

*Exactly,* thought the baron. *If he'd already been engaged, we'd have had no way of appeasing them.*

"A blessing? Really? You all know that was only a temporary measure until we found a long-term solution. Are you in alliance with their delegation—with the marquess Lord Sasriel, who betrayed our nation? Did you *want* Lady Niamilia as your crown princess?"

For his treasonous acts, Lord Sasriel and his entire family had been executed. The baron and his fellows had only sought to delay the crown prince's wedding a bit; they could hardly be lumped in with the likes of Lord Sasriel. Yet he found his hand trembling as he gripped the document of unflattering details. This was evidence that he and the others had collaborated with a foreign power—with foreign royalty, no less.

*Calm down. This isn't enough for the royal family to have us purged.* If every aristocrat were to be punished for their greed, society would fall apart. Harland would have no noble families left.

"You're the ones who gave the Bendins an opening," Sylvester went on. "Surely you know by now that Parte is punishing them for their indiscretions."

The Bendins had been complicit in the ploy to stoke hostility among the populace in Parte. With war on the table, Lord Bendin had

assumed he could coerce Harland into an engagement between his daughter and the crown prince. As soon as this was made public in Harland, Lady Niamilia had been disqualified from being a bridal candidate. Accordingly, Parte's lingering anger soon shifted entirely toward Lord Bendin.

"Surely you noble men, with your esteemed intelligence, have at least some idea of how the incident with Parte damaged our nation." Sylvester smiled at them. "I don't expect you to be as thorough as I was with the information in the provided documents, but even so, you should understand where I'm coming from."

The baron's mouth went dry. There was a painful prickling in his throat, but he didn't reach for the cup of water set in front of him by the servant. *Did I misjudge the consequences? No. No, at the time, there was no way I could have known what the Bendins would do.*

No one could have known. That was why they had agreed so readily to the deal Raul had offered them. If the baron abandoned all pretense of pride and admitted his lack of foresight—claimed he'd been unwise and inept—then even Sylvester couldn't reprimand him, right? Besides, it wasn't like he meant for this to happen. Sylvester had no proof he'd been involved with the conspiracy or collaborated with Parte.

Then again, he had already betrayed his country once by taking the deal with Raul. How would Sylvester treat someone he couldn't trust? The baron nervously lifted his gaze. There was a dark, eerie light in the prince's golden eyes.

"I'm sure you would all insist you had no hand in what happened with Parte," said Sylvester. "I have no way of knowing whether that's true. Given that the documents you have in your hands are enough evidence of your collusion with a foreign power, I will have to request an investigation to determine your innocence." The way he looked at them was like a predator staring down its prey.

"A-an investigation? What sort of investigation?" someone asked.

"I wonder," Sylvester mused, ignoring the question, "what the other aristocrats in parliament would want from you."

The more financial success one enjoyed, the more it was envied. Even if the men in this room weren't charged with treason for what they'd done, the situation would be the perfect opportunity for their adversaries to swoop in. If they were accused by other members of parliament, and an investigation was opened into their finances, it could mean dire consequences.

*I wonder if anyone in this room is actually paying all their taxes.*

Every man in the room with him was greedy. They must've had a few financial secrets they wanted to keep hidden. There was no guarantee this potential investigation would be as lenient as other recent audits.

Blood drained from the men's faces as the full implications of Sylvester's words settled in.

"What's the matter?" the crown prince asked. "None of you care to take a guess?" There was nothing remotely naive about him. Earlier, he'd intentionally made himself seem inexperienced to lull

them into a false sense of security. The tense, oppressive air in the room was proof of how effective his little plan had been.

Seeing that no one had anything to offer, Sylvester grunted and nodded. “Clearly you have no idea what the others in parliament might want. Well, let’s not mention it to them just yet.”

“Huh?”

The baron’s mind went blank. He couldn’t process what the prince was saying. No sooner had he shown his trump card than he stowed it away again.

“By the way,” said Sylvester, “I assume you’re aware of how much this engagement ceremony is going to cost, yes? You *were* the ones complaining about it.”

It was hard to understand where he was going with this.

“Thankfully, some noble families have already made donations to the occasion. The generous amount Lord Savile and Lord Roger in particular have offered is quite substantial.”

The baron’s intuition told him this was a hint: Sylvester would refrain from having them investigated, provided they contributed financially to his engagement ceremony. But the two men he’d mentioned sent a shock wave through the crowd, for they had also made complaints about the ceremony. Their daughters were said to be close friends of Lady Claudia, but there was no telling how genuine those relationships were. High-society women were just as merciless and calculating as high-society men. As fellow bridal candidates, it would make sense for them and their families to try to delay the

engagement announcement. What didn't make sense was them suddenly welcoming the union and celebrating it.

While the baron was busy frowning in consternation, unable to believe this bit of news, Sylvester decided to make his demands more explicit. "I hope all of you will contribute as well."

"Why, of course we will!" the men said immediately.

How could they refuse, especially if this meant no further trouble for them? The bigger question was how much they needed to donate. If it was too little, they risked offending the prince.

While the rest of the room calculated how much to sacrifice, the baron glanced up at the prince. When their eyes met, he shuddered.

The sun had set at some point. Only darkness lay beyond the window at the crown prince's back. Candles had been lit throughout the room to keep it bright enough for the meeting. All the while, those golden eyes watched them carefully. Sylvester's smile was no less warm and inviting than it had been when he first entered. There should have been nothing intimidating about that, yet the baron's hands trembled uncontrollably. His mind wandered back to the half-crumpled paper pinched between his fingers.



*Would an investigation even be necessary?* If the prince already had this much information on them, surely he was capable of digging into their individual finances as well. Right then, he remembered what the prince had said earlier that changed the whole atmosphere of the room: *"There should be a date on that paper. I noticed that something significant changed on that day for each one of you."*

When the baron swallowed, it was like there was a rock in his throat.

*He knows. He already investigated us before this meeting.* And his condition for keeping his silence was for them to fund his ceremony. He wanted their money—the entirety of the profits from their deal with Raul. *In return, he's promising to let this slide.*

Several colorful curses ran through the baron's head. *You've gotta be kidding me, you damn tyrant!* But even he knew that sometimes sacrifices had to be made for the greater good—or in this case, self-preservation. Compared to the losses he could suffer if all his financial information came to light, this was a small price to pay.

## Chapter 3:
## The Villainess Attends Her Graduation Party

DESPITE THE WINTRY CHILL, this year's graduation party had imbued the palace's grand ballroom with a feverish heat. Underclassmen were also welcome to attend, lending to the fervor in the room. It was a much different sort of event than the lavish parties high lords attended.

Plaster decorations adorned the high ceiling, from which hung a grandiose chandelier. Elaborate reliefs were carved into the pillars. The venue looked much the same as it did during its fancier events, but the atmosphere was a complete departure. Perhaps this was because all the attendees were teenagers and the orchestra was playing livelier, more playful music. Cheerful voices filled the air, with smiling faces everywhere. Even the occasional tears somehow made the place seem more vibrant.

"Big Sis, I'm going to miss you sooo much!" a girl sobbed to her friend.

"All this means is we won't see each other at the academy anymore."

It was typical of the underclassmen to cling to their upperclassmen at graduation parties.

Charlotte, with her pink hair and candy-colored eyes, continued to cry.

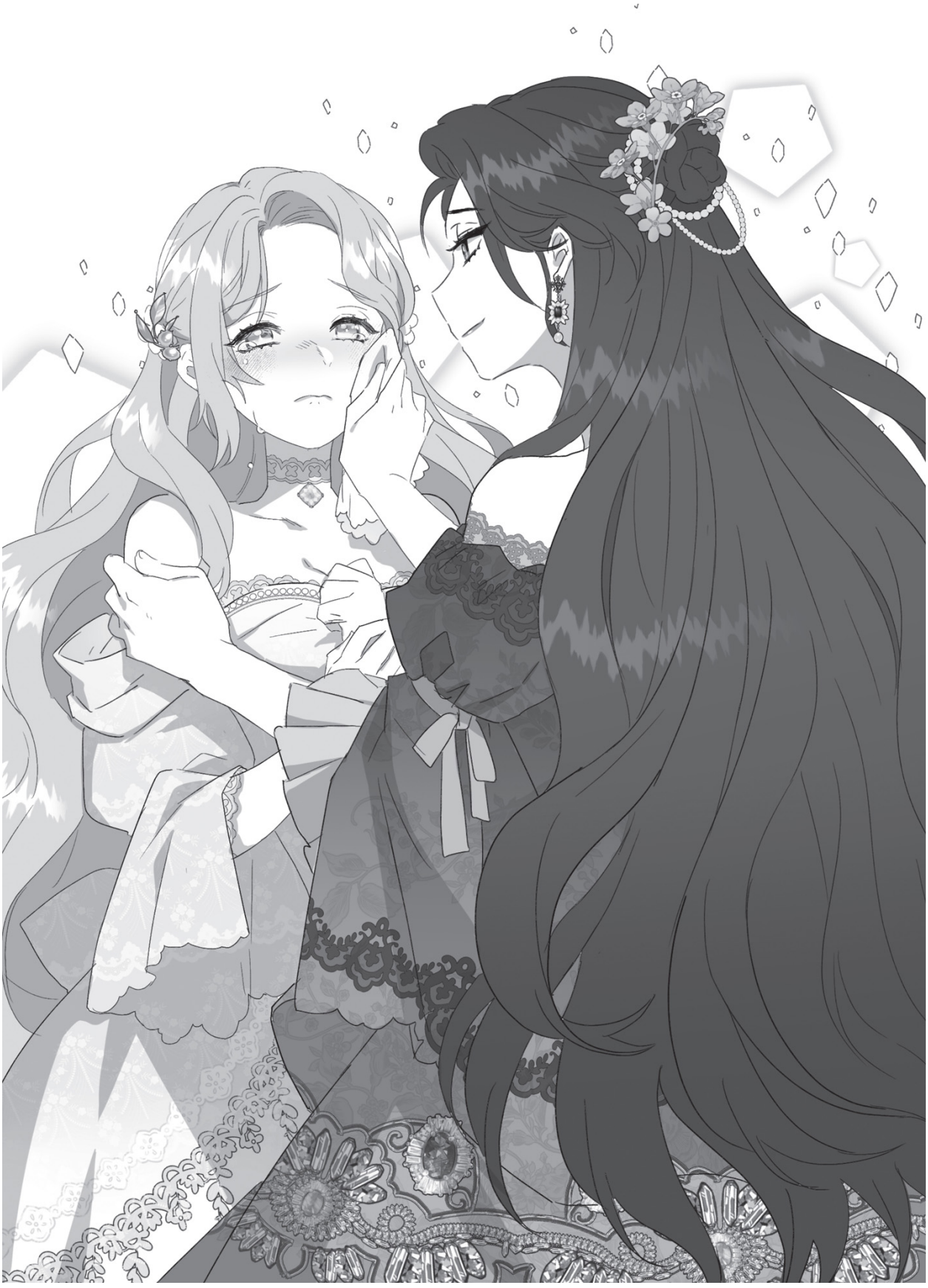
"Come now, your eyes will be all swollen," Claudia told her as she gently dabbed away Charlotte's tears with a handkerchief. But her kindness only added more fuel to the fire.

As much as Claudia worried over Charlotte, Charlotte's tears warmed her heart. It was nice to know that someone loved her enough to cry over her. And she knew those tears were genuine, which made her even more honored to receive them.

There was another reason to be sentimental about this occasion; if Claudia wasn't careful, her eyes might mist over too. Today Charlotte was wearing a vibrant yellow dress, the color of a fresh lemon. This one wasn't designed to hide her chest like all the others, however. Charlotte had long held a complex about any conforming design: they all emphasized her voluptuous chest. Since it was winter, her dress had a less revealing collar line, but she wasn't trying to bind her breasts to look smaller anymore. It probably helped that the only people at this graduation party were those she already knew, so there was no need for her to fret about being ogled. Either way, it was proof she was slowly overcoming her insecurities.

"Enough already," Louise grumbled with a raised brow. "Get a hold of yourself. Do you intend to ruin Dee's dress with your tears?" She held her holding fan over her mouth as she spoke. For all her complaints, her voice held genuine concern.

"Big Sis Louise!" Charlotte wailed. She launched herself at Louise, knowing that Louise was only trying to comfort her.



"My goodness. What are we going to do with you?" Louise huffed, but she made no move to peel Charlotte off. She was wearing a pastel-purple dress, reminiscent of a wisteria, with white gloves. White fur was sewed into the hem of her skirt, which billowed with even the smallest of movements.

Now that she was free of Charlotte's iron grip, Claudia cast her gaze around the hall. She saw many a fellow graduate comforting their underclassmen. *I was in Charlotte's position when I attended my elder brother's graduation party, and now I'm in his shoes. It's such a strange feeling.*

And well before that, during her previous timeline, she had been condemned during her brother's graduation party. That incident included, she had attended a total of four graduation parties now. Students weren't allowed to repeat years at the academy, so it was a rather unusual number. Perhaps that was why she felt a bit unmoored.

*But more than anything, this is a celebration of new beginnings.* That was especially true for her and why she was so calm about it all. Difficult didn't begin to describe what her first year had been like. Every day she had been forced to face new problems. But despite how trying the experience had been, she'd enjoyed how different life at the academy was from life in her family's estate and high society. It helped that the students were advised to leave their status and political affiliation at the door. She could form friendships with people she never would have otherwise.

*All this means is we won't be able to see each other at the academy anymore.* She mentally repeated the same words she had

said to Charlotte earlier, though she knew there were *some* people in her life for whom that wouldn't be true.

No sooner had his face appeared in the back of her mind than she caught a glimpse of him in her periphery.

"Ah, it's so much warmer over here than everywhere else," said the man in question. "That must be why the spring flowers are beginning to bloom."

"It's a pleasure to see you as well, Prince Raul," said Claudia.

He must have finished greeting everyone else before coming over. By "spring flowers," he was referring to her attire, which had been designed to evoke spring blossoms. Her gown wasn't one simple color but a chic combination of yellow, brown, and gray to match the seasonal trends.

Raul was clad in the formal dress of his homeland. His forest-green tunic paired well with his wavy, dark-brown hair. Lestea stood next to him, also in men's attire, with a beautiful smile plastered on her face.

"This is where we first met," Raul remarked fondly. "I remember being shocked when you correctly guessed Lestea's gender."

Claudia nodded. *I was shocked during our first meeting too, though for an entirely different reason.* Raul had been a client of hers during her brothel days and had offered to pay for her freedom.

"You invited me to dance with you after that," she recalled.

"I did, even though I'd always hated dancing."

She already knew how much Raul disliked women and had been careful to maintain as much distance as possible during their dance. He seemed to have appreciated that greatly.

Raul smoothly lowered his head in front of her and asked, "Would you honor me with one now?"

Claudia had already danced with Sylvester, who was currently busy making the rounds and greeting people. When she caught his eye, he mouthed that she could turn Raul down, but she couldn't possibly refuse a friend. She pressed her hand into Raul's outstretched palm, and he led her out to an open spot on the dance floor. They each took their position and, as a new song carried through the air, their bodies moved to it instinctively.

"You were probably special to me from that moment on," Raul said. "I've been wanting to dance with you again ever since."

"I never realized."

If they hadn't been busy dancing, she might have blushed. Fortunately, all the movement helped mask any heat that would have otherwise gathered in her face. With the history they shared in her brothel days—history that only she remembered—their reunion had been one surprise after another. *It sent a chill through me when Syl asked whether I'd met him before.* Raul had no way of knowing any of that, though.

Their steps were light and airy as they continued the number, talking all the while.

"The moment I realized you'd captured my heart was when I attended that tea party you were hosting." With a laugh, Raul added,

"No one has ever cared for my comfort as you did. Your compassion struck me to my core."

"I'm glad it meant so much to you."

"You always give me what I desire most, from your compassionate gestures to the words I need to hear. Each time, I find myself wondering: what can I do to return the favor?" Aside from harboring his love for her, that is.

Their eyes met, the bitter chocolate of his own carrying that rare sweetness to them. *You have always cared about me so deeply,* Claudia thought. That was true now, and it had been true during her brothel days. There was no need for Raul to return anything to her. She couldn't give him what he wanted most of all: her heart.

"I love you, Claudia. Though I'm sure you must be tired of hearing that by now."

Claudia smiled at him. "I appreciate your feelings." There was nothing else she could say. Nothing else she could do. She had to fight to keep the sadness from showing on her face. Raul gave no indication that he'd noticed any change in her expression.

"I'll always be waiting for you," he said.

And with those words, their dance ended.

Once the graduation ceremony was over, the next event awaiting Claudia would be her engagement ceremony. Raul had likely already heard about it, but he hadn't mentioned it at all.

Lestea swooped in the second the song finished. "Might I have the privilege of a dance with you as well, my liege?" she asked

reverently.

"You're as incorrigible as ever," Claudia said.

Lestea was ever the handsome woman in men's clothing. Claudia never could've imagined having such a person in her close circle.

The sands of time were unceasing, sweeping Claudia down a new and unexplored path. It had already been four years since she reawakened as her younger self.

## Chapter 4:
## The Crown Prince and the King's Younger Brother Exchange Glares

LATER THAT NIGHT, Raul remained in the royal castle rather than returning to his quarters at the embassy. Sylvester had invited him to stay and drink.

This wasn't the first time Raul had been invited to Sylvester's private quarters, but he'd never set foot in here at night. Sylvester's room was enormous. The only candles sat at the center of it, casting shadows on the table, sofa, and armchair.

Sylvester was already seated in the armchair, leaving Raul a seat diagonal to it. The crown prince set down two glass snifters and poured an amber liquid into them. Hors d'oeuvres were provided on the table in front of them. Orange candlelight lapped at the two men and their glasses.

"I didn't expect you to invite me for a drink. I'm so humbled by the honor I could cry," Raul said sarcastically.

"I figured it was as good an opportunity as any to put you in your place," Sylvester shot back.

They lifted their glasses, clinking them together.

"You've already done that," Raul said. "I heard you summoned all of the aristocrats who opposed your ceremony."

"If *someone* hadn't stuck their nose where it didn't belong, I

wouldn’t have had to.”

Raul ignored the comment. “How did you convince Lord Savile and Lord Roger to donate?” he asked. He had his suspicions, but it seemed a decent enough topic to broach.

“That was easy. Better for them to make an ally of the future crown princess than an enemy.”

Raul nodded. “And with how close their daughters are to Claudia, it probably seemed like the reasonable choice.”

There would have been more resistance from the two families if their daughters’ relationships with Claudia had only been for the sake of appearances, but both Charlotte and Louise genuinely adored her. Both houses likely thought it would be more beneficial in the long run to acquiesce quickly. All parties had already agreed to the engagement; there was no changing it. Besides, Claudia’s many accomplishments would have erased any remaining doubt. She was a role model with her good comportment, but on top of that, her actions had benefited Harland greatly during the tensions between the church and Arakaner. That wasn’t something even a seasoned lord could easily accomplish, much less a lady her age.

“What about the remaining opposition? The ones I didn’t buy off,” Raul said. “I’m sure there were some.”

“You of all people should understand how difficult it is to earn unanimous support for anything.”

“Yeah, that’s usually impossible.”

Aristocrats had their own ties, obligations, and motives. Parliament had been split on the matter of whether to accept Niamilia as a bridal candidate. It was nearly unheard of to have complete and total support on any policy or decision.

"But," Raul said with a grin, "you made it happen, didn't you?" He knew Sylvester well enough to be confident that the man would go to any lengths for Claudia.

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

"So you won't reveal your hand, hm?"

It was typical for the two of them to try to work out what and how much information the other had.

*I doubt I'll get any intel out of the aristocrats I bought off,* Raul thought. He couldn't really expect otherwise. Sylvester had essentially stripped away all the trade deals those aristocrats had received and the profits along with them. And what man would openly admit he'd been outsmarted by someone half his age?

*However Sylvester did it, he must have humiliated them.* It made no difference to him if they'd decided to fall in line.

As Raul suspected, Sylvester had negotiated with the remaining dissenters. Their only objection to the ceremony had been the substantial cost. Once Sylvester had secured donations from the men with whom Raul had bargained, he could guarantee the ceremony wouldn't cost the royal coffers any more than past engagements. With that, there was no longer a legitimate reason to oppose the ceremony. Everything resolved quite smoothly.

When Nigel’s corrupt actions had come to light, Harland had bargained for rights to process sugar. Now those rights were in the hands of the royal family. This played a big part in parliament’s willingness to accept the engagement; more and more lords were trying to curry Harland’s favor—though had there been further grounds to complain, surely some would have done so.



*But in the end,* Sylvester thought, *Claudia's quick wit and impeccable character helped make it an easy choice for everyone.* Everything she'd accomplished had greatly encouraged the people to accept her. *She's perfect.* His lips stretched into a smile unbidden.

Raul, meanwhile, was frowning. "If you're not watching the rug, you'll get it pulled out from under you."

"No need to worry. I'm ever vigilant," said Sylvester.

His father had still given him another hurdle to clear. He wouldn't be able to relax and enjoy their engagement ceremony until he'd tied up all loose ends. But he was under no obligation to tell Raul about that.

"Our ceremony will be a lavish event with no complications." Sylvester motioned to Raul with the glass in his hand. "It's high time you accepted reality."

"It's only an engagement ceremony. Not a wedding."

"Raul." Sylvester glared at him. *You never used to be this obstinate. I guess meeting Dia changed you.*

Raul's bitter-chocolate eyes glowered right back. "I'm not in denial about her feelings for you. But doesn't she deserve an escape if she needs one?"

"And for your own peace of mind?"

Raul shrugged. "I won't deny that either. Just…don't tie her down too much."

"What are you implying?" Sylvester demanded.

"All I'm saying is that everyone should have plenty of choices available to them. You have a habit of penning them into the choice you want."

Sylvester knew Raul was right about that. His style of negotiation was to make people think they had a variety of options when there was only one real choice. This was especially true with the woman he loved. He wanted Claudia's attention solely on him. *She doesn't need to look at anyone else.* He desperately hoped she wouldn't. The passion he felt for her was a powerful inferno that scorched even his own heart.

The flames of the candles danced, drawing long shadows on their faces. Raul was a gentleman. His words made that apparent. But…

"Your concern is misplaced. No one could tie Dia down even if they wanted to," said Sylvester.

Claudia wasn't the same woman she had been in her first year at the academy, when she was haunted by Fermina. She had overcome her trauma. Even if he did try to limit her options, knowing Claudia, she would find a new path he'd never even imagined. Her blue eyes shone with an unparalleled strength of will.

"She doesn't need your help," Sylvester added.

"Maybe not." Raul's eyes lowered, his lashes casting long shadows across his cheeks. He swirled the spirit in his glass. "But I can't just do nothing. You understand, don't you? I want her to know I'm there for her."

Sylvester understood indeed. He wanted Claudia to turn to him if she ever needed help. He wanted to be special to her. Anyone who loved someone would feel the same. “Who could have guessed that the two of us could feel this way about another person?”

Raul laughed. “Hear, hear.” Before he met Claudia, Raul hadn’t wanted to be with anyone. He still didn’t particularly like women much.

“Curious how so much can change.”

And all because of one person. No matter how either of them tried, they would never be a match for her.

The hours passed as the two chatted about the woman they’d both fallen in love with.

## Chapter 5:
## The Crown Prince Chats with the Knight Captain's Son

"GOOD MORNING!" Tristan stopped short and blinked. "Huh. You're usually ready by now."

"I don't see any reason why I need to be presentable for someone like you," Sylvester quipped. He was still in his pajamas, with a robe pulled over them. He had a lingering hangover from his night of drinking with Raul and couldn't find the energy to move.

"Ouch. Haven't you ever considered that good manners maintain a friendship?" Tristan gave Sylvester a hurt look, then immediately ruined it by breaking out in a grin. He knew what a night of excessive drinking looked like. He plopped down on the sofa Raul had been sitting on the night before. The food and snifters were gone, replaced with a breakfast spread.

While Sylvester sobered up, he addressed the next issue on their agenda before they were set to head out. "No one opposes the engagement ceremony anymore. We just need to wrap things up."

"Oh, you're talking about the villages where the dissidents are gathering, right?" Tristan asked. "The ones peppered across various territories."

"We only know of two villages for certain: one on the outskirts of the capital and another in the south. But that's because we haven't been able to fully investigate potential locations in other territories."

The regional lords maintained tight control of their domains. Thus, the royal family couldn't override their authority without risking their anger and losing access to the truth. They were kept from getting too involved.

"Regardless," Sylvester went on, "His Majesty believes we should nip this in the bud for the sake of our future." He agreed with his father on that. It was important to prevent problems where possible; much better to intervene early than regret one's inaction afterward.

"It's important that we find out how intent the villagers are on total isolation," said Tristan.

Sylvester nodded. "Indeed. They try to live entirely on what they can produce, proclaiming themselves an independent utopia. The church hasn't bothered interfering since they're monotheists. For the moment, they're still paying all their taxes, so we have no real grounds for complaint."

Having to give their money to the state galled the villagers. The only reason they paid their taxes was to avoid audits. In fact, some of these villages had only been discovered recently.

"Do you think they've existed in this fashion for a long time without us knowing?" Tristan asked curiously.

"I have no idea," Sylvester admitted. "We've only just begun looking into them. From the two we have identified, we can assume any others would exist along territorial borders, where it would be difficult for the local lord to discover them. The most pressing concern regarding these villages is that Cardinal Nigel had contact with them."

Tristan’s brows knitted. He knew all too well how much of an adversary the cardinal was. “Just how much of a meddler can one person be?”

“Enough to have manipulated the Bendins from his confinement.”

After Nina handed over all the information she had on the cardinal’s movements, the crown had compared that intel with any unresolved domestic disputes, which had pointed them in the right direction. Fortunately, Nina had been the one to reveal the location of the village in the south. Rose Garden (formerly Dragoon) was the syndicate responsible for sniffing out the other villages outside the capital. They had a bone to pick with the cardinal, so they’d been eager to share their findings.

“Worse yet, we still don’t have evidence of their crimes,” Sylvester said.

From the outside, the villages looked perfectly peaceful and normal. Whatever the villagers were up to, they were camouflaging it well. The crown couldn’t order a large-scale investigation without justification, and they hadn’t found anything to suggest the villages were even connected to one another, let alone anyone else. Given the scale of Nigel’s operations in Harland, they couldn’t confidently say that the two villages they had found were the only ones involved. If they were careless enough to antagonize the rest, they had no way to predict the extent of the backlash.

“Are you sure they’re up to something?” Tristan asked.

The villagers were free to follow their own beliefs, no matter how peculiar they were, as long as they didn't harm others.

"Yes," Sylvester said grimly. "It seems they've been kidnapping people."

"What?! That's a huge problem!"

"It would be if we had any proof."

The abductions were limited to common civilians, and no missing person reports had been filed. One day, out of nowhere, there would be new people living in these secluded villages, only for them to quickly disappear afterward. It was possible they had just moved away, but something about it was suspicious.

According to the investigator they had on the case—who stopped by the village once a month masquerading as a traveling merchant—the time between these people's arrivals and departures was quite short. Villagers who were there during his previous visit would be gone by the next. There were even cases of whole families moving to the village together and only one person later disappearing. The villagers always had some excuse ready whenever the investigator tried to ask them about it. None of them were believable. In the report Sylvester had read, the investigator expressed feeling unsettled by the whole thing. They'd wanted to continue the investigation, but the village had refused a third visit.

"We don't have the opportunity to enter the village directly anymore," said Sylvester. "Fortunately, we've been able to pin down their movements more recently."

That was probably due to Cardinal Nigel being driven out of the country. Whatever operation the village had been running was beginning to show cracks.

"We thought the villagers' livelihood consisted of farming and hunting, but now we know they've been creating medicine."

A wrinkle formed on Tristan's brow. "Medicine?"

"An analgesic. We found out they were selling it to the nearby town's apothecary."

Aristocrats had their own personal doctors. Commoners did not. If they came down with an ailment, they usually bought a concoction from the local apothecary.

"Um…" Tristan rubbed his forehead. "Wasn't the whole point for them to have no involvement with people outside their village?"

They could hardly call themselves self-sufficient while maintaining a steady stream of outside commerce.

"They obviously have some need for money, whether to make their tax payments or for tribute to the cardinal. Per the apothecary's statement, it's a quality analgesic. Much better than the concoction that gets sold downtown in the capital, and they haven't had any complaints from the customers."

"Hmm. Based on that, it doesn't seem like these villages are full of dissidents after all."

"But there's still something mysterious about it all. Look at this." Sylvester gave a document he'd been holding to Tristan. It contained a rough sketch of a person's face.

"A detective, huh?" Tristan studied the drawing for a moment. "He's a rugged fellow."

"He's got the body to match, from what I hear. Seems he's the one who's been looking into these villages."

Tristan's face pinched. "Hold on. Isn't a detective supposed to investigate people? Does that mean he tracked someone to the village? Maybe he's after one of the missing persons?"

"That's possible," Sylvester agreed. "Some people aren't content to leave things to the local authorities when a loved one goes missing, and they'll hire a detective. Regardless, since he's snooping around the village too, we can't simply ignore him. A missive has come in from the investigator I had tailing him." Partly because Sylvester thought it might provide clues about what was happening in the village as well.

Tristan nodded thoughtfully. "I get you. I assume you mentioned this to me because you have the answers you were looking for."

"Not quite," said Sylvester. "We still don't know what his investigation is about, but we were able to trace his movements. Over the past year, he's changed his lodgings constantly." He picked up another document and passed it to Tristan. It was the report of everywhere the detective had stayed and approximately how long he'd stayed there.

"I don't get it," Tristan said. "What does this mean? If his target is in the village, wouldn't he stay somewhere nearby?"

"It's possible he was tracking a missing person, but even so, the

pattern doesn't make much sense."

Tristan scanned the page. "He went east, then west, then down south. From there, up north and then back south again."

"Our investigator only discovered the man when he went south. It doesn't make sense for him to be following someone, not when he traveled straight to his destination each time. It's like he already knew where he was going, not tracking someone. It's also odd to me that a detective would cross multiple territorial lines over the course of his investigation."

"Oh, yeah. I guess when you think about it, that's a long distance to travel for a job." Tristan skimmed the document again. He was used to traveling across borders while accompanying Sylvester. They'd sent their own investigator to the south, after all; that was why it hadn't initially struck him as strange that the detective was moving all over the place. But Tristan couldn't compare a civilian detective with the crown prince who had the entire nation's future resting on his shoulders.

"Whoever the detective's client is must have quite the fortune," said Sylvester.

Traveling such distances and changing lodgings so frequently would cost a substantial amount. It wasn't the sort of cash a civilian would have readily available. *Which means they're either a merchant or an aristocrat.*

"Assuming the detective *was* following someone, though, this would suggest that the target was crossing borders too, right?"

"Correct. I suppose if his target was a traveling merchant, the detective's movements would make more sense." Sylvester nodded to himself. Talking with Tristan was helping him put the pieces together. *Could it be a traveling merchant who bought analgesics from the village and was distributing them?* It could even be something else they were peddling, like crops. Unlikely, however, since those could be purchased anywhere, not just at these secluded villages. A detective wouldn't be involved in this if that were the case. "Either way, I think we'll need to speak to this detective to be sure."

"True. Whatever the guy's reason is, he's obviously looking into the village."

"I wonder if this is coincidence or something more." Had the detective merely stumbled upon the village? Or was the village itself the target of his investigation? "Let's just hope he's willing to give us answers without a fight."

Tristan gave his friend a tight smile. A detective was forbidden from sharing the names of his clients or the details of his work. He'd be even more inclined to keep his lips sealed if his client was as wealthy as Sylvester suspected.

"It'll really complicate things if it's an aristocrat who hired him," said Tristan.

Sylvester already had to be discreet with his investigations into other lords' territories. The last thing he or Tristan wanted was for an aristocrat to find out and get in their way.

## Chapter 6:
## The Villainess Has a Meeting with the Prince

IT WAS A BRILLIANT EARLY AFTERNOON. Gentle beams of sunlight reached into a comfortably warm room. It was here that Claudia sat beside her beloved on a sofa. The mood between them was more relaxed than romantic. Their knees bumped; she was tempted to lean her head against his shoulder and close her eyes, but she had to resist.

*I can't,* Claudia reminded herself. *He made time for me even though he must be terribly busy.*

Paperwork was crammed on the coffee table in front of them, all of it for their engagement ceremony. After navigating the twists and turns of parliamentary complaints, what was supposed to be an early engagement had been pushed back to a more typical timeline. With Sylvester intent on making it a lavish affair, there was substantial preparation involved.

"I made most of the choices for the ceremony myself. I hope you don't mind," she said.

"I don't," Sylvester assured her. "But I'm sorry for leaving so much on your shoulders."

He was preoccupied with something else, so Claudia had taken over all planning for the ceremony. She wasn't as familiar with the royal traditions, so she'd asked to confirm some things. The royal family had sent an adviser to assist her, but she'd wanted Sylvester's

opinion too. It was *their* ceremony, after all. *I wonder if that's selfish of me.*

Sylvester rarely let his exhaustion show, but today she saw it plain on his face. Shadows haunted his features. If he had the free time to meet with her, perhaps he should have spent it resting.

"Can you not relax a little?" Claudia asked.

Sylvester stroked his chin, cocking his head to the side. "Hm? Is it that obvious?" Their eyes met, and his golden ones crinkled with the smile that played across his lips. "Perhaps it's because I'm always relaxed with you. But it's fine, Dee. It isn't as bad as it probably looks." Then he added, "I want to be involved with these preparations too. This is my opportunity to declare to everyone that you belong to me."

"And this is my opportunity to stake my claim on you," Claudia returned in kind. The passion in his gaze set her cheeks aflame. The embarrassment that followed threatened to swallow them in silence. Her mind reeled with a desperation to come up with something—anything—to say.

*Everything was so calm and peaceful a moment ago, then he has to say something that makes me self-conscious!*

The backs of his fingers tickled her cheek, his index finger sweeping lightly across her bottom lip. Then he dropped his hand to hers, lifting it so he could press a chaste kiss to the back of it.

"My blood, my bones, all of it is yours. It's only a shame this isn't our wedding instead," said Sylvester.

"It will be the day of our wedding ceremony before we know it."

If the engagement ceremony was to be opulent, the wedding was bound to eclipse it. Weddings were always grand affairs, and Sylvester would ensure theirs was the greatest Harland had ever seen. That was a scary thought—her days were already packed with all the preparations for their engagement ceremony. She could only imagine how much worse it would be for the wedding itself. She was doing her best not to think about it.

"It's a boon, at least, that we could begin preparations earlier than in generations prior, since the royal family is already satisfied with my qualifications," said Claudia.

Lord Savile and Lord Roger had even donated as a show of support. No one questioned that Claudia was the most suitable, even if not everyone was pleased about it.

"As exciting as this is, we don't even have time to breathe," said Sylvester.

"True, but at least the situation with Parte Kingdom ended without incident." And with it, the tension in Harland had largely dissipated. The potential for war had weighed greatly on her mind, so with that out of the way, she could focus all her attention on the preparations for the ceremony.

"Though I hear people are bombarding you constantly," he said.

"Yes, well, I am getting even more invitations than before." Everyone wanted an opportunity to get close to the future crown princess. This was especially true for the aristocratic faction, which had lost its figurehead with the fall of the Lloyds. Desperate for the

backing of a great house, some of them were doing whatever they could to make connections with any of the Lindsays, not just Claudia.

"I see where they're coming from," said Sylvester, "but I would prefer they not make too much fuss. It'll only cause me more trouble." He hunched over the table. "Now then, why don't we address your concerns about the ceremony?"

"Of course. This part here…"

The two began going over the documents, discussing each one she had earmarked for his perusal. This wasn't the first time they had attended to paperwork together, but she found herself smiling. Perhaps it was because this time, it was about their shared future.

*He has a bad habit of trying to show me off at every opportunity he gets,* Claudia thought. If he couldn't hide her from prying eyes, then he might as well flaunt her. There were several times she had to interject and remind him of the importance of discretion, though that proved to be its own entertainment. He had strong opinions and little hesitation, which helped them address each matter promptly.

"I think you could stand to be more demanding," said Sylvester.

"I could say the same to you," she quipped with a smile. "Or have you forgotten that you are the crown prince of our kingdom?"

While she was collecting the documents that had been spread across the table, a servant brought them fresh cups of tea. The relaxing scent drained all the tension from her shoulders.

"I don't want to move from this sofa," Sylvester said as he leaned back.

"You should take it easy for as long as time permits." Claudia knew he was investigating a village of people intent on isolating themselves. She was also aware this was a challenge from the king. She'd also been concerned from the moment she heard Nigel was involved, but Sylvester had asked her to focus on the ceremony preparations. She couldn't say no to that. He'd at least been kind enough to make sure she was up to date on the investigation's progress.

When she reached over to stroke his back, Sylvester leaned toward her. *Looks like he's the one leaning his head on my shoulder this time.* Their roles had been reversed. Her smile widened; she was glad that he shared the desire to rest and relax in her presence. As his head lolled against her, she combed her fingers through the long strands of his silver hair. If this was how she could support him, nothing would make her happier.

Their engagement had been unofficial for so long. At last, they would be able to announce it to the rest of the world. Words Tristan had once spoken echoed in her mind: he'd said that while he could protect Sylvester with his sword, he could not protect Sylvester's heart. That was something only Claudia could do. An obvious sentiment, maybe; of course there were things only select people could do. But when Sylvester had told her about Tristan's remark, Claudia was overcome with emotion. Upon hearing it, she knew she had Tristan's approval.

Tristan acted like his skill with the sword was all he had, but he was still Sylvester's childhood friend and knew him well. It had really

meant something for him to say he felt she could provide Sylvester emotional support; she'd been so happy that heat began to build in her eyes, her tears threatening to spill. She only hoped that she could live up to those expectations, that she could be a pillar of support for both Sylvester and the people of Harland.

Sylvester's lids slid shut, hiding his golden eyes. His beautiful silver lashes cast long shadows across his porcelain skin.

Claudia wanted to help bear his burden. *No, it's not just that I want to—I* will *do it.* That determination swelled in her chest, a heat that spread all the way to her very fingertips. She would manifest what she wanted rather than praying it would be so.

People always had the capacity for change. Even if it was difficult to invoke that change in others, one still had the power to change themselves.

She blinked slowly. It was as if purpose had solidified in the depths of her blue eyes, making them sparkle with renewed conviction.

## Chapter 7:
## The Villainess Is a Dedicated Worker

THE SPRING SUNLIGHT STRETCHED toward her feet like fingers trying to grasp her, only to be thwarted by shadow. Claudia was transfixed by the new buds that had sprouted all around her. They were a tangible reminder that her engagement ceremony was fast approaching.

Time had passed all too quickly after her meeting with Sylvester. Claudia was preoccupied with memorizing information about the honored guests for the event and arranging the final alterations to her gown. Her schedule had been utterly packed ever since this all started, and that had yet to change even with the event a mere week away. The celebration was to be held at the castle, yet her family home was also a bustling center of chaos.

Claudia was currently out in the high-end district, wearing the same maid attire as Helen. The outing was, in part, to help her get a much-needed break from her duties, but she was also headed to Rose Garden's headquarters. As head of the syndicate, she received regular reports. The maid disguise was because she wanted to avoid the risk of exposing herself as "Rose."

She normally donned that outfit when she had the cover of darkness to hide her, but with her schedule, she had very limited time to do so. In the daylight, Rose would stand out like a sore thumb. There were other ways to receive reports from Rose Garden, so the

maid outfit wasn't strictly necessary, but she would attract too much attention if she were to go out in her usual clothing.

Everyone in the capital knew she was betrothed to the crown prince, even though she was still only a duke's daughter. It didn't matter that the official announcement had yet to be made. With all the preparations underway, rumors spread quickly. And so, unable to go out as herself, Claudia had dressed as a maid running errands for her lady: something so unremarkable no one would pay her any mind.

"Such fine weather today isn't it, my la—" Helen cut herself off, still adjusting to treating her mistress as a peer.

"I'm glad we're able to enjoy the sunshine," Claudia said without missing a beat.

"Me too. It's a nice break from all the business." Helen's throat bobbed as she swallowed. She was doing her best to sound casual despite how unnatural it must have felt.

The two climbed out of the servants' carriage they had taken to get here, then headed toward the eatery where they were to meet their contact from Rose Garden. The restaurant was on the edge of the district, close to where Claudia had once visited a confectionery to buy a modest gift for Sylvester. There was a single bodyguard trailing behind her, but she was so accustomed to him by now that he may as well have been air.

Claudia and Helen entered the eatery and placed their orders like normal customers. It was the perfect time for a bite to eat, so they opted for something sweet. There were no signs of any members of Rose Garden inside despite this being the arranged meeting place.

"Why don't we read a newspaper while we wait? I'll go buy us one," Claudia offered, slipping out of her chair. She returned only a short moment later with the newspaper in hand. "The customer over there," she said, pointing vaguely off to the side, "had already finished reading his and offered it to me. Apparently, he overheard me talking about buying one."

"Oh, how kind of him!"

Helen was sitting beside Claudia, so when she opened the newspaper the two could read it together. Her bodyguard sat across from them so their arrangement wouldn't look strange to observers.

A horse-racing ticket fell onto the table with today's date on it. Whoever had given the paper to Claudia had been a betting man on his way home from the race track. Inside the page where the ticket had been tucked, the contents were overlaid with the report from Rose Garden. Once Claudia finished reading it, she tucked the ticket back inside and folded the paper.

Their order arrived soon after, and they eagerly dug in. The sugar spread through Claudia's mouth, giving her tired brain some much-needed energy.

When they left the restaurant, an unfamiliar man flagged her down. Claudia's bodyguard was wary of the man, but Helen assured him there was nothing to worry about: this was the customer who had offered Claudia his paper.

"Terribly sorry," he said, "but I just remembered I left my racetrack ticket stuffed in my paper."

"Yes, I noticed. I slipped it in again, so you can have your paper back." Claudia held it out to him.

The man—or rather, the member of Rose Garden—grabbed it. "Thank you."

Once they'd made the exchange and the man had wandered off, Claudia said, "As much as I wish we could stay out longer, I suppose we should be heading home." It was so warm outside that she was tempted to do some window shopping. Yet she had to deny herself her heart's desire because she had other matters to attend upon returning to the estate. She had only afforded herself a little extra time for a walk by requesting their carriage wait some distance away from the eatery.

Almost as soon as she and Helen set off toward the carriage, they heard a young boy's shrill cry. "Pardon me! Please help!"

They both froze as the young boy shot toward Claudia, swinging around her back to hide behind her skirts. Her bodyguard's hand reached for the boy, but Claudia stopped him. The child seemed genuinely frightened, and she sensed no ill intent. Besides, he had no weapon and was clasping his hands in front of his chest as he pleaded, so the bodyguard made no further attempts to remove him. If the boy's hands had been hidden or the bodyguard had sensed any real danger, he probably would intervened despite Claudia's protests.

Helen understood Claudia's intentions to protect the boy and pressed closer to help keep him hidden from view. There was enough foot traffic in front of them that whoever was pursuing the boy wouldn't find him easily.

*That must be it, right? Someone is chasing him?* Claudia discreetly swept a glance across their surroundings, eyes catching on a suspicious man. He had a hat on and seemed to be desperately scanning the street for someone.

The boy in question was dressed well, as one would expect in the high-end district, but his panicked expression told her that he wasn't simply hiding for fun. *I wonder if he got up to some mischief and was caught,* she thought. He looked to be around twelve, his face still childlike. His hair was canary yellow and looked soft as down. Emerald eyes peeked up at her through rounded spectacles. He had a brown beret on his head and wore a white shirt with a beige vest and half-length trousers. His exposed knees were red from the chill that still lingered in the air.

Claudia peered over her shoulder at the boy. She would ask about the situation as soon as his pursuer was out of earshot.

"Bwah!" the boy cried suddenly. Something—she wasn't sure what—had caught him by surprise. When he lost balance and staggered, his foot landed on a loose flyer that had blown in beneath him, sending him flailing backward.

The streets in the high-end district were normally pristine and free of litter. Perhaps the wind had carried a hapless advertiser's flyer out of their hand, and it had unluckily landed beneath the boy. Claudia's bodyguard acted fast, snatching the boy's arm to keep him from landing on his back.

"Are you all right?" he asked the boy. But while the boy may have been fine physically, the situation was not. The boy's pursuer

had heard his yelp and gone stock-still.

"Th-thank you," the boy said hastily once he was back on his feet. He grabbed Claudia's hand and tugged. "Come! This way!"

Fortunately, since she and Helen had hidden the boy well, the pursuer hadn't found them yet.

The boy led Claudia down a narrow, deserted alley. At the other end was a horse-drawn wagon with a cloth canopy. The rear gate was lowered, the wooden steps pulled out so that the driver could load (or unload).

"We can hide in here," the boy declared, leading her into the wagon. There were wooden supports on the sides that stretched up and curved to form hoops that supported its cloth canopy. They could certainly avoid prying eyes inside, but the steps leading in didn't fully extend to the ground. They hovered in midair, and Claudia hesitated to set foot on them.

She shook her head vigorously. *No, this is no time to dawdle.* If the boy's pursuer noticed her hovering at the back of the wagon, it might raise his suspicions. She accepted the boy's outstretched hand for support and climbed inside, Helen following behind her.

*With the rear gate open and the steps lowered, the driver won't be leaving anytime soon.* The boy must have thought the same thing, which was why he'd chosen to hide here. He sank behind some of the boxes piled up inside. Claudia's bodyguard looped around to the front of the wagon to inform the driver of the situation.

Intending to ask the boy what was happening and why, Claudia began, "By the way—"

The wagon lurched forward.

Outside, her bodyguard howled for the driver to stop. The driver must have assumed the shouting was for someone else because the wagon went faster and faster until it was racing along at top speed.

"What do we do?!" Helen cried.

The lowered gate and wooden stairs jostled fiercely as the wagon tore down the street.

## Chapter 8:
## The Villainess Is Met with Misfortune

"SOMEONE MUST BE DRIVING this thing!" the boy shouted, then whirled toward the front of the wagon. "Stop!"

Claudia joined him, her voice booming. "Please stop!"

The driver apparently couldn't hear them over the wind, and the stacks of horse feed up against the wall near the front of the wagon muffled their cries. The wagon showed no signs of slowing down. Still, they continued screaming for a little while before they accepted it was pointless.

"Why am I so unlucky?!" the boy wailed.

Claudia could understand his frustration. All he'd wanted was to escape his pursuer. "No one could have predicted this," she said.

"Dee," Helen interjected, her brows raised nearly to her hairline, "what are we going to do?!"

Claudia's bodyguard had tried to follow them—they'd been able to hear his hurried footsteps for a while—but no human could match the speed of a horse-drawn wagon. Peeking out, they saw no trace of him anymore.

"Our only option seems to be to stay in here and wait," Claudia said, smiling bitterly. There was nothing else they could do when the driver couldn't hear them. They could try jumping out if the wagon slowed, but there was no point in needlessly injuring themselves.

"I'm sorry," said the boy. "It's my fault for suggesting we hide in here." He shrank in on himself.

"Please don't fret about it," said Claudia. "We're the ones who decided to follow you."

Helen nodded. "Exactly. I'm sure you couldn't risk being found either."

Claudia was tempted to stroke the boy's head, but she worried it would seem overly familiar. Instead, she gently patted his shoulder. "If you don't mind, could you tell us why you were being chased in the first place? Perhaps we can be of help." She paused. "Goodness, I just realized we haven't even introduced ourselves." She took a seat on one of the nearby boxes, ignoring how dusty it was. Better a dirty seat than to try to keep her balance with how the wagon jostled.

Helen frowned, fidgeting restlessly. She didn't like her lady having to sit in the dust.

"It's fine," Claudia told her with a chuckle. She sat up straight and turned back to the boy. "We're maids of House Lindsay. You may call me Dee, if you like."

"I am Helen."

"Right," the boy said. "Um, I realize it's rude for me to ask, but Miss Dee…you're actually Lady Claudia, aren't you?" His face scrunched, as if he genuinely felt bad for pointing this out.

Helen and Claudia stiffened, blinking rapidly. They had never met this boy before—never even seen him. How did he know who she was?

*That's not necessarily suspicious.* Claudia was famous, after all. There were portraits of her for sale. It wasn't surprising that the boy would know of her. On the other hand, she *was* in disguise. No one would normally assume that a noble lady, much less one as high-ranking as a duke's daughter, would be out dressed as a maid.

"How did you figure it out?" Claudia asked curiously.

"Miss Helen has calloused hands. You don't," he said.

Her hands were pale and supple, without a single mark on them. Her fingernails were carefully trimmed as well. One might assume that she was more self-conscious than most about her appearance, but her nails were simply too clear and well manicured for a maid. Not only had her hands never seen the hard, demanding work of a servant, but the level of care put into her appearance signified she was someone of prominence.

"Thus," the boy said, wrapping up his explanation, "I concluded you must be an aristocratic lady. But I had to narrow it down further. So I looked at your clothing to figure out your identity. There's something unique about your uniform, you see. My grandfather told me that most servants have to procure ready-made uniforms from the market. Only select houses supply their staff with specially tailored outfits."

Those houses were the royal family and the high-ranking aristocrats close to them. One of the Lindsays' ancestors had, in fact, been a royal princess who married into the family. While the Lindsay staff uniforms were not the same design as the royal family's, they were from the same tailor.

"The royal family's tailor has a peculiar style that comes through in all their designs. My grandfather admired them so much that he taught me all about them."

"That does ring true," said Helen. "I've been told before by other maids how much they envy my uniform."

The uniform proved that one worked for a noteworthy household and was something of a status symbol among servants. An untrained eye would find nothing remarkable about the Lindsay uniforms, but they would be wrong. Claudia knew this because the same could be said of dresses: each modiste had their own trademark style of gown. It made sense that the same could be true of tailored uniforms.

"I doubted myself at first," the boy continued. "But as I examined you closer, I realized I was right. Your beauty makes you stand out too much, Lady Claudia. Oh, but your disguise was well conceived! Most people only look at a person's outfit to make a judgment about who or what they are." In other words, the majority would immediately assume she was as she appeared: a simple maid. Only someone with a particularly keen eye would be able to tell the difference, but in a crowd of people, no one could pick her out. "They might think you're pretty, but I don't think most people would figure out that you're *the* Lady Claudia!"

She nodded, taking it all in. "Most illuminating. I will certainly take your analysis into consideration for the future. And I would prefer my identity remain a secret, so please speak to me as casually as you would anyone else."

The outfit was one aspect of her cover, but making sure those around her treated her as just another one of the common folk was also essential to her disguise. She needed people's assumptions not to be challenged, lest she rouse their suspicion about her identity. She'd already asked the same of Helen, and not because she wanted Helen to treat her an equal. No, of course not. That wasn't her real motive at all.

"Oh, right!" The boy cleared his throat. "Sorry for being so inconsiderate, miss." She hadn't needed to explain her reasoning to him. He'd figured it out on his own.

*What a clever boy.* He was perceptive enough to work out who she really was, *and* he could follow her unspoken logic.

"No need to apologize. I'm the one asking you for a favor," she said.

He was kind to abide by her wishes, and if she applied his knowledge to her future disguises, people would have an even harder time figuring out who she was. Claudia smiled at him, impressed by his intelligence and grateful for his understanding.

The boy's nose flared as he announced, "I'm Kiel, a detective!" He hooked his hands on his hips and puffed out his chest proudly. It was adorable.

*I wonder if this is what it would feel like to have a younger brother.*

Helen gazed warmly at the boy, as if she shared the same sentiment as Claudia.

"I may be a commoner, but I'm good at what I do!" Kiel insisted. "The reason I lost my footing earlier was because I realized who you really were, Miss Dee."

No wonder he'd been so shocked. The maid he'd reached out to for help had turned out to be a noblewoman.

"I went to the high-end district to give a report to one of my clients. That's when I noticed someone suspicious following me. I have a feeling he's involved with my current case."

"Is this case of yours that dangerous?" Claudia asked.

"Uh…" Kiel hesitated. "Sorry, but I can't tell you anything about it."

"Client confidentiality, I understand."

His face lit up. "Exactly! I have to protect my clients' secrets!"

"Do you normally work downtown?" Since he was a commoner, she assumed he was only visiting the high-end district briefly.

Kiel shook his head, his blond hair bouncing with the motion. "I was born and raised out east. My parents own a ranch, and that's where I live. Technically speaking."

Claudia was taken aback by this information. She exchanged a glance with Helen. Even assuming he wasn't from the easternmost part of the kingdom and instead from somewhere closer to the center, it was still a considerable journey from the capital.

"Surely you didn't travel all the way here alone?" she said.

"Oh, no. I didn't. I have—well, had—someone with me. He was off at the races. I mean, I made him leave because he'd just be in the

way…" His voice trailed off, and he shook his head. "Anyway, you don't have to worry about him!"

"Hold on just a moment!" Helen cried. "He left you by yourself to go gambling?!"

Kiel panicked, throwing up his hands. "No, um, I told him to go! One of the horses we raised was participating. I figured I'd be fine by myself since I'd be in the high-end district."

"That was reckless!" Helen's brows pinched together, her lips pulling into a frown of disapproval. Whether his family-raised horse was competing or not, that was no reason for a child to wander about alone, even in the high-end district.

Kiel groaned. "I never imagined someone was following me."

"Yes, that part is rather unusual, but you should show due caution. You're a clever boy. Surely you understand," Helen said. She couldn't abide a child walking about unaccompanied.

Claudia couldn't argue the point. *Though I'm not sure we have the grounds to be lecturing him in the first place.*

Among aristocrats, one was considered a child until they'd had their fourteenth birthday and made their formal debut into high society. Kiel was, by those considerations, still only a child. But an aristocrat wasn't allowed to walk alone, even after they had come of age. There were situations where they might not need a bodyguard, but they would at least have a servant accompanying them.

Was it right to scold the boy as if he were an aristocrat? Maybe walking about alone was normal in the town where he was raised. If

his home was a ranch, then he would have been brought up somewhere far from the bustling cities of the kingdom. Most rural areas had much lower crime rates than the densely packed metropolises; the more remote one's home was, the more likely they led calm, peaceful lives untouched by such concerns. Such was true of the Lindsays' home region.

*On the other hand, there's what happened to Sunny.* Sunny was attendant to Kayla the courtesan. She had been accosted by a man Claudia assumed was a client when she ventured into the high-end district. And when she visited the confectionery, she had almost been shooed out simply because of her occupation. Claudia could understand Helen's concerns. It made her heart ache to think of what could happen to a defenseless child at the mercy of a malicious blackguard.

*As intelligent as he is, I'd like to think Kiel would find some way to outwit them.* But at the end of the day, that was just wishful thinking, wasn't it? If Kiel's guardian had been with him, he likely wouldn't be in this situation.

Judging by the contrition on Kiel's face, he too saw the truth in Helen's words. "I'm sorry," he said. He looked like a chastised pup with its ears folded back and head bent forward.

Helen smiled. "I should apologize for all my preaching, but I do want you to understand that not even the high-end district is free of people with ill intent."

"Yes," Kiel agreed. "I'll make sure not to go around by myself anymore. I know you're just worried about me, Miss Helen!"

"You're a good boy," Claudia said.

"Yes, very much so," Helen said, still smiling.

Kiel chuckled bashfully. Color gathered in his soft cheeks, in turn filling Claudia's chest with warmth.

This whole unexpected situation had terrified her. Outside, the rhythmic *clip-clop* of the horses' hooves echoed off the road. The whole wagon shimmied and shook, occasionally making her body ache from her uncomfortable position. Despite it all, she thought her meeting with Kiel had to be a gift from the Capricious God.

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When the sun finally began to set, the covered wagon rolled to a stop. Its pace had slowed halfway through their journey, but it had continued trundling along until now. The horses were surely spent.

It proved laborious for Claudia and company to peel themselves off their seats after sitting so long on the stiff, rumbling floor. With great care, they alighted, and Claudia had never felt more grateful to be on solid ground. What a marvel it was to be standing on something that didn't constantly vibrate and bounce.

All three of them massaged their sore behinds as they took in their surroundings. They had stopped at a watering hole for the horses. There was a trough full of water, along with a post to keep the horses tied up so they didn't wander off. They seemed to be at the

edge of a town. It was quiet. Down the gentle slope from where they stood were rows of buildings—the town's border.

"With how sore I am, I'd guess we were riding for about two hours," said Kiel.

Claudia studied him. "You can tell?"

"I've ridden enough to tell by the soreness of my rear and by how much the sun has moved in the sky." The sorts of carriages used by the common folk must not have had the same comforts as those of the upper crust.

Kiel explained that passenger carriages, which maintained scheduled routes with regular stops, were all a similar build to the wagon they had just ridden, except those were lined with solid wooden seats.

"It's common for people to bring their own cushions since you're in those passenger carriages for hours at a time. Unfortunately, mine's out of commission."

"Goodness, that is most inauspicious," Claudia said. "What happened?"

"Someone with an upset stomach was next to me, and as I was putting my cushion on the seat, they puked all over it. It smelled so awful, I had to toss it."

Helen pressed a hand over her mouth in dismay. "Oh dear."

"And the guy with me hadn't even brought one!" Kiel exclaimed, throwing his hands up in frustration. "So we both had to suffer achy bottoms."

Whoever the boy's guardian was, the two of them apparently traveled together a lot. He was, as Kiel explained, the same man who had come with him to the capital—the one he'd sent off to the horse races. Even commoners weren't willing to let their children travel so far alone. Such trips were expensive, and a child could easily be abducted or worse. For as much as Kiel complained, he obviously respected his guardian enough to bring him along.

"He's not much of a bodyguard," said Kiel, "but with his size, he makes himself useful."

"Bodyguard? Is he from Parte Kingdom?" asked Claudia.

Kiel nodded. "That's right. He's a coward who deserted because he was tired of war." Dredging up his guardian's less-than-savory qualities had Kiel pursing his lips in a pout. Even that was adorable. His story and animated expressions helped ease the tension, but Claudia couldn't let herself relax too much.

"We need to pull ourselves together," she said. "And we must speak with the driver while there's still daylight." She trudged toward the driver, who was offering feed to his horses.

The man was, understandably, startled by their sudden appearance. "Huh?! What? You were in my wagon?"

"You have my apologies," she said. "We didn't think you would be departing so soon, and we were playing a bit of hide-and-seek."

Claudia went on to say that she and Helen were maids for House Lindsay and that Kiel was a boy in their care. She debated whether to tell him the truth of her identity, but as she didn't know if she could trust this man, she decided against it. She could always

come clean later, but she didn't want to cause any unnecessary fuss if she could help it.

*Although I can already bet our house is in an uproar.* She did regret that; she hadn't meant to cause more trouble to her family and their servants on top of everything else.

"I realize how inconvenient all this must be, but might we entreat you to return us to the capital? We would be happy to compensate you for the trouble," Claudia promised.

"Huh, is that so?" the driver muttered.

The man was rather young, about twenty or so. He wore a beige shirt and brown overalls. The way he stared at them made Claudia uncomfortable. Maybe it was because her clothes were still dusty from their ride in the wagon, and how exhausted she probably looked. As disheveled as she was, no one would take her for a duke's daughter.

"All right," said the driver. "Get in the wagon. I'll take you back."

Claudia blinked in surprise. "What? Right this moment?"

"Yep. That'd be better for you lot too, right? To get back as quick as possible?" He began to tuck away the sack of horse feed.

Something about the whole interaction didn't sit right with Claudia.

Kiel tugged her sleeve. "Miss Dee, I think it would be best for us to run."

"Why would—" She cut herself off. "Very well." He must have sensed something was wrong too, but there was no time to discuss it.

Helen seemed to sense what was happening. Together, the three of them started back toward the wagon, pretending to obey the driver. As soon as they were in the shadows and out of sight, Claudia hiked up her skirt and scrambled down the slope toward the town below.

Even if they had the advantage of numbers, there was no telling how much strength the man had. Claudia had toned her body to enhance her beauty; she was confident that she was much stronger than the average noblewoman, even while exhausted. But she had never actually fought someone before. The bit of self-defense she had learned was for creating an escape, not overpowering her enemy.

"Wha…?! Hold it right there, you lot!" the driver howled after them, voice laced with panic.

They didn't dare look back. The three of them pumped their legs as fast as they could.

"We need to go somewhere public! Where he can't try anything even if he does catch up!" Kiel shouted at them.

Claudia agreed; they would head straight for the heart of the town. The driver couldn't leave his horses and wagon behind, so he couldn't immediately give chase.

*Thank goodness the town was located down a hill and not up one!* Claudia was careful not to trip over her own feet as they descended to reach the border safely. And as they ventured into the town proper, the lanterns on the streets winked to life, even as the sun lingered in the sky. The town teemed with people. It wasn't until

Claudia was sure that the driver hadn't followed them that she stopped to catch her breath and take in the sights.

"There are an awful lot of inns here," she said.

Inns lined the streets, signboards placed out front to advertise vacancies. Claudia had never seen anything like it before.

"The town might have developed to accommodate travelers and merchant caravans," Kiel suggested. "That would explain the watering hole at the edge."

"So that's the reason for all the traffic: lots of people stopping here to rest on their journey," said Claudia. In fact, it was the perfect time for dinner.

Kiel spun around, his golden hair dancing across his forehead as he peered back the way they'd come. "I think that driver was in cahoots with the guy who was following me back in the capital."

"Why is that?"

"Because he was wearing the same color of clothing. Varying shades of brown, remember? I know I'm wearing something similar, but even his shirt was beige."

Claudia hadn't noticed until Kiel mentioned it. From the brief glimpse she'd had of Kiel's pursuer, she remembered he'd been wearing a hat and brown clothing.

"Everyone dresses that way in the place I've been investigating," Kiel said. "I was careless. They left the wagon's rear gate and steps down on purpose so they could lure me in and snatch me up." His face scrunched as he tried to puzzle together all the tidbits of

information he had. “He must have panicked and driven away when your bodyguard tried to speak to him because he thought he’d been caught.”

“And he was willing to abandon his cohort in the process?” said Claudia.

“Yes. If he’s willing to kidnap someone, then I think they already had it all planned. They probably intended to meet up somewhere afterward.”

It dawned on her then. “You mean this town, don’t you?”

“Probably,” he said. “We know he stopped here to give his horses a rest. But there was something strange about that, wasn’t there?”

Claudia nodded. “He was willing to head right back to the capital.”

“Exactly. He was pushing his horses hard the whole way here. As a driver, he should know they need to rest before moving again.” And there was nothing more difficult than traveling at night. There were no streetlamps on the open road like there were in the city. The highways to the capital were carefully maintained, but they were black as pitch when the sun fell. If any nocturnal predators emerged, it would be nearly impossible to escape them.

Claudia wondered what the driver had intended to do if they’d actually returned to the wagon.

“I’m curious as to why he didn’t enter the town,” Kiel mumbled to himself. “Especially somewhere like this, which seems to be such a

popular rest stop."

The number of people milling about was a good indication of the town's activity. With the number of inns on this street alone, it was the perfect place to stay.

"Instead, he stopped at the watering hole on the outskirts. Either he didn't have the money to stay at an inn, or he was up to no good and wanted to avoid attention. But worse than that…" Kiel paused to take a deep breath. He threw his hands up, cradling his head and the beret on top of it. "Why am I always so unlucky?!"

He'd lamented his lack of luck before when the carriage first peeled away with them stuck inside.

"I'm sorry," Kiel went on, dropping his gaze to his feet. "I've always had bad luck. Bad things always happen to me, but…this time I got you and Miss Helen wrapped up in it."

Claudia couldn't lie and tell him otherwise; it truly was misfortune that they'd happened to board the very wagon that belonged to his pursuer's collaborator. That wasn't a reason to blame him, however.

"I was the one who decided to climb aboard with you," she reminded him. "There's no need for you to punish yourself for it." Claudia could have dismissed his suggestion to hide there, but she hadn't. "The best course of action at the time would have been for me to proclaim my true identity and take you into my protection."

"But you disguised yourself as a maid because you didn't want to draw attention to yourself, right?" said Kiel. "You saved me regardless. And anyway, it's all water under the bridge."

She chuckled at him. “Here I was trying to reassure you, but you wound up consoling me.”

“That’s because you haven’t done anything wrong, Miss Dee. If I’m being entirely honest, I approached you for a reason.”

“You did?” she said in disbelief.

“I thought it was a golden opportunity to make the acquaintance of a duke’s daughter.” He had seen through her disguise before they boarded the wagon, after all. Kiel had grabbed her hand and dragged her along because he’d hoped to spend some time with her. “Sharing a thrilling experience brings people together, or so they say. I thought this was my chance. I should’ve known better, with my terrible luck!” he spat, lamenting his own lack of foresight.

Claudia reached down and gently took his clenched hand in hers. It was still quite small, given how young he was. Smaller than hers. Yet his skin was tough and taut over his bony knuckles. She could tell he had faced much hardship in his life, some by choice and some not.

“Kiel, there is no reason to blame yourself for any of this. But if you insist that you’re cursed with misfortune, then let us hold hands. They won’t be able to take you so long as you aren’t alone.”

Helen took Kiel’s other hand, having taken a liking to Claudia’s idea. “This way, you won’t fall again either.”

“I’m not *that* much of a child, but thank you,” he grumbled back. His cheeks puffed out as he sulked, but he didn’t try to pull away. His blush traveled all the way to his ears.

Claudia and Helen grinned at him.

"Now then," said Claudia, "let's collect ourselves and consider our next move."

There was no sign yet that the driver had come to the town. *But he may once the sky grows dark.*

"The fastest route would be to go to the authorities for help…"

"But wouldn't that be a problem?" Kiel's emerald eyes peered up at Claudia from behind his spectacles. He had already caught on to her hesitation. "In high society, it can be terrible for a lady's reputation to be kidnapped, as I understand."

He was right. If a noblewoman was kidnapped, she would be treated by high society as damaged goods. All potential matches would dry up. Most gave up and chose to enter a nunnery.

"As comforting as it would be to report this to the authorities, I think we'd best be cautious," Helen chimed in. "There's no telling who owes allegiance to your enemies."

Sylvester had managed to quell those who'd opposed the ceremony, but if any of them could find another opening, they would take it without compunction. It was too risky, even with Claudia's disguise. She wasn't confident she could fool them.

"Then we're left with the same dilemma," Claudia reminded them. "How shall we get back to the capital?"

"There are passenger carriages here, aren't there?" Helen asked, glancing between Claudia and Kiel. "What about taking the earliest one back? I should have enough money for the fare."

Typically, when Claudia made purchases in the high-end district, she would have the store owners send her family an invoice. There was no need for her to carry any money. Since they were both disguised as maids for today's outing, however, Helen had seen fit to bring some along with them.

Kiel bobbed his head eagerly. "Yeah, I think that's our best bet."

That decided, they made for the station. The carriage schedule was posted near each stop. It didn't take long for them to figure out which one was heading out soonest.

"Why am I so unlucky?!" Kiel blurted out.

The earliest carriage wouldn't depart until noon the following day. With that suspicious driver and his cohort still out there somewhere, they couldn't afford to sit around waiting. Most of the locals seemed to have their own transport, so there wasn't much demand for the passenger carriages.

"With most people here being seasoned travelers or merchants, I suppose it's only natural the passenger carriages wouldn't depart very often," Claudia said, dejected. Who would want to take such an uncomfortable ride if they already had their own? Her gaze sank to the ground. Before she could lose hope, she chastised herself and forced her head back up. If she let herself look downtrodden in front of Kiel, he would only blame himself further. "Let's think of something else."

The saving grace in all of this was that she wasn't alone. There were three of them, and if they put their heads together, they could

come up with something. And if nothing else, she could go to the authorities as a last resort.

By a stroke of luck, she happened to spot a traveling merchant.

"Look at him," she said, motioning. "Do you suppose he's headed for the capital?" It looked like he had just ridden in from the opposite direction, so he certainly hadn't come *from* the capital. "It's possible he's headed back the way he came, but I think it's worth having a chat to find out."

Kiel nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, I think that's a good idea!"

"This time, I'll do the talking," Helen insisted. She must have thought it inappropriate to let Claudia do everything for them.

The three of them agreed on what she would say, and Claudia left the matter in Helen's hands. The merchant in question looked to be in his forties and was pulling two horses along by their reins. When Helen flagged him down, he greeted her with a friendly smile and said, "Yep, I'm headed to the capital. I've got a deal with the Evans Company."

None of them could have expected such a fortuitous connection. Helen's eyes went wide. "Truly?! That's incredible!"

"Business is booming for them now, but we've had dealings with the Evans Company for ages—since the old man was running it, in fact." He cleared his throat. "Erm, probably shouldn't call him that, should I?" He grinned at them, glowing from Helen's reaction. The man was obviously proud of his relationship with the Evans Company.

"If you've been working with them for that long, they must have a lot of faith in you," said Helen.

"Of course! Trust is the most important thing for a merchant!"

"Yes, and I'm sure they rely on you a great deal. This is just for curiosity's sake, mind, but what goods do you trade? The Evans Company is mostly known for their cosmetics, aren't they?"

The man stroked his chin. "Yeah, at least now they are. But they used to deal in more standard goods like daily necessities and the like. That's my corner." He went on to say that the Evans Company had become quite familiar with the kingdom's southwestern region while transporting such goods. The man himself seemed to know the ins and outs of the Evans Company.

*It sounds like he's telling the truth about being their business partner.* Brian had taken her to the southwestern region not long ago, to the territory belonging to the former Lord Sasriel. Judging by the way the merchant spoke, he knew the Evans Company had people crossing Parte's border and going in and out of the conflict zone beyond it. Only someone incredibly familiar with the Evans Company could know so much about their operations.

"And actually," the man continued, "that's my mainstay too: the southwestern part of Harland. Last year was a real mess, I'll tell you, but I managed to snag quite a bit of merchandise at a low price. Hard to quit this profession when you can get lucky and strike gold like that!" Helen proved to be such a good listener that the man suspected nothing, eager to talk about himself and his work.

Claudia knew better than anyone what had happened in the former Lord Sasriel's territory, having been there herself. At present, the land was in the hands of the royal family. Given the importance of the area and its location at Parte's border, they had to wait for the appropriate time and find someone suitable for peerage to appoint as ruler.

Claudia nodded to Helen to urge her along. If this merchant had such close connections with the Evans Company, he was a safe option.

"There is one favor I would like to ask you, sir," said Helen. She informed him that their group had boarded the wrong carriage and were eager to return to the capital first thing in the morning.

The man was shocked to hear the story, but empathetic. "That sounds rough. I planned to leave first thing in the morning anyway, so I don't mind you lot tagging along."

"Thank you so much! That would be most appreciated!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to sit on the bed of my wagon for the journey, though."

"That's perfectly fine! We would rather be uncomfortable than late to return." Helen beamed at him, and the man flushed, scratching his cheek awkwardly. "I have a bit of coin with me as well, so allow me to pay you for your generosity."

"You're the ones in a pinch here, not me," he said. "You sure?"

"Most definitely. The Evans Company obviously puts a lot of trust in you and your work. Please don't hold back on our account."

He chuckled. “Well, I guess when you put it that way, I’ve got no choice.”

From the sound of it, the man would have been willing to take them without payment. Before approaching him, however, the trio had agreed that it would be best to compensate him if he proved trustworthy. The man would be more likely to see them as clients if they paid him for his troubles, whereas imposing on someone’s generosity risked them demanding something in return for their kindness. After all, they had done something out of the goodness of their hearts, and didn’t they deserve some reward?

Claudia and Helen were curvaceous and beautiful beneath the dirt and grime that covered them now. The last thing they wanted was for the man to get any ideas. Better to have him treat them as clients to begin with; that way, even if his base urges tried to emerge, he would have reason to behave. Paying him was partly for their own preservation. *There’s no reason to believe this man would ever have such debauched thoughts, but best not to take chances.*

Helen handed the man the same amount they would have paid if they’d taken the passenger carriage.

“Have you already figured out where you’re gonna be staying?” he asked them. “If not, I can introduce you to a place where even a couple of lone women like you can rest safely.”

“That would be wonderful! Yes, please!” said Helen.

The inn in question was one the merchant had long frequented. Though the place was a bit on the expensive side because it provided

ample security, the man assured the trio that he could get them a discount.

"Thank you so much for everything!"

He waved Helen off. "You lot must be exhausted. Better rest up as much as you can. Just give my name to the receptionist and they'll help you out."

The merchant had to drop off his wagon, so he would part ways with them here. But he did, at least, tell them a bit more about the town before he left. They had been right to assume that the town had developed into a hub for merchants and travelers.

"You see all the inns lining this street, don't you? With them all crammed together like this, they can't each have their own stables, so they share a large one not too far away." Large was probably an understatement if it had to accommodate the customers of five different inns. "They maintain it as a group and hired enough stablehands to manage the place. That way, they've got the security they need and professionals on hand to look after the horses. Costs a pretty penny, though."

"It's probably more cost-effective for them to collaborate than each have their own stables, I'm sure," said Helen.

The man nodded. "That's the gist of it. Customers can rest easy knowing their horses and wagons are in good hands. That's why I make it a point to stay here, even though it's a bit out of my way."

This town was northwest of the capital; it was a detour for a merchant who mainly traveled between the central and southwestern parts of the kingdom.

"Slow and steady wins the race, as they say. When you're making long trips, there's nothing as important as having a secure place to sleep," the man told them. "Anywho, I'll be on my way." He waved at them and left.

Their group of three headed for the inn he'd recommended. He would be staying there too, so he promised to reach out to them in the morning when it was time to depart.

"What a nice man!" Kiel exclaimed, his spirits lifted.

"We have Helen to thank for being such a skilled conversationalist," said Claudia. "We learned much, thanks to her."

"He's the type who enjoys talking about himself, that's all," Helen replied.

"I won't argue with you there, but he was clearly enjoying himself because you were so attentive," said Claudia.

Helen shook her head. "You were the one who picked him out and suggested we approach. I was so shocked when he revealed his connection to the Evans Company."

"I must admit, I was too." Who could have predicted that would be the first thing to come out of the man's mouth?

Kiel's eyes darted between them. "I've never heard of them before. Are they famous or something?"

At that, Helen smirked. "They revere Dee as a goddess."

"They what?!"

"Helen, stop that!" Claudia grumbled at her. "Don't tell him such nonsense!" The exasperating part was that Helen wasn't *wrong,* but

she'd skipped all the details.

"Is it true?" Kiel asked her.

Claudia hesitated, debating how to answer. "Their products are top quality, but they do have some rather…extreme ideas, you could say."

"The heir to the company, Lord Brian, is most devoted to Dee."

Claudia gave her a look. "Helen, you're having fun at my expense, aren't you?"

"I am," she admitted without hesitation.

Though Claudia was at her wits' end, it was impossible to be angry with Helen when she broke into a fit of giggles, dimples forming on her dirt-smudged cheeks. The two ladies were so rarely afforded opportunities to tease one another; they could only be this familiar because of Claudia's disguise.

When Claudia glanced up at the sky, the stars were already twinkling at them. The curtain of darkness had begun to fall.

"If this inn is as secure as the merchant said, we should hurry," Claudia told them. As much as she wanted to enjoy the moment and banter with Helen some more, they couldn't forget that they were being pursued by a suspicious someone (or someones, perhaps). "I'm glad we'll be staying in the same building as that merchant. His bodyguard will be with him, right?"

"Yes," Helen confirmed. "That's what he said."

The merchant had hired a sellsword for protection. This one person wasn't much reassurance of their safety, but the more people

on their side, the less likely their pursuers were to act.

Claudia and Helen kept hold of Kiel's hands as they made their way inside. They had no trouble reserving a room once they told the receptionist the man's name. Given how on edge they still were, they opted for a single room. That meant only a single bed.

"This type of room is normally for spouses or couples," said the receptionist. "There is only one bed, large enough to accommodate two adults. But since it's just the two of you and the boy, there should be enough space."

"All right," Claudia said with a nod. "We'll take it, then."

"W-we will?" Kiel squeaked from beside her, confused. Claudia understood that it might not be the most comfortable, but he would have to make do.

"For an additional fee, we can prepare breakfast for you as well. Would you like us to do so, or would you prefer to eat elsewhere?"

"No, we'll eat here."

The receptionist dipped her head. "Very well. We will inform you when your meal is ready. All fees must be paid up front."

Fortunately, with the discount, they still had money left. Claudia was grateful to Helen for having the foresight to bring cash with her.

Their room was on the second floor. Together, the three of them clambered up the stairs. This inn was one of the many that lined the street, with a brick exterior, and there was no space between it and the other buildings. They were all squeezed in together, side by side.

The only windows in the building were in the rooms that faced the street.

Unfortunately, Claudia and her party hadn't reserved one of those rooms. It worried her because a lack of windows meant poor ventilation and no natural light, but there were benefits too. It retained heat much better and was more insulated from all the hustle and bustle outside. While the inn's dated amenities proved it had been around a while, it was kept neat and tidy.

Claudia opened the door with the provided key. The walls were surprisingly thick, which meant that once inside, they had peace and quiet. They wouldn't have to worry about anyone eavesdropping on their conversations either.

"It's more spacious than I thought it would be."

She had anticipated a bed and a bedside table, but it also came with a closet and two armchairs. There was enough floor space that they wouldn't bump into each other as they moved around.

Kiel's eyes shone with suspicion behind his rounded spectacles. "I thought you would call this cramped. An aristocrat of your caliber would have a much more impressive room at your family's estate, wouldn't you?"

Helen nodded. "Of course. She *is* a duke's daughter. Even my living space is larger than this."

"You share your room with another person," Claudia reminded her.

"Even if you halved the size, it's more than enough for one."

"Hmm." Kiel's forehead scrunched as he considered this.

"I can understand his confusion," Helen said. "When I first visited the duke's estate, it was so grandiose, I felt like I was dreaming."

"As much as I'd like to say you're exaggerating, I can't," Claudia admitted. Her father's estate was opulent. The same was true for the interior, though the gardens and grounds were vast and sprawling as well. Yet it still wasn't anywhere *near* as impressive as the estate they had in their home region, since land was much harder to come by in the capital. Her father's title wasn't merely for show.

"But you don't think this room is cramped, Miss Dee?"

She shrugged. "For a town like this, no. This is about what you should expect."

Claudia wasn't fond of him prying into her reasons. Years had passed since she'd awoken as her younger self, but she hadn't lost perspective from her brothel days. When she was at the bottom rung of the ladder, she had lived in a room much smaller than this one.

*A courtesan lives better the more money she earns, so that was only natural to start.* No matter how confident Kiel was in his detective skills, he would never be able to guess the real reason she didn't react to this inn room like a typical noblewoman.

"Huh. You're not how I imagined most aristocrats to be, Miss Dee." Self-conscious, Kiel hastened to add, "Oh, I don't mean that as a negative. It's a compliment!"

"I hope you mean you find me more approachable."

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, exactly! I think I get why the heir of the Evans Company worships you like a goddess.”

She sighed and shook her head. “I would prefer you forgot about all of that goddess business.” Perhaps she shouldn’t have been surprised that had made such an impression.

Helen snickered.

*I cannot keep my guard up forever.* Claudia knew their pursuers were still out there somewhere, but she couldn’t always stay vigilant. Her focus wouldn’t last that long. It was important to rest when she could. And since they were tucked safely away into this inn room, perhaps she could relax a little now.

She poked Helen in the side, and the maid yelped in surprise. “This is your fault, you know.”

“All I did was tell the truth!” Helen protested.

“Then how about we discuss who Brian truly has feelings—” Before Claudia could finish, the maid clamped a hand over her mouth.

“There’s no need to state the obvious,” Helen said with a tight smile.

Kiel observed the two of them. “Is this Brian the heir to the Evans Company?”

“That’s not something you need to worry about, Kiel,” Helen assured him.

Claudia’s eyes narrowed at Helen. She didn’t want to discuss Brian’s feelings for her, but she was happy to bring up the goddess thing. *Convenient, that.*

They hadn’t expected their trip to go on for so long, but it wasn’t all terrible. The absurdity of their bickering soon had all three erupting in laughter, and they spent the night with raucous conversation.

## Chapter 9:
## The Boy Detective Shares His Thoughts

KIEL'S FAMILY HOME sat upon a grassy hill. His relatives, who owned ranches of their own, lived close enough that he could see their houses from his.

There were always horses outside his window. When the weather was nice, they would graze and lie around, but what truly made them stand out was their speed. Though the stables were supposedly dedicated to breeding warhorses renowned for their agility, that was only marketing for their real specialty: racehorses. Over the years, many aristocrats had come to know of them and would pay directly for pick of their best stock.

On the ranch, children were expected to do manual labor. All of Kiel's cousins (who were about the same age) would wake up at the crack of dawn to look after the horses. Kiel was the only one who didn't contribute. While his cousins were sweating and working away, Kiel sat indoors across from his grandfather, getting an education. He'd always been a quick learner, and his grandfather—who'd once worked as butler to a viscount—noticed his potential and insisted he focus on his studies.

"At this rate, you could work for a house with its own custom uniforms," Kiel's grandfather would say whenever Kiel managed to impress him.

Aristocrats' servants typically had to procure cheap uniforms from the market with their own money. They were of poor make and quality; no one wanted to spend much on something that would stain and wear thin through the rigors of housework. Only those in management positions had the coin to afford better. However, there were a few noble houses in high society that provided their servants with custom outfits free of charge.

Kiel's grandfather had climbed his way from ordinary household servant to esteemed butler. He admired those custom-made uniforms immensely. It was his hope—his *dream*—that his grandson would reach those same heights.

Despite his grandfather's special treatment, none of Kiel's cousins envied him. To them, listening to their stern-faced grandfather's long, complicated diatribes sounded more like torture than manual labor. They had no idea Kiel enjoyed studying, so they pitied him.

As Kiel grew older, the situation became less bearable. He couldn't stand being cooped up in the house all the time. He began carrying his books outside. Then he wound up falling in a cesspit. Another time he had dirty cleaning water thrown over him in the middle of winter. He was fortunately never injured in these incidents, but he became painfully aware of his own poor luck.

It only worsened once he started visiting the local town. On one occasion, he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and was caught up in someone else's mischief. Another, he was falsely accused of stealing someone's cat. Each time, Kiel scrambled to prove

his innocence. In the first case, he captured the real culprit, and in the second, he found the cat's beloved hiding spot and returned it to its owner.

His ill fortune might very well have launched his detective career; through it, he found purpose. It gave him the same sort of joy as solving a problem from his grandfather.

Naturally, this was also when he began using his trademark mantra he'd come to grumble so often: "Why am I so unlucky?!"

Kiel took any misfortune that befell him as the sign of a case to solve. This was also his way of overcoming his unlucky nature. He'd solved dozens of cases in the local town, making a name for himself among the authorities.

It was due to his growing popularity that one aristocrat's messenger came to meet with him. At first, Kiel assumed the messenger was there for one of their horses. He was shocked to learn the messenger was instead after his "brilliant mind," as the man put it.

The messenger informed Kiel that he couldn't share the details of his client's request with anyone, and that it would be dangerous. Kiel would not even be told what the job was until he agreed to take it. If he did, he would need to leave home immediately to focus on the case. That was how Kiel landed his assistant—the man with the bulky, imposing figure who was really no help at all—but his family fiercely opposed the whole thing.

Kiel took the case despite their protests, saying, "Knowing my luck, even if I refused, I'd just get wrapped up in it later anyway."

His family couldn't argue that point. They knew as well as he did how horrible his fortune was. Rather than getting dragged in later against his will, Kiel reasoned he might as well receive this aristocrat's coin and do the investigation on his terms. His family eventually gave in. They had no other choice.

Dismayed, Kiel's grandfather crossed his arms over his chest and said, "I had hoped you would focus on becoming a butler instead."

"I don't want to," Kiel told him honestly. "I can't say I'm too fond of staying in one place for long."

No matter how terrible his luck, he couldn't remain locked away in his family's home forever. But before he left, there was one thing he had to ask his grandfather. Even after the old man's retirement, he had a sharp mind. The people in the town always came to him for help whenever it came to dealing with the aristocracy. Kiel trusted his grandfather's judgment.

"No matter what happens, our family won't get hurt, will they?" Kiel asked.

"You're the only one who'll know the details of the case," said his grandfather. "And our horses are still in high demand. Whoever your client is, they won't lay a hand on us. Not if they don't want to raise questions."

His grandfather still had connections to the viscount and his family, but Kiel's family had also made a name for themselves among the horse lovers of the aristocracy. If anything happened to them, the rumor mill would reach their customers soon enough. With the secrecy involved, Kiel's client obviously wanted to keep things quiet.

They wouldn’t want to draw unnecessary attention, not even in the form of gossip.

“There are horse enthusiasts in all factions. I’ll do what I can to make sure we’re protected. You remember everything I taught you about the noble houses and their relationships, don’t you?”

Kiel nodded. “Yep. There’s the royal faction, the aristocratic faction, and the neutral one, right? I know which faction each house belongs to.”

“My lessons may be a bit dated, but they’re better than nothing. If worse comes to worst, I’ll assist you however I can.” His grandfather lifted his large, wizened hand and stroked Kiel’s head. “Don’t let your miserable luck get the best of you.”

“I won’t,” Kiel promised. “No matter what happens, I’ll find a way to beat it!”

Once Kiel left home, the aristocrat’s messenger would provide him with anything he needed, including lodging fees.

“Don’t worry,” his meathead of a companion swore to his family. “As his assistant, I’ll protect him from danger!”

Kiel scoffed. “Says the deserter. And you’re *not* my assistant.”

The aristocrat’s messenger had been nothing more than that: a messenger. Kiel would have to conduct his investigation alone (or rather, with his companion—who was, for the record, imposing but not the least bit dependable).

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Despite his companion's questionable reliability, the man was menacing enough to prove useful in a suspicious case like this one. People would never expect a child like Kiel to be the real detective, which made things convenient for him. The only issue was that the man lacked the intelligence to provide any sort of advice, so he was little more than a guardian along for the ride.

*So this aristocrat wants me to investigate some new medicine circulating the market.* Word had it that this medicine could be used as an aphrodisiac or a hypnotic. What the aristocrat had requested, more specifically, was that Kiel trace the medicine to its source. Kiel thought that sounded like a matter for the authorities, but there was no public record of any investigation.

Kiel's client was the earl Lord Demitor, whose house profited off the sale of medicines. The earl hadn't said as much, but Kiel suspected his motivation was to remove a new competitor from the market.

*Odd that he'd be concerned with this, considering the aristocracy is in shambles right now.* On reflection, Kiel thought maybe he shouldn't be so harsh. The earl's dogged interest in his own finances despite the drama was perhaps an example Kiel should follow. *And in case everything goes south, I ought to think about where to go to escape the fallout.*

Given that he was investigating highly suspicious drugs, Kiel had a feeling he wouldn't make it home alive—even if he managed to get

answers for Lord Demitor. Nothing was guaranteed, least of all where his terrible luck was concerned.

Kiel continued his mantra about his cursed misfortune while he conducted his investigation, which soon brought him to a particular village. Dubious aphrodisiacs had existed since time immemorial, but the one Kiel was after was an especially potent brown concoction. He had finally pinned it down when he'd stopped by a town's apothecary and made inquiries. Curiously, the brown substance he found there was being sold not as an aphrodisiac but as an *analgesic*.

When a commoner was sick or injured, they had to rely on the local apothecary for relief. One could never be sure whether the provided remedy would even help. By and large, they wouldn't, and the person's recovery was left to fate. That being the case, these remedies somewhat put the mind at ease. This analgesic, however, had been proven to work. Everyone in town spoke highly of its effectiveness, which was how Kiel had found out about it. The apothecary had even told him it was in such high demand that new shipments sold out immediately.

It probably went without saying that with Kiel's luck, his companion had been the one to nab a sample of the stuff.

Kiel found it peculiar that this analgesic had the exact same characteristics as the rumored aphrodisiac, and that it was used widely in the town because it was one of the few medicines that actually worked. The similarities between the medicine he was investigating and this analgesic helped him in narrowing down their origin. It was hard to trace anything from the black market, but the

apothecary was a different story. It operated out in the open and never changed location. Even if the proprietor wouldn't readily admit where he got his stock, Kiel could take a guess as to when new shipments would arrive and stake out the place to get his answers.

That was what led him to one very strange village.

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"I see you're all wearing the same color of brown," Kiel's companion said to some of the villagers who had ventured into town.

"Brown represents blessings from heaven," explained one of the villagers.

"Oh, really? Never heard that one before."

The villager laughed. "If you spend a little time in our village, you'll soon understand."

Kiel's intuition warned him not to follow through.

Later, his bodyguard told him, "I've seen eyes like those on the battlefield. That's what a man looks like when he's lost his grip on reality." The whole bulk of his body had shivered in fear.

Kiel and his companion decided against pressing the villagers for details or entering the village itself, limiting their scope to what they could gather from the outskirts.

*What's strange is that the size of the village doesn't match the quantity of analgesic they're producing.* Lord Demitor had determined exactly how much was circulating in the local black market. Combined

with how much product was in the apothecary, the amount was staggering. The village he'd traced it to was far too small to produce it all; it had about twenty households at most. Even assuming every single member of their community was dedicated to production, it wouldn't account for the amount being sold. *That means there must be more.*

Since there were only two of them, it was easy to adapt to any developments in their case. On the other hand, it was hard to cast a wide enough net for all the information they needed. Kiel enlisted Lord Demitor's assistance whenever possible. He made regular reports about his progress, and in return he had the earl's knowledge and information network at his disposal. The earl's insight into the distribution of medicine was an especially helpful resource. That, along with what Kiel had uncovered in his investigation, helped him pin down the potential locations of the other villages.

Per Lord Demitor's request for the whole truth behind this medicine, Kiel decided to take his investigation outside the region. *He probably knew from the beginning that this medicine is being distributed across the border.*

There was no telling how widespread it was. Kiel could understand now why the earl's investigation was kept secret. If Lord Demitor could get his hands on the analgesic and produce it himself, he could make enormous profit.

*The bigger issue is whether the rumored aphrodisiac and hypnotic are as potent as the analgesic.* If they were, what would the

earl do with them? It was depressing to consider, and far outside of Kiel's power.

*I opted to stay and investigate here because I thought it would be easier to gather information.* It was easier to search for a needle in a tiny haystack than in a stable full of hay. That was how Kiel had found the first village and discovered the existence of the others.

*Lord Demitor must have hired me because he doesn't want anyone else to know that he's looking into this.* The more Kiel learned, the more certain he became that he would never make it home. Still he continued his investigation. He knew that the more he found, the more cards he'd have to play. Surviving as a commoner in society built for aristocrats was no easy feat, but his grandfather had taught him well.

Kiel never stayed in one place for long, moving constantly toward the capital at the center of Harland. *I can't believe this medicine has even made it into the capital.* The authorities seemed aware of it, but the capital was much more densely populated than anywhere else in the kingdom. This meant a higher crime rate, which meant the authorities had less manpower to hunt down suspicious drugs.

Until his arrival in the capital, Kiel had always made his reports through the earl's messenger, but now he was finally able to secure a meeting with Lord Demitor in person, in the capital's high-end district. The earl was the final hurdle—the "big bad," as it were—that Kiel would have to face, but that could wait until later. He hadn't uncovered the full truth about the villages yet. The ones he had

managed to locate thus far were only the arms and legs of the operation; he'd yet to find the head of the beast. All the villages had to be producing the medicine, but until Kiel located the main one, Lord Demitor wouldn't be able to stake his claim.

*I'll be in a life-or-death situation once I do find it, though.*

Kiel's companion would only be in the way during the meeting, so Kiel sent him off to the races instead. Since one of his family's horses was participating, it was a good opportunity to send a message back to them that he was safe and in the capital.

Kiel had donned a beige vest and a brown beret for that day. It was similar enough to the village style; he'd chosen it with the idea that mimicking their colors might encourage them to see him as friendly and open up to him. He'd kept his shirt white to denote that he wasn't truly a member. The villagers had their own rules and beliefs, so infringing on those without permission or respect might only provoke them. Thus, he'd gone with something subtle but still familiar to them.

His meeting with the earl had gone off without a hitch. For the most part.

"Why am I so unlucky?!"

On his way back from the meeting, he'd locked eyes with a villager. *I never imagined they'd find their way into the high-end district of the capital!* Commoners couldn't enter without a written permit. Bribery might open doors in other regions, but not in here. These villagers must've had an inside connection.

*But why me?!*

The man tailing him was brawny and towering. Most people assumed that his companion was the real detective, and he was just a child along for the ride, so maybe it was a coincidence that they were after him. Or maybe they thought he'd be a valuable hostage they could exchange for his escort. Whatever their rationale, they were definitely after him. Kiel had no choice but to run for it. His ill fortune was alive and well, haunting his every step.

*Meeting Miss Dee was a rare stroke of* good *luck.* Claudia was much more dependable than his hulking guardian. It was her hands that first drew his attention. They looked as supple and soft as silk, her nails too perfectly manicured for her to be a servant. That stoked his suspicions, and when his eyes moved down to the hem of her skirt, he was convinced. *A circular skirt? There's no way, is there?*

Kiel's grandfather had taught him every exhaustive detail of servant uniform design. He'd claimed to have learned it from a woman he'd dated many years ago and that he was just passing the knowledge along. Regardless, a circular skirt was one that flared out from the waist in a perfect, flattering arc. The style required more fabric than, say, the wavy pattern of a flare skirt, which made hemming it more difficult. When the seam allowance was folded on a circular hem, the fabric on top of the fold would have more overlap, which required a tailor of some finesse to ensure it lay evenly.

The skirt on Claudia's outfit was masterfully made, with folds at perfectly measured intervals. Kiel was stunned. It had to be a design from the royal modiste.

Nervously, Kiel lifted his gaze from the skirt to the woman wearing it. Claudia's disguise could not fully mask her beauty, and as he drank in her features, Kiel thought his heart might stop. Her black hair fell around her shoulders in gentle waves, and her blue eyes shone with determination. He swore his heart *did* stop when he realized she was a duke's daughter, the very one spoken about in rumors and depicted in portraits. Reeling at this revelation, he lost his footing.

The fact that Claudia spoke with the casual cadence of a servant and had chosen a maid uniform for her disguise demonstrated her intelligence and education. She had proven herself again when they arrived in town after escaping the driver who had taken them from the capital, and she had chosen just the right merchant to ask for aid. Perhaps it was coincidence that this merchant dealt with an acquaintance of theirs, but Claudia would never have chosen him in the first place if she hadn't felt he was a safe bet.

*She's as graceful as you'd expect from someone of her station, so why do I get this feeling that there's something almost un-aristocratic about her?* Claudia hadn't hesitated to sit on the filthy cargo boxes in the covered wagon. They had paid the merchant to establish a client relationship so that he would hopefully not later want another kind of compensation, but that wouldn't stop him ogling her. Indeed, Claudia seemed unbothered by any leering.

Everything about her was different from the image Kiel's grandfather had painted of aristocratic ladies. *Not to mention, she takes me seriously and listens to me.* She made him feel like an equal.

Not once did he think she was looking down on him. The softness of her skin when he held her hand was a keen reminder that she was from a different world, but even though he was both a commoner and a child, she never made him feel small. It warmed his heart.

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*I'm not sure how I feel about the three of us sleeping together.* Kiel agreed it was best that they stay in the same room, since their pursuer was still out there somewhere, but that didn't make it any more appealing.

He eyed the bed, large enough for the three of them, and heat rushed to his cheeks. *Young or not, I can't help feeling nervous!* He was male, after all. There was a big difference between sitting together for a chat and sleeping side by side.

Humans were at their most vulnerable when filling their three major needs. Sleep was one of those needs. Sleeping in the same bed meant seeing these two women at their most vulnerable and leaving himself exposed. Who could blame him for being flustered?

Kiel drew a breath, held it, and exhaled slowly. Reality soon proved how cruel it could really be.

"There's no need to be nervous, Kiel," said Claudia.

The women had been full of energy since they entered the room, and they made it very obvious that they weren't at all worried about sharing a bed with him.

*I mean, I get it, but still!*

They seemed to see him as a younger brother, given the difference in age between them. They might treat him as an equal in other matters, but not this. And maybe that was to be expected. He still looked like a child. His voice hadn't dropped yet.

*Why does it bother me so much?* What did it mean to be a man, anyway?

Such idle thoughts rattled around his head as they all went down to the dining hall and had dinner. Even when their plates were empty and they headed back upstairs, he hadn't found an answer. So instead, he turned his thoughts to their pursuers and decided to share what he knew with Claudia and Helen.

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When they returned to the room, Kiel sat on the bed. That way, he wouldn't stare at it and dwell on their sleeping arrangements. Claudia and Helen sensed he had something to tell them and each took an armchair.

"I can't tell you the specifics of the case, but I do want to gather my thoughts, and I think there's some things the two of you should know." Especially if something were to happen. He'd approached the two of them hoping for protection, after all. The Lindsays were known for being fair and just; if the danger became too much, maybe he

could come to them with everything he'd learned and enter their protection.

"First," said Kiel, "I don't think our pursuers are seasoned criminals. If they had more experience, I doubt I would have escaped them so easily. From what I can tell, they're no different from your average citizen."

The villagers did hold unique beliefs, but they weren't affiliated with any syndicate. They lived the way most of Harland's common citizens did: enduring menial labor and monotonous routines.

Claudia raised her hand. "Allow me to confirm something first. I assume you're investigating these villagers collectively, not any particular individual?"

"Yeah, that's right. I've even spoken with them before. They're a strange bunch, including the way they all dress in brown, but I wouldn't call them bad people. They're not violent."

"So this is somewhat unusual for them," Claudia said. "They must have targeted you because they noticed your investigation."

"That's the only reason I can come up with," Kiel replied. "I'm probably a thorn in their side with all my poking around."

Perhaps he had stumbled upon something that forced them to resort to drastic measures, or they were simply paranoid and thought it better to nip their problem in the bud.

*Maybe I'm getting close to locating their main village.* He had already discovered many others. That they chose to act now suggested he was making some progress.

"It may be prudent to go to the authorities after all," Claudia reasoned. "If they're targeting you, then they might attack us and the merchant we'll be traveling with."

Kiel shook his head. "I understand your concern, but I don't think they will."

"Why not?"

"As I told you, they're not seasoned criminals. And I think they'd prefer to avoid further scrutiny." Largely because of the medicine they were distributing. Kiel hadn't told Claudia about it yet, but that medicine was their main source of income. The last thing the villagers wanted was to draw attention to it. "Especially since they're coming after me just for snooping around."

It wouldn't cause much fuss if a single commoner went missing. His grandfather and the rest of his family had enough pull to demand an investigation, but these villagers didn't know that. They had no idea that he came from a ranch favored by aristocrats and thus had resorted to kidnapping. Their real target was likely his companion, but even two people disappearing wouldn't cause that much of a stir.

*And there's that hypnotic drug.* They might have planned to release him if they managed to brainwash him into following their beliefs. Without a victim—or rather, without a victim *aware* of being a victim—there would be no case against them.

"If I were by myself, they might act, but this merchant has ties to a major trading company, right? Even if he didn't, I'm sure they know the risk of attacking someone like that," said Kiel.

A traveling merchant was nowhere near as significant as an aristocrat, but the authorities would be forced to act if there was an attack on the road. Fear of further violence could disrupt trade and the distribution of goods. The merchants' guild would put pressure on the authorities to ensure their members' safety. The villagers had to understand that, as they needed to peddle their medicine.

Claudia nodded. "Yes, I think you're right. If they're that leery of outside involvement, it stands to reason they wouldn't risk an attack. Logically, the more victims there are, the more likely officials will take an interest."

Kiel had been the villagers' real target; it was unlucky happenstance that Claudia and Helen got wrapped up in it. As far as he could tell from his pursuer's movements back in the capital, they weren't after anyone else.

"There's another thing I want to talk about: their base of operations."

"You know where it is?" Claudia asked, voice hitching in surprise.

"I don't know *exactly* where it is," Kiel clarified. "But assuming they aren't taking a large detour by coming out this way, I think their final stop is in the north, just past the capital border."

He had managed to pin down the general area of the village based on the locations of other villages and the fact that their medicine was circulating in the capital. The villages were always just beyond the border of whatever region to which they peddled their medicine, their trade contained to that region. Though the villagers

had covered wagons, they weren't experienced with long-distance travel like proper merchants, hence there being multiple villages per region. The distance between them varied—sometimes incredibly long, sometimes rather short. By Kiel's estimate, the villagers would travel two days at most to sell their medicine.

Kiel explained as much to Claudia and Helen, adding, "I can tell because there wasn't much horse feed in our wagon." The rest of the cargo had been everyday necessities, supplies that the villagers had probably bought with the profits from their medicine. That was likely the true purpose of the wagon, and they'd assumed they could kidnap Kiel while on a regular supply run. That made it even more obvious that they weren't used to this.

"You really are a detective," Helen murmured.

Kiel's eyes went wide. "Wait, you thought I was lying?!"

"No, no! I'm sorry, I realize it's rude to say, but you simply don't look like one." What Helen meant was that she couldn't imagine an adorable boy like him risking his life for an investigation. Even if his job had put them in danger in the first place, it was hard to picture him puzzling out clues and drawing conclusions to solve cases on the regular.

Claudia must have shared Helen's feelings because she had a tight smile on her face.

"Well," Kiel said, sounding resigned, "I am a child. You wouldn't be the first to doubt me."

"Just to be clear, it's not that we don't trust you," Claudia chimed in.

"Yes, it's clear how clever you are," Helen said.

Kiel was aware that his intelligence belied his age. He'd never found much in common with his peers. It was no wonder people were skeptical of him being a detective. No matter how professionally he presented himself, he couldn't escape people's assumptions.

"Well, now that you understand I really *am* a detective, I won't press the issue any further," he said.

Helen was visibly relieved.

*These two are way too generous for their own good.* They treated him like an equal even though he was a child. Kiel was all too used to adults not taking him seriously for his youth, so it was a novel experience to have Claudia and Helen show such consideration. *I guess if the mistress is a good person, so is her maid.*

Once their conversation was over, Helen chased Kiel off the bed to make sure it was made and ready for sleep. She worked with the practiced precision of a professional.

"Why don't we keep our exercise light this evening?" Claudia suggested to Helen as she watched from her seat.

"Exercise?" Kiel echoed, head tilted in confusion. *Why would they exercise right before bed?*

Helen eyed Kiel. "Would you like to join us?"

"Uh, I guess if I can, sure?" He had no reason to refuse, so he followed Claudia's lead and began to stretch. Apparently, it was part of their daily routine to do calisthenics before bed.

"One has to stay fit to maintain a beautiful figure," Claudia informed him.

He made a face. "Do I need to worry about that, though?" She'd explained that part of her regimen was for breast enhancement, so he didn't think it was meant for him. On the other hand, he would have felt awkward sitting around and watching them, so he joined in. The exercise warmed him up right away.

"It's still early," said Claudia, "but why don't we go to bed now so we'll be ready for tomorrow? Kiel, you can sleep between the two of us."

He could only sputter back at her.

"I think we'll all fit better on the bed that way," Claudia explained. Helen immediately agreed.

Heat rushed to Kiel's head, leaving his mind blank and unable to function. Before he knew what was going on, he was already tucked snugly between the two ladies.

*What's happening to me?!*

This was the first time he had ever shared a bed with anyone other than family. *And with a duke's daughter and her maid, no less!* He'd be the envy of every man in the world if they knew. Granted, the two women would never have agreed to share a bed with him if they thought of him as a man instead of a child. *Don't sweat the details!* his mind screamed at him.

*Urgh. My heart's pounding so fast, I can't sleep.* It was pitch black once the candles were out, but that little bit of exercise had

done a number on him. It had accentuated the beautiful curves of both women's bodies—completely different from his own mother—and now that image sat in his mind. And he could feel them lying there on either side of him.

*Ngh, I'm so…* His whole body went rigid, muscles going tense. *I'm so darn lucky right now.*

For the first time in his life, Kiel offered a prayer of gratitude to the Capricious God.



## Chapter 10:
## The Villainess Is Taken by Surprise

AFTER SEVERAL HOURS in an uncomfortable wagon and the stress and anxiety that came with it, all three of them were thoroughly exhausted. Claudia fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. By the looks on Helen and Kiel's faces after waking the following morning, they'd probably had the same experience.

The traveling merchant reached out to let them know he was nearly ready to leave, so they joined him in the dining hall for a light breakfast. Then all five of them—Claudia, Helen, Kiel, the merchant, and his companion—made their way to the stables where he'd left his wagon and horses.

"Sure is a good thing we decided to set out early," said the merchant. "If we were any later, we'd be even more delayed."

Curious, Helen asked, "Did something happen?"

"Heard last night a messenger rode in. Dunno the details, though."

The report had presumably come from a neighboring town. Whatever the specifics, something more alarming than a robbery had occurred; the authorities would be inspecting any wagons coming or going in the afternoon. That would severely impede traffic, and the last thing a traveling merchant wanted was a delay.

"I'm just anxious to reach the capital so I can take it easy," said the merchant with a chuckle.

Claudia, Helen, and Kiel shared that sentiment.

When they finally reached the stable, the size of it startled Claudia. She'd known it would have to be large to accommodate clients from every hotel, but this surpassed her expectations. It was the size of all those inns combined.

The merchant waved to the guardsman at the entrance and ducked inside to retrieve his wagon and horse. He and his companion would sit on the driver's bench. The wagon bed lacked a cover and instead had rails on the sides; despite the rudimentary design, it was reinforced enough for long-distance travel.

*This should be safe to ride in, right?*

Fortunately, the skies were clear. Claudia hadn't spotted a single gray cloud that might suggest rain. Yet the fact that their pursuer wasn't alone—that he had at least one cohort—left her a little anxious. If the driver had managed to rendezvous with his fellows (and there was no telling how many of them there were), that could spell trouble.

Claudia climbed into the wagon, praying it would be a smooth and uneventful ride. *First, I need to keep Kiel in our custody.* They'd met him in the high-end district, which implied that his client was an aristocrat. Commoners couldn't enter the district without a permit, and those weren't handed out freely. If Kiel's client insisted that he continue the investigation despite the attempted kidnapping, Claudia would need to intervene. Kiel deserved a say in the matter, of course, but she couldn't just sit by and let him do something so dangerous.

Kiel's client couldn't make impossible demands if Kiel had the Lindsays' support.

"This place has a nice view," said Claudia.

Kiel nodded. "They made the street wider around the stable entrance to make it easier for wagons to pass through."

The width of the street left nowhere for ill-intentioned scoundrels to hide; it was an additional security measure. *Alas, it means that we'll also be in plain sight when we leave the stable.* Claudia didn't voice her concerns to the other two; she didn't want to add to their anxiety. The wagon was already lurching forward. All she could worry about now was how sore her bottom would be by the end of this trip.

"The merchant said earlier that a messenger came to town. Do you think it was about us?" Claudia asked Kiel.

"Now that you mention it, yeah. It probably was," he said.

It made sense that Claudia's family would be sending out missives after she'd seemingly vanished into thin air.

"But," Kiel hastened to add, "I doubt they mentioned your name, so I don't think the authorities would be much help."

"True. They probably said they were searching for a missing maid. The authorities are likely only looking for potential witnesses."

Kiel put his hand to his chin. "Or maybe they're after the culprit…" His voice trailed off. "Hmm, that might be more efficient, but then they risk you being the one arrested instead."

"I do think it'd be more reasonable for them to look for eyewitnesses," said Claudia. "And in that regard, we certainly fit the bill."

"Yeah, it makes sense! Too bad we've already left. And there's no telling what they instructed the local police, so we should just avoid them and make our way back ourselves."

The three of them agreed it was best not to kick the hornet's nest by approaching the authorities now; they'd only bring suspicion onto themselves. And since their pursuers were presumably lying low, they couldn't wait around to see if the authorities could help them. Their only option was to stick to the original plan.

"We'll have to suffer these hardwood floors in the meantime," said Claudia.

"Yeah. At least today's ride isn't as bumpy as yesterday, but we'll probably be in here twice as long."

"Twice as long?!" Helen cried in dismay.

They were all still stiff after yesterday's misadventure.

"The horses are going much slower," Kiel pointed out. "At this pace, with breaks throughout the day, it will take twice as long at least. Yesterday, that driver ran his horses ragged. Wagons don't normally travel that fast."

Having grown up on a ranch, he knew much more about horses than most. Little did they know he was a skilled rider too.

"If you want fast horses, look no further than my family's business!" he said proudly.

"I admit, I know little of equestrian arts, but I suspect my brother would be delighted to hear all about it," said Claudia.

"Yes!" Helen agreed. "Lord Virgil does love horses."

The trio continued their lively conversation, but as the sun climbed higher, sitting became increasingly uncomfortable. The driver graciously stopped for breaks, but that could only do so much.

"I will never again take my family's carriages for granted," Claudia declared.

Kiel stared at her. "I've never ridden in a fancy carriage. Is it that different?"

"Completely. They're designed for comfort. When we reach the capital, I'm sure you'll have the opportunity to see for yourself."

"Ooh! I'm looking forward to that!"

The implication was that she would take him with her to her family's estate. She was surprised he responded with such enthusiasm. Many would jump at the opportunity to form connections with a duke's family, but there were plenty others who only found her family's immense influence intimidating. Moreover, there was always the risk of becoming entangled in the power struggles typical of high society.

It made her wonder: had Kiel approached her simply because of her house? Or was there more to it? She hoped it didn't have anything to do with what he kept saying about his miserable luck.

Just then, the wagon jerked to a halt.

"Did something happen?" Kiel asked the driver.

"A tree's fallen in the middle of the road. We'll move it, so wait in the wagon."

It was hard to see from inside the wagon, but the tree couldn't have been too big if the driver planned to move it. The horses could probably step over it, but alas, wagon wheels could not. A strong wind must have swept through a nearby copse of trees and knocked one down.

Silhouettes appeared around the wagon as soon as the driver and his companion began climbing down from the driver's bench.

Helen shrieked.

"What do you think you're doing?" the merchant's companion barked at the blackguards.

Claudia's heart hammered in her chest, eyes flying wide. Before she knew it, she was on her feet and stepping protectively in front of Kiel.

"Hand over the women and child and no one gets hurt!" said one of their attackers.

"You heard him! Don't try anything funny now!" yelled another.

There were five men in total, and they had the wagon surrounded. Claudia's eyes darted between them. They were all dressed in brown, and she recognized one of them as their kidnapper —the driver from yesterday.

Kiel's lips trembled as he said, "I didn't think they'd be so brazen." Nor had Claudia. But as scared as he must have been, Kiel

found enough courage to shout at them, "Do you really think you can get away with this? Your village will be under investigation!"

"Shut up, you little brat! You guys're the ones who forced our hand! You just had to go sticking your nose where it didn't belong, huh?" snarled the driver from yesterday as he crawled into the wagon, eyes bloodshot. He glowered at Kiel, but as soon as his gaze slid to Claudia, a thin smile pulled at his lips.

The way he leered at her made her skin break out in gooseflesh. *I feel like I'm going to be sick.*

There was something so unnatural about his eyes, the whites dyed crimson. When she'd spoken with him the day before, he had seemed like an ordinary young man. Today, everything about him disgusted her, especially the strange odor emanating from him.

"You're a real looker," he said, licking his lips. His hand reached toward her.

Claudia didn't want him to touch her, not even for an instant. Her leg swung up instinctively, slamming into his crotch.

He grunted in pain, crumpling to the floor. His cohorts started to clamber into the wagon. Unlike the one they'd ridden in yesterday, this wagon offered no protection.

One of the men managed a running leap into the wagon from the side and snatched Kiel by the arm.

"Let go!" Kiel cried, thrashing in his grip.

"Kiel!" Claudia's hand shot out, grabbing Kiel's. That moment of vulnerability allowed a different man to seize her.

"Dee!" Helen cried. "Wait! Save Dee at least, please!"

Claudia craned her neck to see where her best friend's voice was coming from. The merchant and his bodyguard had somehow managed to wrest Helen away and forced her onto one of the horses, which they'd unhitched from the wagon. The bodyguard took a seat behind her, holding her in place. With the merchant on the other horse, they set off.

The bodyguard's job was to protect the merchant, not them. Claudia knew she should be grateful they even tried to save Helen.

"I'm sorry!" the merchant called back to them. "I'll get help, I swear it!"

Then he, his bodyguard, and Helen were gone, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them.

*Wait, don't leave us!* Claudia wanted to cry after them. She hated being left at the mercy of these miscreants. But realistically, two men stood no chance against five. She couldn't blame them for making that call, even if it meant abandoning her and Kiel.

Claudia and Kiel put up no further fight. If either were taken hostage, it would only make things worse. Better to cooperate and see where this went. The one saving grace was that their captors didn't seem keen to cause them harm. At least not right away.

A man, presumably the leader of their little gang, approached Claudia and Kiel. "It wasn't our intention to get violent with—" His eyes landed on Claudia, and his mouth fell open. "You're…!" His eyes narrowed as he whirled on the driver from yesterday, who was still

curled on the floor of the wagon. He stomped toward him, screaming like mad.

*What is going on?!* Claudia shot a bewildered glance at Kiel, who gave her a puzzled look of his own.

The other men kept a hold on Claudia and Kiel to ensure they couldn't escape, but she could see they were startled by their leader's sudden outburst.

The leader eventually marched back to them, sighing. "Whatever. What's done is done. Let's just get back to the village."

The group led Claudia and Kiel to their covered wagon, which they'd hidden in the nearby thicket.

## Chapter 11:
## The Suspicious Driver Licks His Lips

***H****EH HEH, LADY LUCK is finally smiling on me.*

As dawn broke, the sky was bathed a pastel pink. The driver's target had slipped through his fingers the night before at the watering hole, but he was keeping an eye on the town's shared stables to make sure it didn't happen again.

*I didn't know the stupid brat got on my wagon.* And since he'd had to flee the capital so quickly, leaving behind his cohorts, he'd been completely on his own. A child he could manage, but there was no way he could handle two adult women along with him. *It's not really my fault they got away.*

His excuses hadn't convinced Renault, who liked to act as the leader of their group, once they had managed to reassemble. *"You got left behind, so what? It's not that big of a deal. Get over it."*

They had agreed beforehand that if anything were to go wrong, they would return to the village on their own or find a way to meet up once it was safe to do so. Anyone would have panicked if a guy with a sword showed up out of nowhere to confront them. All he did was follow the script. What was Renault so cross about?

*Renault's time will be over soon enough,* the man thought. *He'd* been the one to recognize the duke's daughter, not Renault. He knew it was her the second she spoke to him at the watering hole. The master had warned them about her and described her in detail.

*He said she was beautiful, but his descriptions didn't do her justice.*

Claudia Lindsay had been covered in dust and dirt when he saw her, and she had still been more beautiful than any woman in the village. He understood why the master wanted her. *And if I give her to him, the others will have to respect me.*

He didn't like that Renault was always the one getting attention. Sure, the guy was kind of handsome and the village chieftess trusted him implicitly, but they were all supposed to share good fortune. That was one of the core tenets of the village. So, this wasn't fair at all. It wasn't that he didn't understand the importance of leadership. Why else would they have a chieftess? But that was *why* he wanted to catch the detective's young tagalong and the duke's daughter—to show he had the qualities of a leader.

*If I can impress the master, maybe he'll make me chieftain of a new village.* When a single settlement grew too populated, it was customary to construct a new one and move the extra people there. No new villages had been established since the master left the country. They could still contact him, however, so there was no reason not to continue expanding.

*I'm gonna make my very own paradise.* He wouldn't have to take orders from Renault anymore; he'd be the one giving them. *And once the master is bored with her, I'll take that noblewoman off his hands.* Any daughters Claudia birthed would surely be as stunning as she was. *This isn't just a dream. I'm gonna make it a reality.*

When he met up with his fellows, he only told them they were looking for a child and two beautiful women. *I ain't gonna let them take the glory. I'm gonna get my hands on her first so I get the credit.*

Their real target had been the child who traveled with the detective. It would be more difficult, they figured, to catch the robust detective himself. Everyone in the village agreed snatching the kid would be the best way to put the detective off his investigation, which was why they had set out on this mission in the first place.

Usually when they brought people into the village, they enticed them with the lifestyle: plenty of food, a tight community, no backbreaking labor. They didn't need to go to that trouble for a child. They'd never tried to kidnap someone before, but it couldn't be that hard, right? Yet when the two girls were added to the picture, Renault had been reluctant.

*Oh well. The others came around quickly enough. Suck on that, Renault.* They all wanted new villagers. Women, specifically.

Renault had argued that this might only bring further trouble to the village, but the driver had insisted this was for the betterment of all. There hadn't been much new blood among them since the master left. While they picked up a few new people here and there, it was nothing like the booming population they'd had when the master was with them.

*I know everyone better than Renault does.* Once the other men had heard that the two women were beauties, they forgot all complaints about being abandoned in the capital. Renault was forced

to concede to the majority opinion. And so the driver wound up here, watching over the stable.

It would have been faster to ask around town, but he couldn't do that. Any interaction with outsiders could expose him to poison, which he wasn't willing to risk now that his body had been purified. He kept contact with outsiders to a minimum even when trading with them.

*Based on what that duke's daughter said when she approached me, it's a safe bet that they're trying to get back to the capital.* The town's passenger carriage didn't depart until the afternoon. If they were suspicious enough to run from him, they probably wouldn't want to wait that long. That was how he'd narrowed it down—he figured they'd try to make their way back first thing in the morning—and so his fellows set up their ambush down the road.

If he was wrong, then he would be waiting here forever. He'd already told his cohorts to meet him back in town if he didn't contact them beforehand. As soon as they found the child and the women, the men would seize them. At this point, he was more interested in the duke's daughter than the kid.

*C'mon, don't fail me now.*

The sky lightened as the sun rose higher. The driver lit a handmade cigarette, rolled with a special mixture from the village. It was a restorative drug only villagers were allowed to have; it helped protect them from the poison teeming in the outside air.

He let out a long exhale. He could feel the drug circulating through his system, from his lungs to every corner of his body. *It'll be*

*fine. I can do this. And once I become a chief, I'll make that duke's daughter mine.*

The sky above glimmered, looking almost prismatic from the effects of the cigarette. When his gaze moved back to the stables, a jolt ran through him. "I knew it! I knew I was right!"

He'd spotted the trio who had escaped him yesterday. They were joined by a merchant and his bodyguard, but they'd be no match for him and his four comrades. He raced back to his horse to reach the ambush site ahead of the targets.

"They're coming," he told them with excitement once he'd arrived. "Let's put our plan into action!"

"All right," said Renault. "Then we do as exactly as I… Hey, you weren't smoking one of those cigarettes, were you?"

"Huh? Who cares? I'm just trying to protect myself from poison."

Renault shook his head. "You know you're not supposed to smoke too much. It'll cloud your judgment."

"Lay off me, wouldja? I'm fine. You my mother or something?"

Renault was always such a nag.

They had hidden their covered wagon in a group of trees. The horses were unlatched so they could charge their targets. They'd already cut down one of the nearby trees to block the road.

***

Everything went as planned. Well, mostly everything. One of the women managed to get away, but at least they got the kid and the duke's daughter.

*Damn it. She's gonna pay for this…* Though the pain in his groin was almost unbearable, it didn't keep the maniacal grin off his face. *At least we got her.* All he had to do now was hand her over to the master.

Yet even after they'd succeeded, Renault marched over to him, screaming with no concern for how he was curled up in the fetal position on the floor.

"You bastard! Did you realize who she was?!"

*Shut up. Course I realized who she was!* he thought to himself.

"Don't you dare say you forgot the master warned us not to mess with her!"

That was true. When he left the country, their master had informed them that he couldn't offer them the same support. But he'd also mentioned *wanting* this woman.

Renault let out a frustrated sigh. "What's done is done. Let's just get back to the village."

*You should've said that to begin with instead of wasting time spouting nonsense at me.* As much as Renault liked to make a fuss, he always caved in the end. He only yelled because he was jealous. *You're just panicking because I found her first.* Renault had to be worried he could lose the position he had so carefully carved for himself. His sour mood lasted the whole way back to the village.

"He told us not to interfere with her," Renault grumbled under his breath. "He didn't want her, he wanted information *about* her."

That was what really grated on him. Renault was twisting the master's words, and to no surprise his fearmongering unsettled everyone.

"Renault," said one of them. "What're we gonna do? Is it safe to take her back with us?"

"C'mon, stop rattling everyone," the driver cut in, eyeing Renault.

The other guy rounded on him and spat, "Moron! You brought us into this mess!"

His nostrils flared. "The hell?! I ain't done shit! Besides, you guys were all on board."

"That's 'cause you told us about how beautiful these girls were. If we'd known she was a duke's daughter, we never would've gone along with it."

"Yeah? Then I guess you won't be taking part in her ceremony, huh?"

"I-I never said that!"

"Enough, both of you!" Renault cut in gruffly. "You're getting off track!"

Typical. Renault always did this when things weren't going his way.

"For now," Renault continued, apparently thinking he still had some authority, "we'll take her back to the village and contact the

master for what to do. This is too much for us to handle by ourselves."

"Can't we just let her go? We haven't hurt her, so it's no big deal, right?" said another villager.

Renault frowned. "We ambushed and captured her. And we can't let that kid go." The kid and the duke's daughter seemed to be close. They had been holding hands the whole time and wouldn't leave each other's side. "They've seen our faces. The safest move is to take them back to the village and keep them there for now."

"So we stick to the original plan, huh?"

The village had always welcomed new people when the opportunity arose. Anyone who arrived from outside would be unfamiliar with the village's customs; the poison affecting them was to blame. To purify their body and expel that poison, they needed to undergo the ceremony. They took to village life right away after that. The duke's daughter would be no different.

"Yes," Renault said, "but we'll need to wait to do the ceremony until we've spoken to the master."

"Think the master will come to take part in the ceremony?"

"I don't know, since he can't reenter the country."

Renault had complained about getting off track, but when the topic of the ceremony came up, he turned evasive. It was obvious he wanted to participate as badly as everyone else.

*He's no better than the rest of us, but he pretends he's above it all. Asshole.* The driver hated that about Renault. They were supposed

to share good fortune and be honest about their desires. *I'd be a way better leader than he is.*

He kept silent, watching Renault and the others talk without interjecting. They were all beneath him.

"The kid's not a man yet, right?" one said.

"I doubt it," said Renault. "His voice hasn't dropped."

"Then we can leave him with the duke's daughter for the time being. We'll slowly introduce him to the other kids in the village and get him accustomed to our ways."

All the villagers were wary of outsiders, even children. They couldn't risk him giving the other kids weird ideas. They would have to keep an eye on him to see how much he'd been affected by the poison, then educate him the same way they did all the others. Forcing it too quickly might cause him to resist. Keeping him with the duke's daughter for now was probably the best way to acclimate him; it would be easier for him to withstand the change if he had support.

*Can't we do her ceremony as soon as possible?* It was a much easier way to bring newcomers in line than typical education. Once she understood the ways of the village, she would spurn any outside interference herself.

He couldn't wait to hear what the master would say.

## Chapter 12:
## The Villainess Reaches the Village of Happiness

**A**T LONG LAST, the covered wagon arrived at its destination. The journey had been unsettling; Claudia and Kiel's captors were suspiciously kind. She hadn't missed the lustful, hungry way they looked at her, but none of them had acted on their desires. In fact, they'd been gracious enough to offer a cushion when the ride turned especially bumpy. It hadn't helped much, with all the jostling. They'd taken a separate route to avoid the inspections on the main roads.

*It doesn't seem like they planned to bring me along.* From what she'd heard of their conversation, she wasn't their target. They'd only been after Kiel. Something had changed along the way.

Fortunately, they hadn't been rough with Kiel. Once the two of them were tucked into the wagon, the men had untied them and kept a close watch to make sure they didn't escape.

Outside, the sun was sinking over the horizon. The sky's orange hues gradually gave way to darkness.

*We had some breaks, but we must've been traveling for at least half a day.* Claudia's knees almost gave out from the exhaustion. Her stamina was nearly drained.

Kiel had been quiet and obedient the whole time. The situation was too grim for humor, but she missed his cheerful voice.

When they clambered out of the wagon, there was a small crowd waiting for them. A tall woman stepped forward and said,

“Welcome to the village of happiness. I’m Ultea, the village chieftess.”

Ultea had to be around forty. She still had a youthful beauty, her skin largely free of wrinkles. Her eyes were indigo blue, and her hair was dark as midnight. A beauty mark sat near her mouth, adding to her allure. Ultea was clad in the same brown attire as the rest of the villagers, but she had left the first two buttons loose, exposing her cleavage. The overalls she had on did little to hide her perfectly proportioned hourglass shape. Between her sensual air and the exhaustion from the journey, Claudia was feeling dizzy.

“You must be worn out from sitting in that wagon so long,” Ultea purred. “Why don’t you rest? You can stay at that couple’s house.” She motioned to one of the houses, in front of which stood a man and a woman. Claudia had to squint to make them out through the growing darkness. It was hard to determine colors in the lack of light, but they seemed to wear the same brown as the others.

When Claudia and Kiel’s gazes landed on them, the couple bowed their heads in unison.

“We hope you can relax and recover from your journey,” said the husband.

His wife chimed in, “We have a child, so we can take care of you both.” She flashed a smile at Kiel.

Claudia and Kiel weren’t given the option to refuse, so they followed the couple into the house. Candles provided some light within, but there were so few that the darkness hung heavy.

“Goodness, I bet you haven’t had a real meal since you went on the road, have you?” said the wife. “I’ll prepare something simple for

you.” She turned to her husband. “Darling, please bring the spare mattress to their room.”

The room they were shown only had enough space to lay three small mattresses side by side. It was considerably more cramped than the inn room had been. As for furnishings, it had a closet, a small table, and a single small mattress laid out in the middle. It was another sign that they’d only expected Kiel, not Claudia. The closet had one brown outfit inside, presumably for him.

“Our clothes might be dirty, but I’m not wearing that,” Kiel said. He poked his tongue out at the outfit. His own clothing was better quality anyway.

After a few minutes, the husband brought in the extra mattress. “This room is a bit small for two, but it should be fine to sleep in. Did my wife show you the bathroom yet? If you get thirsty, you can drink from the pitcher in the kitchen.”

Claudia took the mattress from him and spread it out beside the first one.

Once they were done, the wife brought them a couple of sandwiches and two cups of piping hot soup.

“Thank you,” said Claudia.

The wife waved her off. “It’s the least we can do. You must have had such a tiring journey. Try to get some rest.”

Did she not know how they’d been brought here? They hadn’t come straight here from the capital. Regardless, neither the wife nor her husband seemed to mean them any harm.

Once the couple had left them the room, Kiel and Claudia exchanged looks. Everything was a mystery, including the chieftess's welcome.

"Why does it feel like we're guests rather than captives?" Claudia wondered aloud.

"I don't get it either, but it doesn't look like we'll be able to leave."

"Indeed." She glanced at the door. "These two appear to be in charge of keeping an eye on us." As friendly as the pair had been, it was no excuse to let their guard down.

The most daunting part of all this was that they didn't know the lay of the land. There was no telling what—if any—wild animals prowled the area. If they tried to escape without a solid plan, they could meet a much worse fate outside the village than in it.

"Is the food safe, do you think?" Claudia eyed the sandwich and soup apprehensively. The wife had left them on the table.

"Since they went to the trouble of preparing a room, I don't think they intend to kill us," said Kiel. "And if they were going to drug and do something to us, I think they'd be more direct about it."

The pair was severely outnumbered. If the villagers wanted to drug them, they could simply use force. Claudia and Kiel would have no choice but to obey. Since their captors hadn't harmed them on the trip here, Kiel was probably right that harming them wasn't the point.

"Then we should eat while we have the opportunity. We'll need the energy to escape eventually," said Claudia.

Kiel nodded. “Agreed. Let’s fill up while we can.”

The circumstances had frayed her nerves. Trying the food took more courage than she was willing to admit.

In contrast to her hesitation, Kiel took a big bite of the sandwich. “It’s delicious!”

His bravery helped her overcome her fears. It wasn’t until she swallowed her first bite that she realized just how hungry she was. *I guess I was too nervous to notice.* Her appetite helped her polish off the sandwich quickly. Once she’d also drained the cup of soup, she let out a contented sigh.

“I should return these dishes to the kitchen,” she said, gathering them up.

“I’ll go with you!”

Claudia held the dishes in one hand and Kiel’s hand in the other. It was an excuse to explore the house a little more.

*Didn’t they say they have a child?* She cocked her head. She hadn’t sensed anyone in the house besides the couple. It was a bit early to sleep, but it was already nighttime. Maybe the villagers liked to sleep with the sunset and wake with the dawn to save candles. It wasn’t customary in the capital, but it was common within such smaller settlements.

*Their house isn’t that big.* The dining room and kitchen were in front, with a hallway leading to three doors. The one at the end of the hall belonged to the bathroom. Their room was on the right-hand

side, and the remaining door was on the left. That had to be the couple's room.

"I'm going to go check it out," Kiel said, pulling his hand away from hers. He opened the door and said loudly, "Is this the bathroom?"

"No, that's the one at the end of the hall," the husband called out to him.

"Oh, sorry about that!" Kiel immediately shut the door, brows knitted together. Claudia was curious as to what he'd glimpsed inside, but she didn't have to wonder long. He tiptoed back to her and said, "I didn't see any kid."

Her gaze moved to the door at the end of the hall. "Maybe they're using the bathroom?"

"I'll check." Kiel turned and marched to the bathroom door, but no one was there. When he returned, he asked, "She *did* say they have a kid, right?"

"Yes, she did."

"Did I miss them somehow?"

"The room was dark, wasn't it? Maybe you did. They wouldn't be making noise if they were asleep."

Kiel frowned. "I didn't see anyone else in the bed. Maybe you're right—it was just too dark to see them."

There was enough light to navigate from their bedroom to the kitchen, but not to see into all corners of the house. When they finally

made it to the kitchen and Claudia dropped off the dishes, the wife peeked in at them.

"Oh, you brought all the dishes back. Thank you!"

"We should be thanking you for the meal," said Claudia. "It was delicious, by the way. You are a wonderful cook."

The woman beamed. "I'm so glad you liked it. Now, it's about time to blow out the candles. Is there anything else you need?"

"Do you have any ointment I could use? My bottom still aches from the ride over," Kiel said.

The woman's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh dear! I'm sorry for not thinking of it. Of course you must be sore. I'll bring you something in a moment. Our medicine is very effective."

"Thank you."

She giggled. "My, you are such a polite boy." The wife watched them carefully as they made their way back to the room.

"Do you think she came to check on us because she realized we were still out of bed?" Kiel asked once the door shut behind them.

"It's possible. This house is so small, they're bound to hear every little sound."

"We definitely won't be able to escape while they're awake." Even if they did make it out of the house, there could be other villagers standing guard outside.

"Let's not try anything too bold today," said Claudia. "By the way, how's your bottom doing?"

"As much as I wish I could say I was just after a sample of their medicine, I am pretty sore. How about you, Miss Dee?"

"Me too," she admitted.

The cushion may have helped a little, but they'd been on the uncomfortable wood floor the entire time. It wasn't made for passengers. The journey had been particularly harrowing during a rough patch midway through. She had never been jostled around so much in her life; it was torture.

"Then it's good I asked. Like the lady said, this village is known for their potent medicine."

Claudia blinked at him. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you more about it once we're ready for bed."

The wife brought them a brown cream, which she assured them would relieve any aches and pains. After smearing some on his bottom, Kiel removed his glasses and sat cross-legged atop his mattress. He pulled the duvet over his head and beckoned Claudia. "Come inside with me. This will help muffle our voices so no one can eavesdrop."

Once she understood the intent, she ducked inside with him. They were so close that their foreheads were almost touching.

"You know how bad my luck is, right?" Kiel whispered. "I became a detective to take advantage of that."

"Th-that's quite daring."

Though he lamented his misfortune, he tried to make the best of it. Claudia had already thought he was strong, but he was proving

more resilient than she'd given him credit for.

"My bad luck means I wind up in some tight spots, but it also gives me a better perspective. Helps me see the truth." What he meant was that it allowed him to see beyond the surface to the roots. "I get to see the ugly sides of people, which sometimes gets dangerous… But as you can see, I've overcome every hurdle so far!"

Claudia's concern was probably written all over her face.

Kiel flashed a smile at her. "Anyway, enough preamble. I think this village is the one my client wanted me to find."

He had mentioned looking into other villages elsewhere in Harland, but he had never managed to find the main one. His terrible luck had landed them right where he wanted to go.

"I want to investigate this place. Of course, our safety comes first," he added quickly.

"Do you mind if I help?"

His shoulders jumped. "Would you?!"

"Yes. I have an interest in this village as well." Not only because she'd been swept up into this, but what she knew of this village matched perfectly with the one Sylvester was looking for—and he'd mentioned a detective, who she suspected was Kiel. Things lined up too well for it to be mere coincidence.

*And if this village is the same one Syl is after, then that means Cardinal Nigel is involved.* That was reason enough to act. It was an opportunity to gather information on the enemy; she was not about to pass it up.

"It'll be such a relief to have you working with me!" Kiel declared. "When I told you I was investigating a group, these are the people I meant. Well, more precisely, I was looking into all the villages." He informed her that the village was manufacturing the drugs he'd talked about. The pain-relieving cream the wife had provided them was one such product. "They also produce an aphrodisiac and a hypnotic drug, and they're distributing them through the black market."

"Excuse me?" Claudia gaped at him. She hadn't heard that part.

All Sylvester had told her was that the villages were populated by isolationist dissidents. The prince was limited in how involved he could get, so that was all he'd been able to share. It would be a huge boon for him if she could get proof they were producing a dangerous drug. She had to find out more.

Claudia's hands balled into fists on her lap.

Kiel continued, "Based on what I've gathered so far, it seems the villagers use the drugs too. They don't put it in the food or anything; they have some special ceremony that they hold. I don't know if they use the analgesics, but definitely the aphrodisiacs and hypnotics."

"They're like narcotics, I assume?"

"Yeah, so people can't use them too regularly. If you hear them talking about a ceremony, be careful."

If the villagers mentioned making her attend something like that, she would have to escape, no matter the cost. They needed to

learn as much as they could about the village and the area before then.

"We should wait here for help unless we really have to move," Kiel suggested.

"Agreed. We don't know much about the area, so even if we escaped, we wouldn't know how to get home." And if there were bears or other dangerous wild beasts about, they would be in real trouble. "We'll need the right opportunity and a concrete plan before we try to escape, and to that end, we should gather as much information as possible."

Kiel grinned at her. "I'm glad you're so quick on your feet." Then he muttered under his breath, "Unlike some big oaf I know." He probably meant his so-called useless companion.

"I'm sure he's terribly worried about you."

"Not nearly as much as your family must be."

"That's not something you can compare. Everyone worries about their loved ones." Claudia thought about her family back in the capital. The estate was likely in an uproar over her disappearance. *I only hope that Helen isn't blaming herself for this.* Knowing Helen, she would be racked with guilt, but Claudia prayed she wouldn't be too hard on herself. And as she thought of all the people that she loved, her gaze fell to her lap.

"I'm sorry," Kiel said. "This is all because of me."

"Don't say that, Kiel. I made my choices."

Claudia recognized her privilege. She had more freedoms than most. Yes, there were times when her status as a duke's daughter was limiting, but by and large, she had experienced few difficulties in her day-to-day. She was able to do as she liked far more often than not. In her opinion, everyone deserved to share these same privileges. That was the kind of society she wanted. No matter how difficult it might be to accomplish, she wasn't one to give up.

"Misfortune happens to all of us," she told him, "but I think meeting you was quite lucky for me."

Kiel grinned, cheeks reddening. "I feel the same way." His eyes glistened with tears.

*He puts on a brave face, but that doesn't mean he isn't afraid.* Claudia pulled him into her arms. "It's all right. We're going to get through this."

"Yeah! Whatever it takes, I'm gonna solve this case!" His golden hair felt like feathers tickling her chin. She found comfort in it.

Once they were done discussing their plans, the two slid into bed and quickly fell asleep.

## Chapter 13:
## The Maid Laments

IT WAS AFTERNOON WHEN Helen arrived at the duke's estate. She was still reeling when the doctor came to check on her, and she was led to the Lindsays' drawing room.

*Why…? Why?!*

Why had *she* been saved instead of Claudia? She should have done something. Claudia was her mistress, her best friend, and like a little sister to her. She was the one who should have been saved, especially with her engagement ceremony to the prince right around the corner.

Helen wanted to scream. How could the Capricious God be so cruel?

*Did I make a mistake?* She began to doubt herself. Maybe if she had done something different, things would have gone better. As soon as she started entertaining that idea, she couldn't stop. In hindsight, even treating Claudia so casually while she passed as a maid felt like a crime.

One of Helen's maid friends supported her, guiding her through the double doors and into the drawing room, where Claudia's elder brother Virgil awaited her. The two siblings looked so alike: he had the same raven hair and blue eyes.

Fresh, hot tears streamed down her cheeks. All the pent-up tension in her body released. *Ahh, Dee! Lady Claudia!*

The guilt crashed over her anew: why had she been saved? Why someone as useless as her? It was like a dam inside her had broken, and the raging torrent of emotions swept away the last dregs of her resistance. Helen's knees crumpled as she collapsed to the floor. Staring down, all she could do was wail, her vision blurred with tears.

A shadow fell over her, and two strong arms—most certainly not those of her friend—wrapped around her. "Please excuse the impropriety," said a husky voice as she was whisked into the air and brought to the nearby sofa.

"Lord Virgil!" she squeaked.

He was carrying her like a princess. When she glanced up, their faces were so close. His hair tickled her cheek. The color reminded her so much of Claudia that she clung to him even after he had set her against the cushions of the sofa.

"Please punish me," Helen demanded. "Punish me for not protecting her as I should have."

Existing was pure torture. The agony had her heart clenched in a vise, making it hard for her to breathe. Helen couldn't live with herself, not with Claudia still missing. She had sworn to serve and protect her, but she had been utterly useless when her mistress needed her most!

"Please, I beg you…" she whispered, desperate.

"Control yourself!" Virgil's voice boomed so loud, it was like a fist smashing into a wall. He'd been so close when he shouted that her

ears rang, but it stopped her tears. He seized her by the shoulders, grip firm, and Helen shrank back. “What are you to Dee?!”

“I-I’m her maid,” Helen numbly stammered back.

“Then do your duty! Did she order you to blame yourself?!”

Helen swallowed hard. “No, no… She would never…”

“You know as well as I do that she wouldn’t. You’re intelligent enough to realize what she *would* want,” said Virgil.

“What she would want…” Helen repeated the words to herself, as if it might help them sink in.

“Don’t torment yourself over it, Helen. What you should do now is something that only you can do.”

“Wh-what can I…?”

“Help her. The enemy is one step ahead of us right now. If we are going to save Dee, we need any information you can give us.”

Helen stared back at him in a daze. When she closed her eyes, she could still see Claudia and Kiel surrounded by their assailants, growing smaller and smaller as she rode off against her will. She blinked the image away, a few fresh tears falling down her cheeks, then focused on the man in front of her. Virgil looked as fatigued as she felt. He loved Claudia just as much as she did.

*Lord Virgil must be beside himself.* At least Helen had been with Claudia until earlier that morning. Virgil had been left in the dark, worrying about Claudia since yesterday afternoon. He must have searched everywhere for her the whole time. As much as his heart surely ached with worry, his blue eyes still shone with determination.

Helen was all too familiar with those eyes. Looking at them helped clear her head. "I am deeply sorry for letting my emotions get the best of me," she said, the tremor gone from her voice.

"No need. I realize I'm asking a great deal of you right now, but you must understand that every second counts."

She nodded. "I'll tell you everything I know."

Claudia's bodyguard, who had been left behind when they were first kidnapped, had probably told Virgil quite a bit. Nevertheless, Helen started from the very beginning of their misadventure. As she spoke, she realized she had left out something very important. *Why didn't I say this the moment I got here?!*

Kiel had told them he was investigating a certain village and had a good idea as to where it was. In the panic after the attack, she had completely forgotten about it.

"A village in the north? That's a good start," said Virgil.

"I cannot apologize enough for not mentioning it sooner."

"You have nothing to apologize for," he insisted. "Only the reprobates who did this are to blame." His hands formed such tight fists that his nails dug into the soft skin of his palms. Helen wished she could embrace him, seeing how much pain he was in. *But no, that's not my place. I am a maid.* If it were Claudia, Helen would have taken her hand and offered a shoulder to cry on. She couldn't do that with Virgil.

"May I ask what's being done to find her?" Helen said.

"Ah, right. We began setting up inspection checkpoints yesterday for any wagons or carriages leaving the capital, but the driver had already left the town. We sent our fastest horses to demand that nearby settlements check any carriages heading to the far reaches of Harland."

Making such demands without advance preparation would cause delays, as not all settlements had the necessary manpower readily available. To ensure everything went as smoothly as possible, they had to limit the scope of the inspections. Their priority was to make sure the culprit couldn't take Claudia far. The authorities weren't looking for a missing duke's daughter, however—the Lindsays hadn't made that information public. Instead, they were only told to look for an "important witness."

Helen frowned. "We should have stayed in town and gone to the authorities, then."

"You were concerned what might happen if you waited, weren't you? The culprit and his coconspirators might've gone after you if you had stayed in town. We can discuss what went wrong after this is all over." Not to punish themselves for it, but to learn from it to prevent this situation from happening again. "Nina is acting as Claudia's double for the moment. We need you to attend to her as soon as you can."

"Of course."

Helen was always with Claudia. Everyone knew that. She straightened her posture. Virgil was saying she was essential to the disguise, to pulling the wool over people's eyes and making them

think Nina was really Claudia. Nothing would make her happier. *There's still something I can do to help. Something I can do for Claudia.* And there was nothing Helen wouldn't do if it meant helping Claudia.

When Helen left the drawing room, she needed no one to support her weight. She strode out confidently on her own.

## Chapter 14:
## The Duke's Son Leaves Bloody Marks on His Palms

SEEING HELEN IN THAT STATE was like looking at himself in a mirror. Virgil endeavored to look calm and composed on the surface, but ever since Claudia disappeared—back when he assumed it was only an accident—fear had seized his heart. There was a tempest of emotion inside him, the deluge threatening to burst out in the form of tears.

He'd lost count of how many pens he'd snapped in two. Each report that came in with no updates had him curling his hands into fists so tight that his nails left bloody marks on his palms.

*Where is my beloved little sister?*

Virgil had promised Claudia in front of their mother's grave that he would always be with her. He remembered his vow like it had happened only yesterday. It was the moment he'd decided to leave his foolish self behind and take his first steps forward as a different man.

Ironically, it was Claudia who had stayed at his side and given him warmth and encouragement, not the other way around. All the memories of their time together were still so vivid, he almost thought he could reach out and touch her. But she wasn't here.

*I'm so powerless.*

He succumbed to the darkness of his thoughts. What he told Helen about not blaming herself was advice he too was trying to

follow. No matter how powerless he was, if Claudia was still waiting for him at the end, he would walk down the path of thorns.

Virgil clenched his fists again. They couldn't afford to linger a step behind the enemy any longer. He was writing down all Helen had provided when the chamberlain announced visitors: Sylvester and Tristan. Virgil didn't have the chance to greet them; they came straight to the drawing room. Like him, they didn't have a second to spare.

"Was Helen able to tell you anything?" Sylvester asked.

"I just finished writing a summary." The ink hadn't yet dried when he handed the report to Sylvester. As the two of them read it, Virgil massaged the knot that had formed between his brows. He hadn't slept a wink the night before. While he prided himself on his stamina, keeping his feelings in check had left him mentally drained.

Virgil's father had to maintain his regular schedule to keep up the facade that nothing was amiss. The task of searching for Claudia therefore fell entirely on Virgil's shoulders.

*That's the terrifying part—it's like nothing has changed.*

Tristan was visibly fatigued, but Sylvester showed no signs of exhaustion. The way his eyes scanned over the report was no different than if he were sitting at his desk in his castle office.

*No,* Virgil thought. *There's even less emotion than usual.*

On the surface, Sylvester looked solemn and focused, but Virgil couldn't read any emotion from him. After how long the two had known each other, Virgil was confident he could read the prince's

mood. If Sylvester was restraining himself this much, Virgil didn't want to think about what the prince truly felt underneath it all. There was no need to poke the bear.

"Hm." Sylvester nodded to himself. "The north, then. The pieces are clicking into place."

"You know where she is?!"

"I have a good idea. We'll have to confirm it," said Sylvester.

Virgil's brows knitted together. "How will you do that?"

"We captured a man at the horse track. He claims he's the assistant to the detective accompanying Dia."

"Ah, that kid—Kiel!"

Prior to Claudia's disappearance, Sylvester had sent men to apprehend a man at the racecourse. They had assumed he was the detective reportedly looking into these suspicious villages. As it turned out, he was only the assistant.

"He refused to tell us a thing. We weren't sure what to do with him. Now that we know his detective friend is in the villagers' hands, we might finally be able to get something out of him," said Sylvester.

They had only arrested the man because they wanted information about the villages for their own investigation. The situation had changed now that it seemed Claudia had been taken to one of those villages. They could be reasonably sure that these villagers, with their distrust of outsiders, had no other allies with Nigel out of the picture. The villages had no discernible links to the church or any of the faithful; the only place they could take Claudia was their

own village. Besides, reports suggested this wasn't their first abduction.

Virgil was itching to speak to this assistant personally, to press him for details. *I need to sit tight,* he reminded himself. The interrogation was Sylvester's duty. His was to continue to the search for Claudia. He watched as Sylvester left, Tristan on his heels.

As for Virgil himself, he had to stay here in case any news came in. He couldn't risk leaving and missing something important. Seeking a distraction, he tried to focus on the paperwork in front of him. Eventually, the frustration hit him so strongly that he found himself snapping yet another pen—and a second later, Tristan stepped into the room.

"Syl's taking command elsewhere," Tristan said by way of explanation.

Sylvester was working in conjunction with Virgil's search for Claudia, but since they'd established a link between her disappearance and the case he'd already been investigating, Tristan was back to coordinate.

"I brought the notes from our conversation with the man calling himself that detective's assistant. I figured you'd want to know what he had to say as soon as possible."

"I do. Thank you," said Virgil. "I greatly appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I'll explain the more confusing parts myself."

Once the man heard that the detective—Kiel—had been taken as well, he spilled everything he knew. He expressed an earnest

desire to help in any way he could. The notes mentioned that he'd been in tears as he spoke.

*I guess he's as worried as we are,* Virgil thought.

Sylvester had been right to suspect that Kiel had pinned down the main village's location. Based on the discovered locations of the other villages, he estimated the main one was somewhere to the north of the capital—a conclusion Sylvester had also reached.

"If you know where it is, you can move out immediately, can't you?" asked Virgil.

"About that…" Tristan paused, then said, "We consulted my father before I came here. It looks like we'll need to grease some palms before we make our move."

"What?!" Virgil snapped, voice cracking. He swallowed the other words he wanted to yell. It wasn't Tristan's fault. The fact that they'd gone to the knight captain meant Sylvester was ready to deploy the guard. *Every second counts in this situation, yet we must walk on eggshells because of politics!* It was easy enough to infer that was the reason for the delay. If this village was to the north, then that meant it was in another lord's territory. That of the Thomases, to be precise.

The Thomases were widely known to be part of the royal faction, but they held no love for the Lindsays. That hadn't changed even after the son of the previous earl became head of the family. They'd been on edge this past year and warier than ever. Understandable, given that the previous earl was murdered in the middle of the capital.

Virgil could already imagine how poorly they would react if the royal family deployed soldiers into their lands without permission. Worse, what if the Lindsays sent *their* private army? The Thomases would explode with rage.

"You think you'll be able to bring them around?" Virgil asked Tristan.

"We're going to try to take care of this as quickly as possible. The village isn't very large. We plan to assemble a small squad and move in secret. If Lord Thomas knew of all this, he wouldn't idly stand by."

Virgil nodded. "Yes, that wouldn't surprise me. Even if you told him you were only suppressing dissidents, he would insist on deploying his own army to take care of it."

Lord Thomas wasn't unique in his distaste for outside interference. No regional lord liked other people poking their noses in, countrymen or not. Much like commoners might squabble with their neighbors over a tree limb growing over their side of the fence, aristocrats were leery of anyone usurping their authority. It was human nature. And if they didn't like each other, the problem was even more pronounced. The Thomases hadn't gone out of their way to express disapproval of the engagement between Claudia and Sylvester, but they would happily ruin the occasion if the opportunity presented itself.

"Thank you for letting me know. At least we're making progress," Virgil said.

"And we're not going to stop there. We're going to end this."

Heartened by Tristan's confidence, Virgil nodded. "Of course we will."

*Hard to believe he's normally so unreliable.* This time, Tristan was showing he could be capable. Virgil reached toward him and mussed his ginger hair.

"Hey! Watch it!" Tristan cried.

"You've grown up."

"If you're going to compliment me, do it like a normal person!"

Ever since Claudia disappeared, Virgil had felt like his insides were being squeezed. He'd never experienced such pain. Only now did the dark clouds hanging over him start to clear, revealing a ray of hope on the horizon. As anxious as Virgil was to run to Claudia's rescue, her future was as important as her present. He needed to stay here. If he wasn't careful, he could ruin things for her. Virgil couldn't do that; his little sister deserved her happiness—to have the engagement ceremony she wanted. More than anyone else in the world, she deserved that.

*We'll rescue you, Dee. I promise.*

His hands balled into fists again, but the skin of his palms was numb at this point. He didn't feel the bite of his nails anymore.

## Chapter 15:
## The Villainess Investigates the Village with the Boy Detective

CLAUDIA AWOKE, sensing movement. The door to the house they were in kept swinging open and banging closed as one of its residents, or perhaps both, went in and out. Claudia must have slept soundly, as her mind felt much clearer. The warmth of another person beside her probably helped.

*We fell asleep talking,* she remembered.

When she glanced beside her, Kiel was still fast asleep, an angelic expression on his face. It tickled her heart. She carefully slipped away so as not to wake him, then ran her fingers through her hair to make herself presentable. He stirred then, eyes fluttering.

"Mm… You're already awake, Miss Dee?"

"Only for a minute or two. I'm going to go get us some water." Claudia's throat was always dry when she first awoke.

"I'll go with you." Kiel lifted himself unsteadily to his feet, his messy blond hair swaying with the motion. He grabbed his beret and pulled it over his head, but he forgot his glasses entirely. Claudia picked them up off the floor and handed them over.

"You need these, don't you?"

He shrugged. "Uh, actually, not really." He put them on, then giggled. "They're just for show."

"They are? You had me fooled."

"Wearing glasses makes you look more intelligent, don't you think?"

She studied him. "I think you look plenty intelligent without them."

"If only everyone else agreed. Not many people pick up on how smart I really am," he said boastfully. For all his bravado, he was too drowsy to walk straight, so he latched on to her hand as they left the room.

They entered the kitchen to find that the wife had just returned. Light spilled in from the window behind her. Claudia could see now that the woman was wearing a beige shirt and brown skirt with a similarly colored apron.

"Good morning," said Claudia.

"Morning," the woman responded. "Did you both sleep all right? You can use that bucket and towel there to wash your faces." She motioned to a workbench in the kitchen. A bucket of water and a folded towel sat on top of it. "Since the weather is nice, we're going to eat with the rest of the villagers outside. Come join us." She took a pot that had been hanging inside the fireplace and headed back out.

The wooden workbench was along the wall left of the entrance. Through the window above it, Kiel and Claudia could see children running by. There were other village women too, carrying pots with them much like the wife's own. They all seemed to be headed in the same direction.

There were a number of other kitchen implements aside from the bucket on the table. The fireplace was to the right of the

workbench. The fire inside had already been snuffed out the night before, so Claudia hadn't even noticed it when they entered.

"So this is what a normal house looks like," she said to herself. Claudia had never seen inside a commoner's home before. In her previous timeline, she'd shared the same space as the other courtesans, so it wasn't quite the same.

"Yep," said Kiel. "Most have their kitchen and dining room right by the entrance, and the bedrooms are in the back of the house."

"And this is the water they use?" There was a pitcher on the floor by the bench. The floor beneath was depressed and made of cobblestone.

"Yeah. They probably keep the water here and use it for all their daily needs. That's how it was at my house, at least. This cobblestone here has a drain in it, so you can pour out any used water."

"Interesting. This is all very educational."

"Maybe, but I don't know that it'll ever be helpful to someone like you, Miss Dee." Kiel knew she was a duke's daughter, and that on top of that, she would soon be crown princess. A lady of her standing had no need to know how the common folk lived—or at least that seemed to be his unspoken sentiment based on how his face pinched as he spoke.

"Knowing how our people live is important," Claudia informed him. "There is much you can learn from different lifestyles. And in my experience, there's no such thing as useless knowledge."

"That's true. Knowledge is power." Kiel had only overcome all his misfortunes up to this point because of his own intelligence and knowledge. He knew better than anyone what she meant, so he nodded along with her.

Careful not to disturb the workbench, Claudia washed her face. She longed for a hairbrush, but she couldn't find one. *I'll have to make do with my fingers for now.* She would ask the wife later if they had anything else she could use.

Claudia took Kiel's hand again as they left the house. Though the house had windows, it was still relatively dark inside. They were momentarily blinded when they stepped out into the sun.

"Morning," said a person walking nearby. "Wonderful weather, isn't it? We're all gathering in the plaza over there to eat breakfast."

Claudia turned to where they'd pointed. The plaza was bustling with activity, and there were plenty of children. Presumably, the child Claudia and Kiel had seen neither hide nor hair of last night was there too.

The plaza was just beyond the row of houses. Glancing at the buildings, she estimated there were about twenty or so. They were all single-story homes with white walls and thatched roofs. The wooden doors and window frames were unpainted. The lack of decoration made the flowers painted on the walls of the houses even more remarkable. The mural on the house in which they'd stayed had adorable pink and red blossoms on it. Each house was nearly identical to the others, set apart only by their flowers. As long as they had

sunlight, it would be easy to find their residence: it was painted with cosmoses.

Short grass carpeted the ground in every direction. The only patches of naked earth were the paths the villagers had carved out through their foot traffic.

The only building that stood out from the others was the one closest to the plaza. It was three times larger than a regular house and had double doors despite being one story like the rest. People were carrying long banquet tables out of it.

"Maybe it's an assembly hall?" Kiel said, cocking his head.

When they arrived at the plaza proper, the villagers had already set the banquet tables together into a U shape, with beige tablecloths thrown over them. Food, plates, and cutlery adorned the tabletops.

The villagers worked efficiently; in a matter of minutes, they had chairs for everyone. Their lady host waved Claudia and Kiel over, and as they approached, they saw a young girl with long, brown pigtails standing beside her. She was about the same height as Kiel and likely the same age.

"I'll introduce you," said the wife. "This is my daughter, Aila."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Aila greeted them. Her dark, chocolate-brown eyes shone with a strong inner will, and her voice was calm and assertive.

Once they had exchanged hellos, Aila guided them to their seats. The chieftess sat at the center of the table, and each household sat together. Claudia and Kiel were seated beside Aila.

As soon as all the villagers had taken their seats, the chieftess spoke. “We thank the heavens for this blessing.” Her gentle voice reverberated through the air, and everyone repeated her words, mumbling them like a chant before they reached for the food.

Because this was Claudia and Kiel’s first time at such a gathering, Aila and her mother served them. The plates themselves were made of simple wood. The food was nothing fancy either: mashed potatoes and fried mincemeat, served with a thin slice of bread.

After they finished breakfast, the wife brought their dishes back to the house to clean them. As she washed, Claudia took the opportunity to ask her about a hairbrush. Unfortunately, the wife said she didn’t have one but would lend her a comb.

While Claudia was at it—even though she very much doubted she’d get permission—she asked, “Would it be all right for us to look around the village, since the weather is so nice and all?”

“Yes, of course. The other children should be playing in the plaza.”

Claudia was shocked. She had expected them to force her to stay inside. When she and Kiel had resolved to investigate the village, she hadn’t thought the villagers would like them snooping. With her permission acquired, the two of them hurried out of the house.

“They don’t seem interested in confining us,” Claudia said once they were outside. “They weren’t in the wagon either.”

“Maybe because we’ve been pretty cooperative?” Kiel suggested.

There was also the fact that the villagers outnumbered them. Claudia and Kiel would have no way to resist. Perhaps that had something to do with it; the villagers could always overpower them if the need arose.

"I wouldn't think they'd be too keen to let outsiders wander around freely, though," Claudia muttered to herself. The two of them didn't belong here. Kiel especially, since he'd been brought here for snooping into their business. What did the villagers plan to do with them? "It's baffling."

"It is, which is why we should search the village for answers."

First, they wanted to map the place out. Kiel and Claudia moved to the area where they'd disembarked from the wagon yesterday. They followed the natural dirt path. A man was performing maintenance on some farming tools under the awning of a nearby building. They could feel his eyes trailing after them, but he said nothing. Looking around, they realized that the wagon had stopped at the entrance to the village. A waist-high fence served as the perimeter.

"There's no fencing around the forest over there," Claudia noted. "I assume it's a dead end, meaning you can't get out that way." The trees were crowded too closely to see through, so she couldn't be sure. The village sat at a base of a cliff; part of its dirt walls extended close to the village's entrance. She was curious about the terrain beyond the fence, but as she approached, the man barked at her.

"Don't go past the fence! It's dangerous!"

"Yes, sir," Kiel called back dutifully, waving at the man.

He must've been there to keep watch and make sure they didn't try to leave.

"But what exactly *is* dangerous?" Claudia whispered to Kiel. "Wild animals?"

"Why don't we ask him?"

The couple they were staying with was friendly and obliging enough, and from what little interaction they'd had with the other villagers, they seemed welcoming too. The village chieftess had personally greeted them. No one treated them as captives.

"What's beyond the fence that's so dangerous?" Kiel asked, stepping toward the man.

"That's obvious. There's poison every—" The man stopped short, then sat up. "Ah, that's right. You two only just got here, so you wouldn't know."

"We don't, sorry."

The man waved Kiel's apology off. "Nah, not your fault. You'll learn about it soon enough. You're safe now that you're inside the village."

"Could you tell us a bit more about this poison, though? We haven't noticed any symptoms ourselves."

"You wouldn't. Those on the outside don't, but it's been consuming you all the same. You don't realize it's been happening till you've been to a ceremony and purified yourself. That's how you wake up to how much has built up inside you. People consumed by the poison have less patience. They get irritable easily. That's why there's

so much fighting out there." He nodded his head toward the world beyond the fence. "And that's what makes this village such a peaceful place."

"And will there be a ceremony for us too?" Kiel asked.

"You're still a kid. You'll have yours once you're an adult." The man's eyes moved to Claudia. "You're, uh…Miss Dee, was it? Yours will be soon, I figure. The chieftess is the one who decides when. So I can't tell you exactly."

Claudia barely held back a grimace at the lascivious way his eyes roved over her body. This wasn't the first time she'd experienced this from the villagers; all the men on the ride here had done the same. They didn't even try to hide their lust for her.

Kiel stepped in front of Claudia, blocking her from the man's view. "Can I ask one more thing? How come that house over there has red window frames and the rest don't?" He pointed to the house closest to the entrance.

"Ahh, that's the chieftess's house. Easy to pick out, right?"

"It is! Thank you for answering all my questions!"

The man chuckled. "I heard you had good manners. I'm impressed. Wish my kid was as polite as you. Always causing trouble." He must have heard this note on Kiel's character from Aila's mother.

"So," Kiel continued, "are there wild animals around here? I assume there must be wolves or something, with a fence like that."

With a shrug, the man replied, "Yeah, wouldn't know about that. I don't hunt, myself. We've never had any inside the village, though,

so no need to worry."

Kiel tried pressing further, asking about bears and other beasts, but the man gave the same noncommittal answers. He didn't seem to know much about what lay outside the village.

*Or maybe he* does *know and just won't tell us.*

Regardless, they thanked him for the information and went on their way.

"Doesn't seem like anyone will tell us about what's outside the village," Claudia said. "And I have a bad feeling about this ceremony for adults he mentioned." The way he looked at her was the same way clients ogled courtesans. She didn't want to think about what this ceremony entailed.

"He said it would be soon. At the very least, it probably won't be today. But that means we should escape before tomorrow, just to be safe."

"The one saving grace is that they don't seem intent on doing anything to us right away. I wonder if the chieftess would tell us when the ceremony will be." Now that they knew where her house was, it felt like the natural next step. They approached, and Claudia knocked on the door.

Ultea, the chieftess, soon peeked her head out. Her sensual aura was even more pronounced under the full light of the sun. "Goodness, is something the matter?" she asked.

"Our apologies for visiting so suddenly. That man over there," Claudia said, motioning toward him, "said that as the chieftess, you

decide when ceremonies take place. I was hoping you could tell me when mine might be. As he said it, I've been infected by poison and it's the only way I can be purified."

"Oh, you poor dear. That must have been so frightening to hear. Don't worry, you'll be fine now that you're in the village. There's no poison here. As for what's already in your system, we can purify you, so fret not. You'll soon share the same happiness as the rest of us."

"All right, but when is the ceremony?"

The chieftess chewed her lip. "I want it done as quickly as possible. Really, I do, but I can't give you a date just yet. As soon as I can, I'll be sure to let you know."

Claudia nodded. "I understand. Would you mind if I asked about the wildlife as well? The man I spoke to didn't seem to know much about anything living nearby."

"A hunter used to live here, but he moved away. We don't really have anyone else who knows about wild animals. There are probably bears and boars in the wilderness beyond the fence, not to mention the poison in the air. But rest assured, you're safe as long as you're within the village."

It was impossible to determine whether she was telling the truth, but Claudia offered a grateful smile all the same. "Thank you for your kindness."

"Not at all. You're one of us now. I'm sure everything must feel so overwhelming. Please, feel free to ask me anything. I'll tell the other villagers to do whatever they can to help you adjust." The

chieftess offered her hand and gave Claudia's a firm shake. "Everything will be all right."

From what the chieftess said, the villagers isolated themselves from the outside because of this "poison." To protect themselves, they cut themselves off from the outside world.

"If the chieftess is preaching to them about how terrifying it is out there, we can't trust she's telling us the truth about the wildlife either," Claudia concluded once they were out of earshot.

"Yeah, she might have been trying to scare us," said Kiel. "Must not be too dangerous if they don't have a hunter here anymore."

Carnivores weren't the only danger to a settlement like this; herbivores could ravage the crops in the fields. But if the village had no need for a hunter, they could assume there was nothing too threatening in the vicinity.

"That's good news for anyone who wants to leave the village," Claudia said dryly. "And we aren't infected by poison, so I'd prefer to stay far away from these so-called ceremonies."

"Seriously. I don't know where they get their ideas, but we should keep looking. Surely help will find us before long."

They had to keep the faith and move forward. As they walked together, Kiel and Claudia continued to discuss what they had learned so far.

"The chieftess said we're already part of the village. Does that mean that we're still being treated as guests because I haven't yet undergone this ceremony?" Claudia asked.

"Well, that has me thinking… The people here seem oddly used to having outsiders move in."

She blinked at him. "Oh, weren't you aware?"

Claudia had assumed Kiel knew more about the village than anyone else, particularly because Sylvester had never made mention of the drugs. Yet his comment suggested even he was missing information.

"The village has been abducting people," she told Kiel. "Their population has fluctuated wildly over short periods—increasing and then suddenly decreasing."

"Really?! I was so focused on their whole medicine operation, I didn't pick up on any population changes." Kiel had moved around, searching for villages' locations. He hadn't investigated them much once he'd found them, so he likely wouldn't have noticed the difference. "I guess that means they're accustomed to new blood."

"Indeed. That might be why they aren't restricting us much: they're used to inducting new people." Claudia had wondered what they'd intended to do with Kiel once they had captured him, but from what she had seen, the villagers only wanted to convert him.

The two followed the sound of children's voices to the plaza where they'd had breakfast. Halfway there, they noticed that the large building nearby had its doors thrown wide open. A woman emerged from within, carrying a load of laundry. The place must not have been an assembly hall if they kept dirty clothes inside. Judging by the size of the clothing she was pinning to the line, they belonged to the children. They were all brown—the same color as the adults' attire.

"Pardon me for interrupting while you're busy, but do you have a moment?" Claudia asked the woman. "I only have some questions, so please feel free to continue working as we talk."

"Go ahead," the woman responded. "But if it's anything complicated, I won't be much help."

"Oh, no, not complicated at all. I was just wondering what this building is for."

"Is that all? This is the children's dormitory. All the kids in the village live here, away from their parents. Not that their families are ever far if they need them."

So the children slept here instead of at their parents' homes. That explained why they hadn't sensed Aila in the house the night before. Claudia tried to find out why the children stayed in a dormitory, but the woman was evasive. She didn't seem to know anything specific, only saying she had never thought much about it.

"It's just the way things are done," the woman added with a note of finality.

A shorter fence was set up around the plaza. The children within were roughly the same height and around five years old, by Claudia's estimations. They sang to themselves as they threw sticks at a target:

"There's not much room in the upper mouth, but you'll find much more if you go down south!"

Three circles were drawn on the ground in a row. The one at the top was set at a distance, while the two below it were much closer together, nearly pressed side by side. The children stood about two

meters back from the last circle. The topmost circle seemed to be the "upper mouth" they were referencing, while the lower ones seemed to be "down south."

"What kind of game is this?" Claudia asked.

One of the children answered, "You have to get your stick in the hole. That's how you score the most points." He showed her the stick he meant. From afar, it had looked like a branch, but now she realized it was a decorated trinket small enough to fit snugly in the child's palm. It was probably around three fingers thick and had a groove carved about a knuckle from the top, circling the width of the stick. Two chestnuts dangled from the end of it.

A chill raced down her spine. *This can't be what I think it is, can it?* Maybe it was because she had just asked the chieftess about the ceremony, but the stick the boy was holding looked like male genitalia. Seeing a child hold something so suggestive made her feel faint. Did any of them understand what this little "game" was all about?

"See this groove at the tip?" asked the child. "On your first turn, you've got to make sure you don't get the stick any deeper in the hole than that. You can get it deeper the second time, but if the balls go in too, you've lost." He went on to explain that one's score depended on how many times they threw the stick and at what angle. The person with the most points by the end won.

Claudia was grateful that Kiel at least appeared to be ignorant of the game's true intentions. He was perfectly composed, listening intently as the boy explained everything. *He went out of his way to*

*protect me from that man's leering earlier, but I guess he doesn't know much about the birds and the bees.*

Kiel was at that age where boys started to become more conscious of the opposite sex. He'd been nervous around her and Helen at the inn. Having him sleep separately never even occurred to her because she'd been too exhausted to give it much thought. *In hindsight, I was being reckless.*

Once the village boy returned to the game, Kiel turned to her and said, "Miss Dee, it seems to me that their game mirrors the intimate relations between a man and a woman."

Her shoulders jumped. "S-so it does," she agreed awkwardly. Far from not realizing the innuendo—he'd understood immediately.

"I wonder if this has anything to do with the villagers' peculiar mentality." His analysis suggested he was approaching this from a purely investigative standpoint. He had only listened to the boy's explanation to better understand the village.

*Now I feel silly for getting so flustered.* Upon reflection, she recalled a book on ethnology back in the capital. It claimed that the religious beliefs of many indigenous populations centered around sex organs as well as nature. Both were an intrinsic part of people's daily lives, after all, and often people did not distinguish them.

"Maybe it's part of their moral system. To help them connect physical acts with their beliefs," said Claudia. No doubt the game they were playing had a connection to the ceremony the adult villagers took part in.

Kiel joined the children to see what the game was like. In the instant the stick left his hand, something splattered on his head. Bird poop. Somehow it had missed his beret entirely and landed right in his hair.

"Gross! Why am I always so unlucky?!" Kiel cried.

"What's wrong? White fluids are good luck," said one of the children.

"They are?" Kiel was dumbfounded. What he thought was misfortune, they took as a blessing.

Yet again, Claudia had to force herself not to think about the implications of the children's words. "Lucky or not, we need to clean him up. Do any of you know where to find water?"

"Over there!" One of the children pointed to the forest. "There's a spring."

Claudia and Kiel headed in that direction. The spring was in the opposite direction from the village entrance. Once they were away from the plaza, Claudia craned her neck to take in their new surroundings. She spotted what looked like the village stables not too far away. Past that was a stone building.

"That place looks different from the others," she noted. Kiel followed her gaze. "We should check it out later."

"I agree…but I gotta get this bird poop off me first!"

When they entered the woods, a thick, earthy scent filled their noses. A girl in pigtails entered their view: she was the daughter of the woman they were staying with. Aila, if Claudia remembered right.

"What are you doing out here?" Claudia asked her.

"Gathering leaves and dried branches for our fireplace." Apparently, she and the other older children could be entrusted with chores like this. "We also water the crops in the fields. We're really busy during the day."

"That must be exhausting," Claudia said sympathetically. "We should be helping you, shouldn't we?"

"Are you going to live here?"

"At this rate, it seems so."

"Huh." Aila dropped her gaze. There was something much different about the way she acted. Something that set her apart from the adults in the village.

"Would it be bad if we lived here?" Claudia ventured.

"Not for me," Aila said.

Claudia wanted to ask what that meant—to find out more from her—when one of the other children called for her.

"I have to go," Aila said, spinning around. "Don't trust the adults." With that, she was gone.

"She's not like the others," Claudia said to Kiel.

"I wonder if she knows there's something wrong with this place."

Perhaps they could have a real conversation with Aila, but Claudia tucked that information away for later. As they moved deeper into the forest, she confirmed her earlier assumption: this side of the village was hemmed in by cliff walls.

"We won't be able to escape this way," Kiel said.

Her eyes darted to him. "The very terrain isolates them from the outside. Were the other villages like this?"

"Not quite this extreme. They had fences, but you could leave easily enough if you knew the lay of the land."

When they at last arrived at the spring, it was beyond what they had pictured. It was wider than Claudia's armspan, and the water was so crisp and clear that they could see down to the rocks and plants at the bottom. A curtain of light filtered through the trees and fell upon the spring's surface and the moss-covered boulders beside it. With the moisture and light, the moss seemed to be thriving.

Surrounded by this natural splendor, Claudia couldn't help letting out an amazed breath. "It's beautiful."

"I don't think I've ever seen water so clear before in my life," said Kiel.

For a moment, they both forgot why they were here.

"I thought I would just stick my head in to wash off the bird poop, but I'd feel bad about contaminating it."

Claudia nodded. "Look, there's a bucket. Let's scoop some out and wash your hair elsewhere." They might as well use the bucket while it was here. Once they were in position, she poured the water over him, careful to avoid any hair that hadn't been touched by droppings. "I should have fetched a towel before we came."

"Nah. This'll dry soon enough if we pat out the moisture." Kiel combed his fingers through his hair, mixing the dampened strands

with dry ones to speed up the process. “They probably use the spring to process their medicine. Clean water is apparently really important for that.” Kiel went on to explain that all the other villages had access to clean running water as well.

After they had finished in the forest and Kiel’s head was sufficiently clean, the two of them dropped by the stables. They were surprised to find goats inside, with men and women taking care of them. Strangely, there were more villagers here than anywhere else.

“Don’t touch the horse,” one woman warned. “We don’t need you getting injured. And you could get seriously hurt if it kicked you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Kiel answered dutifully.

They had been cautioned not to approach, but they could at least study the horse. Two had pulled the covered wagon that brought them here, but there was only one inside the stable. The other must have been in use elsewhere.

“That horse looks exhausted from yesterday’s ride,” Claudia commented. “A day of rest should be enough, I imagine, but I worry about the other one.” Horses needed breaks. Without them, they would wear out completely. If ridden too hard, they could die. “I hope they’re not pushing the poor creature past its limits.”

“I hope so too.”

Though Claudia was concerned for the horses’ well-being, she and Kiel might need both when it came time to escape, regardless of how much they’d rested. She had to be practical about this. While she was at it, she tried to memorize the layout of the stables in case they needed it later.

"With this many people inside, there's no way we'd be able to steal a horse during the day," she whispered to Kiel.

"Nope. I'm sure there're more than usual to make sure of it. I wonder if it'd be less guarded at night…"

Claudia frowned. "Kiel, do you really think you could ride a horse at night?"

"If the moon was bright enough, maybe, assuming we could follow the route the wagon took."

Guiding a horse was much easier than steering a wagon, but the darkness of night hid unpredictable dangers. It would be easier if they were surrounded by empty plains. If there was more forest beyond the village, it would be impossible to go anywhere fast. And they wouldn't be able to see where they were going in the darkness. If visibility was bad enough, walking might even be faster than riding.

"We shouldn't count on using the horses to escape when we don't know the terrain. Although, if the villagers think the same way, there probably *is* less security around the stables at night."

Kiel nodded. "Anyone they brought here would be unfamiliar with the landscape, so it adds up."

"Either way, I think we ought to go on foot if we decide to leave at night."

When they finally left the stables, someone flagged them down to tell them it was lunchtime. Whenever the skies were clear, the villagers gathered in the plaza for meals. Before Claudia and Kiel could make their way over, they were ambushed by children pouring dried

leaves over their heads. Claudia and Kiel whipped around to see who their assailants were, but the children scampered off, cackling gleefully.

Kiel and Claudia glanced at one another and nodded. It would be good to get in a little exercise before eating. They chased after the mischief-makers with a shout of "Get back here, you knuckleheads!" The adults watched them play with warm smiles on their faces.

The children here were as innocent as children anywhere, and the village was so peaceful. Maybe that was what made it all the more unsettling. She was doing her best to act like someone adjusting to a new lifestyle, but the truth was that she and Kiel had been abducted. Why didn't any of the villagers feel the least bit guilty about their part in it? *Aila was the only one who acted differently.*

While she and Kiel chased around the children who had pranked them, Claudia spotted Aila helping the adults prepare for lunch out of the corner of her eye. Aila was awfully young—the same age as Kiel—yet she seemed to be the only one sympathetic to them. Why was that? *Assuming she doesn't totally share their beliefs, how does she feel about her life here?* Was she as unsettled as Claudia? And if so, how awful was it to live with that every day?

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After lunch, Claudia and Kiel headed for the stone building they had seen earlier. It was much taller than the others and constructed with sturdier materials. Asking the villagers about it would've been the

simplest way to sate their curiosity, but they reasoned they could find out themselves by exploring the rest of the area inside the fence.

"What do you think it's for, Kiel?"

"This one has to be an assembly hall, right? If it was a church, surely we'd see people coming out for meals."

The village's perimeter wasn't very large. Based on their experience with church communities, it would be odd for the villagers not to come here. Yet unlike the stables, they hadn't spotted anyone in the vicinity. The only figures were children collecting leaves in the nearby forest.

"It's on a small cliff," Claudia said. The stone building was on a circular plot of land that jutted out into the open air, the path toward it sloping upward.

"It's a dead end on the other side," Kiel said.

Once they were at the top of the slope, they found only a sheer drop beyond it, opposite the forest. There was nowhere to go here either; the cliff was too high for them to survive a fall. No wonder the villagers weren't keeping close tabs on them.

A brisk wind buffeted them as they stood there. Plains stretched out below.

"It's a nice view," Claudia said.

The vegetation in the region didn't grow very high. It was like a vivid green carpet rolling out around them on all sides. Claudia inhaled, drawing as much clean air into her lungs as she could. This area was much more open than the forest, so there was no earthy

stench hanging in the air. They took their time to enjoy the scenery before starting toward the building.

The stone structure was rectangular with a simple steepled roof. The architecture was unremarkable and free of decoration. Wooden double doors stood closed at the entrance, one side permanently locked. The other was not; it creaked as they nudged it open. Once inside, Claudia knew immediately what the place was. "It's a chapel."

There were rows of pews and a single altar in front of them. Sunbeams poured in through the long windows lining the walls, bathing the place in light. It was only one story, with high ceilings.

"A chapel, but not a church, since I don't see any faithful here," Claudia said.

"Maybe the chieftess is their religious leader as well. I've heard chiefs can serve as church officials in small villages."

Claudia recalled seeing the chieftess say a prayer before mealtime, but she didn't see much connection between the villagers and the church. If they followed the church's teachings, they wouldn't be abducting people. Nor would they make wild claims about poison infesting the outside air. Their beliefs were too peculiar; she didn't see how they could have any connection to the church's teachings.

*Whatever the cardinal is doing here, it likely has nothing to do with the church.* He had abandoned even those who followed him. What he did wasn't motivated by faith. Nigel was only using his position within the church for his own ends.

She strode down the aisle and stopped at the altar. There, she noticed a set of wooden stairs to the left, leading down into the

basement. “Should we take a look?”

“We may as well! Oh, but wait one second.” Kiel pulled his hand from hers and raced out of the chapel.

Claudia stood waiting for him, the silence creeping in around her. It made her oddly lonely, perhaps because she could feel Kiel’s lingering warmth in her hand. Or maybe it was because she’d found herself somewhere so unfamiliar. It was like a cold draft chilling her heart.

Thankfully, Kiel returned almost as quickly as he left. “Sorry for the wait!”

He insisted on going down first, so she followed behind him as they carefully crept down the stairs. There was a door at the bottom. They pushed it open. Since it wasn’t locked, they assumed the villagers didn’t mind them entering.

The room was dark despite all the sunlight outside, but lanterns everywhere kept the place lit.

“This place…” Claudia started when her eyes landed on an enormous workbench. Vials and medicine jars covered every surface. She spotted a shelving unit with tiny drawers. It reminded her of the one she’d seen in Marilyn the perfumer’s shop. Dried brown herbs were scattered all over the room.

“So they *are* making medicine here.” Kiel hummed in thought as he scrutinized every inch of the room.

“Be careful not to breathe it in,” Claudia warned him.

"Yes'm. Although I don't think there's anything too dangerous sitting around here, or else it would be locked up." Then he muttered under his breath, "It sure would've made my life easier if they left their contraband lying around in the open." An unsettling comment though it was, Claudia sympathized. Any conclusive evidence would benefit the investigation.

She followed Kiel's lead and tried to take stock of the room. *If clues were that easy to find, this case wouldn't be this complicated.* She kept her back to the entrance of the room and peeked into one of the drawers in the shelving unit.

"The medicine we produce here is a village specialty," came a voice from behind her.

Claudia sucked in a breath, shoulders jumping. When she spun around, the chieftess stood behind her. Ultea had tied back her long, indigo hair, and her lips were curved into a sleek smile.

*When did she get here?* Claudia hadn't sensed the chieftess's approach. When she glanced at Kiel, he looked equally dumbfounded.

"Oh, did I surprise you? I'm sorry," Ultea cooed at them. She knelt in front of Kiel and threw her arms around him, pulling him close. His face landed right in her exposed cleavage.

Kiel grunted in surprise. He managed to turn his head so he could at least breathe, his face flushed red as a tomato.

The chieftess's hands began to rove about his body, as if an embrace wasn't enough for her. From Claudia's angle, she couldn't

quite tell what Ultea was trying to do. All she knew was that Kiel began to tremble furiously.

"Excuse me!" she cut in, raising her voice. "Kiel seems quite distressed! Please let go of him."

The chieftess obliged and withdrew her arms. Finally free, Kiel collapsed against the worktable, drawing in ragged breaths until he could finally compose himself.

"You must feel left out, Miss Dee. Come into my arms," said Ultea as she strode toward Claudia.

"No, I don't need—" The rest of Claudia's sentence muffled against the chieftess's chest as she was pulled into the older woman's embrace. Claudia was especially horrified by the woman's stifling body heat; it was through pure courage that she swallowed her disgust. Fortunately, she was taller than Kiel, so her face was spared Ultea's bosom.

"You are welcome in my arms whenever you wish."

Her breasts squished against Claudia. With no corset, Claudia could feel the soft roundness of them. Ultea was even more voluptuous than she looked. Released at last, Claudia slumped against the workbench trying to even her breathing, just like Kiel had done.

Ultea giggled. "My, how innocent you both are."

*It's not innocence. It's exhaustion from being forced into something I tried to refuse.* Claudia was tempted to say as much but held her tongue. Nothing good would come from souring the chieftess's mood.

"I assume you figured it out from looking," said Ultea, "but this is our dispensary, where we create our medicine. Everything I produce on the workbench here is either used by the villagers as needed or shipped out for sale." She gathered a handful of dried herbs as she spoke. "I am the one who makes the medicine, but the villagers assist with processing. That's why we all wear brown." The herbs leaked brown fluid, which stained if they weren't dried beforehand. "We reasoned it was better to wear the same color so it wouldn't stand out too much."

Even their wardrobe was determined by the medicine they created—such was its importance.

*I wonder if she's so desensitized that she considers the aphrodisiac and hypnotic a normal part of life too,* Claudia thought. Such drugs fetched high prices on the black market, but the villagers lived very modestly with little excess. *I suppose it's possible they're hiding their wealth somehow.* But the village kept itself isolated from the outside world. What use would the people here have for material luxury?

*It seems much more likely to me that the money is being funneled to Cardinal Nigel.* Nigel wouldn't associate himself with the village if there wasn't some benefit. A hypnotic to brainwash people would certainly be convenient, though nothing suggested he had used anything like that on Nina. Instead, he had manipulated her circumstances to extort her. *That might mean this hypnotic isn't fully effective.*

Regardless, Claudia needed more information. Her eyes met Kiel's, and they nodded; they appeared to be on the same page. The two of them linked hands, excused themselves, and climbed the stairs back to the chapel, a scatter of dried leaves crunching beneath their shoes.

## Chapter 16:
## The Chieftess Rejoices

"AH, THIS IS WONDERFUL." The words fell from Ultea's lips, infused with almost maniacal passion as she thought of Claudia and Kiel.

Claudia was a symbol of abundance with her lustrous, wavy black hair. Her blue eyes reminded Ultea of the spring in their forest, shining with life. Her body hadn't fully matured, but she was shapely enough to stimulate men's sexual appetites. She was exactly what the village wanted. Her breasts were pert and full, her bottom perfectly plump. Then there were her legs, thin and supple. Every inch of her was the embodiment of beauty, down to the tips of her perfectly manicured nails. The village hadn't intended to bring her into their midst, but after seeing Claudia in person, Ultea was convinced. This had to be a divine blessing.

"We are meant to make her one of us."

Even if Claudia doubted them at first, her way of thinking would change as soon as she underwent the ceremony. Not even a duke's daughter was impervious. She would become more obedient once it was done, and even if the powers that be tried to bring the villagers to account for abducting her, Claudia would protect them. In fact, with Claudia on *their* side, there would be no crime to charge them with. *Soon she won't be able to live without me.* She snickered gleefully at the idea of Claudia's fall from grace.

Ultea couldn’t wait for Kiel to reach adulthood. He had gentle features and emerald eyes full of determination. He was still only a child, so he wouldn’t be able to take part in the ceremony. Ultea’s heart thrummed with anticipation. How might those eyes, so clear and pure, darken and muddy the longer he stayed among them? It was an enormous boon to have gained those two.

Nonetheless, they had a problem. The face of the young man who’d mistaken Cardinal Nigel’s words popped into Ultea’s head. “I suppose I will have to dispose of him soon,” she muttered to herself.

Young men were a valuable resource in the village, which was why she had given him the benefit of the doubt for so long.

“It’s a shame. He’s so eager at night, and there are parts of him I find adorable.” But she couldn’t dote on him forever; it risked damaging the village order. As a parting gift, she would wait until after Claudia’s ceremony to remove him. “He should at least make himself useful before he leaves us.”

Ultea reached out and caressed the large jar in front of her. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “I won’t let your sacrifice be in vain.” Her gaze was affectionate as it swept over the other jars lined on the shelves by the wall. She had all of them to thank for the improved effectiveness of their medicine. Their contributions helped maintain the happiness of the other villages.

“Rest assured, you’ll have a new companion soon enough.” She pulled the jar into her arms, patting it reassuringly like a mother might do with her baby.

Unfortunately, losing one villager meant they would need a replacement. Children took time to mature into adults, after all.

*It really hurt us when the cardinal was driven from the country.* His information network had been integral in determining places to target and people to abduct. He'd been familiar enough with the nation's geography to pinpoint exactly where to establish new settlements, based on which local resources were available for their medicine. Further, his protection had helped them survive so long without outside interference.

Cardinal Nigel's recommendations had inspired her to increase the number of test subjects, which allowed her to improve the product, increasing its potency.

At first, the herbs they used only seemed useful for creating an analgesic, but she soon discovered that if she tweaked the process, they could be used for an aphrodisiac or a hypnotic instead. This brought in enough money that they never had to worry about starving. Their people risked exposure to poison if they left the village, but by performing ceremonies regularly, they could purify their bodies.

The concept of trading medicine initially confused the villagers, but they all saw the benefit before long. Nigel was the one who'd guided them down this path, and they had been supporting him financially ever since, while retaining a portion of the funds for themselves. They needed the village to prosper if they were going to continue bringing people into their midst.

"I hope his answer comes quickly."

Ultea couldn't make a final decision about Claudia on her own. Nigel had warned them to stay away from the duke's daughter, but since he had also expressed interest in her, it only made sense to seek his input. Renault had volunteered to be their messenger because he felt personally responsible. Assuming his journey went smoothly, he would return by the morrow.

As Nigel was no longer within the country, they couldn't contact him directly. He'd appointed someone else to act as a representative for his interests. The villagers had been instructed to contact this representative if they needed anything and heed his judgment.

*Personally, I want to make her one of us.* Claudia's presence alone would bring more life into the village. Ultea was keen to groom Claudia into her successor.

After checking their stock of herbs, Ultea left the room. She sensed someone in the dispensary. When she peeked inside, Claudia and Kiel were inspecting the room with unrestrained curiosity.

*I'm sure everything must seem new and strange to them, given that they aren't accustomed to our ways yet.* Ultea knew that they'd been wandering around exploring the village since breakfast. If they were searching for a way to escape, she wanted to tell them it was a waste of time. But they were clever enough; they would figure that out for themselves.

Ultea had already posted villagers to stand guard. The only places not under surveillance were the chapel and the forest, both areas with no escape. There wasn't much a delicate woman and a child could do to fend off the villagers anyway.

Claudia and Kiel still hadn't noticed her in the doorway. Feeling mischievous, Ultea crept up behind Claudia.

"The medicine we produce here is a village specialty," she said.

The way Claudia flinched brought a grin to Ultea's face. Both Claudia and Kiel stared at her, wide-eyed. Kiel's expression was particularly innocent, and she couldn't help scooping him into her arms.

*This is the perfect opportunity to see how mature his body is. Maybe he's already a man and we simply haven't realized.* Children didn't mature overnight, of course, but they did sometimes hit those adult milestones without anyone noticing. And it was those milestones that they had to keep a careful watch for—hence, having all the children live together in a dormitory.

Ultea slipped her hands toward his lower body, groping between his legs. Blood rushed to Kiel's face. Her smile deepened at his reaction. There was no sign that he had reached that adult milestone yet. *Then I was right. He's still a bit too young. We'll just have to wait for him to get a little older.*

While she was at it, she pulled Claudia in her arms too. Her reaction had been similarly enjoyable, making Ultea's heart pound. *Ah, I can't wait to have a taste of her.* Desire was building within her.

Now was the perfect opportunity to teach the two of them a bit more about the village. Once she finished telling them about the purpose of this building, she watched the two of them link hands and leave.

Ultea checked on the inventory in the room and then extinguished the lanterns. She had plans that evening, so she wouldn't be returning to the chapel. She carried only a personal lantern to light her way as she climbed the stairs.

"Oh dear. Someone must have been up to mischief."

There was a sprinkling of dried leaves at the top of the stairs that hadn't been there when she came in. No doubt the children had pulled another prank on Claudia and Kiel. As much as Ultea wished they would clean up after themselves, it could wait until tomorrow morning. She smiled to herself, remembering how Claudia and Kiel had chased after the kids before. Many adults reacted with irritation when the children played pranks on them, but Claudia and Kiel had enjoyed themselves. Perhaps they would adapt quickly to life here.

*Yes. This must be a sign of the divine guiding us.* She offered up a prayer at the altar before leaving the chapel.

## Chapter 17:
## The Villainess Meets the Village Girls

THAT NIGHT, KIEL AND CLAUDIA were back in their room at the couple's house. Kiel had his arms crossed over his chest, deep in thought. "I'm suspicious of the chapel basement," he said.

"So am I," Claudia agreed.

They had been able to investigate the dispensary a bit before the chieftess arrived, but there'd been nothing amiss. The analgesic was definitely processed there, but there was no sign of an aphrodisiac or a hypnotic. Yet Claudia was certain the answers they sought were in there somewhere.

Kiel shared her opinion. They waited until the couple was fast asleep and then snuck out of the house. Torches were burning outside, but only in certain parts of the village—mainly the entrance and the stables. They obviously wanted the light sources to keep watch for Claudia or Kiel trying to make a run for it.

The two of them had to feel around through the darkness to find their way. They couldn't risk a lantern for fear of drawing attention to themselves. And so they crept along, careful not to make any noise. Claudia's heart thundered in her chest with impatience at their slow pace, but everything would be for naught if the villagers discovered them.

She thought they were being cautious until they rounded a corner and nearly slammed into someone. Both she and Kiel gasped

and slapped their hands over their mouths. The other person did the same. Squinting through the darkness, Claudia was stunned to realize who it was. *Aila?*

Aila wasn't carrying a lantern either. Much like Claudia and Kiel, she had been sneaking around. That was why they hadn't sensed her coming. But why would she—a villager—be creeping around in the dark?

"Miss Dee?" Aila whispered. "Is Kiel with you too?"

"Yes. He's here," Claudia answered, voice low. It took a moment for her to notice that there were a couple of other girls standing behind Aila.

"Actually, we were coming to talk to you," Aila said.

Claudia turned her attention back to Aila, blinking. "Me?"

"This isn't a good place to discuss this. Follow me."

Aila beckoned her along and slid through the shadows, leading them to the entrance of the forest. Here, they were far enough from the rest of the houses to avoid eavesdroppers. For extra security, Aila crouched in the undergrowth and motioned for the others to do the same. Better to decrease the chances of anyone finding them.

"I don't think Kiel will be forced to do a ceremony yet, so I mainly want to warn you, Miss Dee."

"I assume you mean the ceremony meant to purify us of poison?"

Aila's nose wrinkled. "There *is* no poison! It's a complete lie!" Claudia had only hoped to press the girl for answers, but Aila

exploded with pent-up rage.

One of the girls beside Aila pressed her palm over Aila's mouth. "Quiet! They'll hear you!"

"Sorry," Aila muttered to her two friends. When she turned her head back toward Claudia, her face was tight with panic. "I meant what I said, though. There is no poison. If there was, then we'd have shown symptoms by now."

"That's because, um…" one of the girls began, then stopped.

"Because all three of us and our parents came from outside the village," Aila supplied. She went on to explain that they had been living in squalor when one of the villagers reached out to them, promising that they could live more comfortably if they moved here—with better food, clothing, and shelter. Their parents had jumped on the opportunity. "And since they were supposedly 'infected' with this poison, they had to do this ceremony. They've been…weird ever since."

"What do you mean by 'weird'?" asked Claudia. Aside from their odd beliefs, Aila's parents seemed perfectly normal.

"They space out a lot, like they're in a daze. But that's not even the strangest part." Aila glanced at one of her friends.

The girl's face fell. Her lips trembled, pressed tight like she carried an unbearable weight on her shoulders. "It's…my mom," she said haltingly. "She had a baby, but she said she doesn't know who the dad is."

"It's not just her either. No one knows who the fathers are of any kids born here. Everyone just says they're 'a blessing from the ceremony,'" Aila added.

*Oh dear.* Claudia wanted to put her head in her hands but resisted.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Aila said, seeking validation. "I mean, their husbands should be the dads, right?"

Claudia wasn't sure if the girls fully understood the implication of the fathers being unknown.

The girl who'd shared her story began sobbing, her shoulders quaking. Claudia leaned forward, holding the girl in her arms. "It's all right," she promised. "There's nothing for you to be scared of. You haven't done anything wrong."

Aila's friend continued weeping, squeaking out between her tears, "Tonight…my dad went to the chieftess's house. I-I heard him and my mom talking…"

"He went to her house?"

When the girl could no longer speak through her tears, Aila answered for her. "The chieftess sometimes invites one or two people to her home, and whatever they do, it's similar to the ceremony." She gritted her teeth. It was clear from Aila's reaction that *she* understood that her parents were being unfaithful to each other. Claudia knew better than most that a parent betraying their marriage cut deep.

"Village of happiness, what nonsense," Claudia growled, remembering what the chieftess had said when she welcomed them.

That was what she'd called it—the village of happiness. "As if this place isn't what's causing people pain."

It made her heart ache, especially because there was nothing she could immediately do about it. Her whole body vibrated with emotion. It vexed her how powerless she was—powerless to help them, powerless to resist her own capture.

The girl's tears dried up at Claudia's words. "So you…you believe us?" she croaked, peering up into Claudia's eyes.

"Of course I do. I believe you completely."

This time, Aila was the one whose eyes glistened with tears—not of distress but of relief.

"I'm so glad!" Aila cried out. "So we really aren't crazy." The way she acted suggested that she and her friends had lost confidence, gaslit daily by the other villagers. They had begun to believe that *they* were the ones in the wrong. By the teachings of the village, what they were saying was heresy. Claudia was proud of them for holding strong and trusting their gut despite the pressure to conform.

"You did well to stay strong for so long," Claudia told them. She couldn't imagine how many times they must have come close to breaking.

Fat tears rolled down Aila's cheeks, and her shoulders slumped with relief. Claudia had given them the affirmation they longed for. "But, Miss Dee, if you do the ceremony, you'll start acting weird too."

"She's right!" said one of the other girls. "You have to leave!"

To Claudia’s surprise, they shared that they had been searching for a way to escape the village themselves.

“At nighttime, after the adults watching us are fast asleep, it’s easy to sneak out of the dorm,” said Aila. They did their assigned duties during the day, but they slipped out at night, unbeknownst to the rest of the villagers. That was partly how they found out about their parents’ infidelity. “As long as we stay away from the torches, we can go wherever we want.”

“But the village only has one exit, right?” Claudia asked. If they had to escape, there was no way to avoid the light of the torches there.



"Yeah. That's why I figured I could snuff them out." Aila went on to explain that they could help Claudia escape that way: the villagers on watch would be too busy apprehending Aila and her conspirators to notice. These girls were willing to sacrifice themselves for her. "But if we do, you have to tell people outside that there's something seriously wrong with this place."

Claudia could tell they'd racked their brains to come up with this plan, but she couldn't accept their sacrifice. She shook her head. "I can't."

"Why not?!" Aila demanded. "I thought you knew there was something wrong here!"

"That's not the part I take issue with," Claudia told her calmly. She understood that they would probably need Aila and her friends' help to leave. There was no way to escape without some kind of distraction. "I refuse to let you girls sacrifice yourselves."

Aila clenched her fists. "We don't have time! You need to get out of here and get help!" Her voice was strained with emotion.

"It's because I'm an adult now," one of the other girls chimed in. Her body was more developed than Aila and the others.

"Oh, did you have your birthday recently?" asked Claudia.

The three girls appeared to be around the same age, but some people looked younger than others. Maybe she was actually older than she appeared.

"No," said the girl. "I've had my courses for the first time. When that happens to a girl, or when a boy has his first nocturnal emission,

then they've become an adult in the village. That's why they have us live together, so we can't hide it."

Claudia remembered the woman she saw laundering their clothes that morning. She must have been checking their underwear to see if any of the children had reached one of those milestones. It had seemed so innocent at the time—just an everyday chore. It was hard to believe there was such a dark purpose behind it. Claudia suddenly found it hard to breathe now that it was all sinking in.

"Once you've done your ceremony, I think mine is next," the girl went on. "The villagers always 'celebrate' whenever one of us becomes an adult."

Claudia's blood might have run cold at that point, if not for the warmth of Kiel holding her hand. It stunned her that the village would make such a young girl participate in a ceremony where women could wind up pregnant without knowing who the father was. A girl's first courses and a boy's nocturnal emissions were natural parts of maturing, but they did not indicate someone was an adult.

*Is that why she was groping Kiel in the dispensary? To see if he was an adult by their standards?* Claudia was glad she had interrupted when she did. At the same time, she was shocked by the chieftess's audacity to do such a thing to him.

"I don't want to do the ceremony!" the girl cried. "I don't want a baby!"

"I won't let them put you through that," Claudia promised her. It was hard to get the words out. She was so disgusted by everything she'd learned that her throat felt like it was closing up. Her head

pounded, heat concentrating in her temples as fury coursed through her. “I swear to you, here and now, I will not let them perform one more ceremony.”

The cycle of misery would end here.

Kiel, who had been listening quietly the entire time, said, “I agree. We’re going to stop this.” His voice carried such conviction in it that the girls looked instantly relieved.

Claudia tried to soften her expression, offering them a kind smile. “Yes, you can be sure help is coming.”

“Really?!”

Sylvester already knew there was a village to the north. Helen would tell him everything she’d learned from Kiel, and he would send out a rescue party.

“That’s why the safest thing to do is wait,” Claudia told them.

“But you can’t do the ceremony!” Aila protested.

“I agree,” she said. “If they settle on a date, we’ll have no choice but to run.”

“It’ll be tomorrow night at the earliest,” Aila said. “Renault—one of the guys in the village—took our fastest horse. I think they’re talking with someone on the outside.”

Right then, Claudia pictured a man with silver-streaked blond hair and blue eyes. *Cardinal Nigel was banished from Harland. Could they really contact him so easily?*

“Whoever it is, they’ve been communicating with this person for a while. It’s who they were telling about Kiel. If nothing goes wrong,

Renault should be back tomorrow morning."

"But you said it will take place at night, yes?" Claudia clarified.

Aila nodded. "Yeah. You'll have to spend the day purifying your body. Once the sun goes down, you'll go to the chieftess's house with the rest of the villagers. That's when it starts."

"Were you really planning to help me escape? Before we ever even spoke to each other?"

Aila frowned at Claudia. "If we waited until tomorrow night, it would be too late!"

So what she said earlier about snuffing out the torches hadn't been a spur-of-the-moment suggestion. Aila and her friends had formulated a plan well ahead of time to give Claudia a chance to get away before her ceremony. They'd resolved themselves to face whatever consequences arose, snuck out of their dormitory, and come to find her.

Claudia's heart swelled with emotion. *I cannot let their good intentions go to waste.* That was why she had refused Aila's proposal.

"I've already said as much, but we can't carry out your plan. You would be punished for your involvement, wouldn't you?"

Aila avoided meeting her eyes. "But…"

"Let's think of another way. For that, I'll need any information you can give us. Would you be willing to trust us and help us out?"

Aila was impatient. She didn't want to risk waiting, but when she realized Claudia wasn't giving up, she was quick to agree. There was a

glimmer in her eyes that shone even brighter after speaking with Claudia.

"We'll trust you," Aila said. "And we'll help out!" Judging by the looks in the other two girls' eyes, they seemed equally determined.

"Thank you," Claudia said to them with a smile. She straightened up, standing tall with her shoulders back, wanting them to see her resolve. "I swear I will save you all. There's no need for you to live in fear anymore." She wouldn't let anyone harm them. "I may not look it, but I have more power than the chieftess."

Aila and her friends had no idea that Claudia was the daughter of a duke, but they had still planned to sacrifice themselves if it meant freeing her to find help for all of them. They deserved better. Claudia would make sure their efforts weren't in vain.

## Chapter 18:
## The Anxious Village Girl Discovers a Goddess

"AILA, DON'T CAUSE TROUBLE," her mother told her.

"I'm not 'causing trouble,'" Aila huffed back at her.

"You're letting outside beliefs confuse you. I realize you haven't been purified yet, so I suppose you can't help it, but you can't be spreading it to the other children."

Aila rolled her eyes. "There's no such thing as poison in the first place! If there was, how come I have no symptoms?!"

Her mother gave a beleaguered sigh. "There you go, yelling again. Now *there's* your symptom."

"No, it's not! Mom, why won't you listen to me?"

At that, Aila's mother shot her an exasperated look. "I am listening to you right now, aren't I?"

This again. It was *always* like this; they were like oil and water. No matter how much Aila tried to protest the village's teachings, her mother dismissed Aila's every argument and behavior as "the poison."

*It wasn't always this way.*

Aila was born and raised in the southern part of the Thomases' territory, in a village near the border. Her family barely managed to scrape by, the food on their table always sparse.

Then, one day, a man visited the village. Aila's family had been happy to answer his questions and share information about the area.

Perhaps because of their kindness, the man told them a secret: there was another village nearby with food aplenty. The reason so few knew about it was because the village couldn't risk too many newcomers at once. However, since Aila's family had shown such compassion to him, he wanted to invite them to live in the village.

Aila's family was initially reluctant to abandon their neighbors. They tried to negotiate with the man—couldn't everyone else in *their* village come along too? But no, the man said the miraculous settlement was too small to accommodate everyone, even with its abundance of food and other resources. They couldn't accept every person. Her family requested a day to deliberate and asked Aila what she wanted.

*If I'd known then what I know now, I would've refused to go!*

Alas, at the time, her hunger got the better of her. She told them she wanted to move. She now feared that her eagerness was the last push they had needed to make their decision. How ironic that *then* they had wanted her input and listened to her. But ever since her parents underwent the ceremony, they had become different people. If pressed for an explanation, she couldn't describe exactly how they had changed. All she knew was that they were practically strangers to her now. People she didn't recognize.

*What happened to them?* It was unsettling. The scariest part was that she felt like she'd lost the only people she could rely on.

Their new environment was exactly as the man had promised: they had food, shelter, and clothing. They wanted for nothing. The

village was so tranquil and the other villagers were content, with their every need fulfilled. Her old village hadn't had any of these things.

At first, her family was overjoyed to finally fill their bellies. The villagers were also incredibly kind and welcoming. It was her parents who initially sensed something was amiss because they were forbidden to leave the village. The other villagers were always watching too, making sure no one tried to escape. But while they had their doubts, the date of their ceremony arrived quickly.

That was when everything changed.

Aila was forced to leave her parents' home and live in the dormitory with the other children. She found it odd, of course, but it wasn't like her parents were shipping her off somewhere. If all she had to do was sleep a little farther away from them, she could accept that. It was even fun being around more people her own age.

She made friends quickly enough. A few children had, like her, moved here with their parents from other villages. With so much in common, they bonded easily. The only thing Aila disliked was how the dormitory supervisor would always check their underwear whenever they changed.

One day, a girl came running back to the dormitory covered in mud, tears streaming down her face. She claimed one of the men had done something to hurt her in the forest. He disappeared the very next day, never to be seen again.

"Even for adults, there is a line you must never cross," Aila's mother told her. "He didn't understand that, so the chieftess had to dispose of him. If you ever have a problem, you should go to the

chieftess about it immediately. I'm sure she will protect you." But then her mother would always scare her by adding, "If you don't follow the rules, you'll be the one she disposes of next."

The very sound of the word "dispose" terrified Aila.

There were other villagers who disappeared after that.

"Did the chieftess dispose of them too?" she asked her mother.

"Oh, no, dear. You mean the hunter who lived here, yes? He was assigned to a different village."

"'Assigned'…?" She wrinkled her brow, testing the feel of the word on her tongue.

"It means he moved," her mother explained further. "This place has sister villages all over. One of the others needed more people."

"Does that mean we might be 'assigned' to another village someday?"

"It's possible," her mother admitted. "But we would live the same way we do now. The other villages are just like ours, so they have plenty of food." She smiled gently as she said it, but something about the idea made heat build in the back of Aila's eyes.

*Will I be able to stay here with everyone? Or will I be torn away someday?* She curled up in the fetal position in her bed as these questions plagued her. After all this time, she had finally made friends, and now her mother was telling her that someday she might have to leave all over again?

As worry churned in her stomach, Aila slipped out of her bed and the dormitory altogether. She was going to talk to the chieftess

about her concerns. She didn't want to be separated from her friends.

The chieftess's house was the only one with red window frames, though that was hard to make out in the dark. Aila knew it was the one closest to the entrance, so she knew where to go without seeing it clearly. She dashed past the rows of other houses, hurrying to her destination. When she made it under the eaves of the chieftess's house, she heard a strange voice, accompanied by a heavy panting she associated with vigorous exercise.

A muffled moan came out from within the chieftess's house.

It wasn't a noise Aila had ever heard a person make before. She retreated a step and her instincts took over, sending her back a few more. Moments later, she heard what sounded like the rhythmic slap of meat; deeply unsettled, she turned and fled.

*I don't want to know what that was. I don't want to know!* Aila was so terrified that rather than return to the dormitory, she ran for her parents' home, where she knew they would be fast asleep in bed.

"Mom! Dad! Wake up!" she cried as she burst into their bedroom.

No one was inside.

"Mom? Dad?" Puzzled, she wandered through the halls and looked in the other rooms. No matter where she searched, they were nowhere to be found.

That was when she realized the truth—the truth she had been so desperate to deny. Could the voices she'd heard at the chieftess's

house, the ones that sounded so unfamiliar to her, have been her parents?

Aila's vision darkened.

What were her parents doing at the chieftess's house? The moaning and panting echoed in her ears even now. She shook her head, trying to banish it from her memory. *No, no! What's going on? Why were Mom and Dad there?!* It horrified her, shook her to her core. Despair clawed at her, pulling her spirit ever downward. As much as she wanted to turn to someone for help, she had no one.

Aila had long thought there was something strange about the village. Everything about this place, from the environment to the bizarre beliefs, was different from the way she'd grown up. For so long, she had turned a blind eye to the sinking feeling in her stomach because she was happy that she didn't have to starve and that she'd finally made friends.

Her parents had been acting suspicious since their ceremony, but she could still talk to them. For the most part, they still sounded and acted like themselves during the day; that was why she hadn't given it too much thought. But after what she witnessed that night, the seed of doubt in her had blossomed and grown into something she couldn't suppress any longer.

*This village is weird, seriously weird! I swear there's something wrong with it!* As soon as she was convinced, her mind became torn. Part of her was determined to fight back, but there was another part too. A darker part. As long as she stayed motivated to fight back against the village culture, she could be strong. The problem arose in

those moments between, when the darkness within her threatened to swallow her whole.

*What if you're the weird one?* the darkness whispered. *What if the adults in the village are right? You're only a child. What if you're wrong? You should just accept the village's ways.*

And was the darkness wrong? She was only one person. Alone, fighting would do her no good. If she did something to anger the chieftess, she could be *disposed of*.

There were some villagers who repeatedly caused problems in the community. By sheer coincidence, she had seen one of them being taken to the chapel once. She had peeked in, watched as the chieftess led the villager down the steps into the basement. That was the last time she had ever seen that person.

*So why not give up?* the darkness purred in her ear so convincingly. *No matter how much you struggle, it will never amount to anything.*

Despite it, Aila refused to surrender. Her two closest friends agreed with her that something was wrong with the village. She had told them her suspicions, knowing they might not believe her, yet they said their parents had been to the chieftess's house too.

*So it's not just my parents.*

It gave Aila courage to know she wasn't alone. She began gathering as much information she could, inquiring into the ceremony as carefully as possible without arousing suspicion.

What she'd learned so far was that ceremonies happened about once a month. Additional celebrations happened whenever one of the children became an adult. Incense was lit for these ceremonies, which was supposed to calm people's nerves and ease their worries.

Then she discovered that her friend's mother was pregnant.

"Your mom said she doesn't know who the dad is?" Aila asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. All she would tell me is that it was a blessing from the ceremony, so she didn't know for sure." Understandably, her friend found this confusing.

If Aila were in her friend's position, she might have demanded more explanation than that. *How is that even possible?* She didn't know, but for some reason, the strange cries of her parents in the chieftess's house rang in her ears. When her friend broke down into tears, Aila cried with her.

Then the most terrifying thing of all happened: their other friend had her first courses. That was when they realized the reason the dormitory supervisor always checked their underwear.

"I don't want a ceremony," her friend said.

"Me neither," Aila agreed. "Isn't there some way we can escape?"

If they could find a way to leave, they might be able to get help from outside. That was the only way they could avoid having ceremonies of their own. Together, they started searching for a way to run before the chieftess chose a date for the ritual. During the day,

they attended to their duties as normal. At night, they slipped out of the dormitory to scout the area, looking for avenues of escape or places to hide. They discovered that only two places were lit by torches at night: the village entrance and the stables. Since nighttime made it so easy to sneak away from the dormitory, it also seemed like the best time for them to flee.

"I can snuff out the torches at the entrance," Aila told her friends.

"What will happen to you when they catch you?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure they'll be angry."

"Not just angry—they might dispose of you!"

"Do we have any other choice?" Aila shot back, hands on her hips.

The girls couldn't argue with her. They were cornered. If the only way to save them was to sacrifice herself, Aila was willing to do it. She would do whatever it took.

Fortunately, the chieftess hadn't yet chosen a date for her friend's ceremony. The village was preoccupied by an outsider who had been investigating them.

*Maybe we can ask them for help!* Alas, she and her friends never had the opportunity to meet whoever it was. When she heard this person had contacted one of the other villages and not hers, she was discouraged. The other village was far, far away from theirs; they would never make it all the way here.

With the only thread of hope ripped away from her, the darkness encroached once more. Aila was weary by this point. Maybe this really was pointless. Maybe she and her friends would have no choice but to undergo—

*No! I refuse!*

Aila didn't want to turn into someone else the way her parents had. She was screaming on the inside, but no one could hear her.

When Aila learned that more people would be joining the village, her resignation grew. She didn't give it much thought. Whoever they were, they would probably be assigned to another village anyway.

Her opinion changed when she saw Dee and Kiel. They were so different from anyone else she had ever met. They obviously hadn't lived in poverty and moved here for a better life. *And since they haven't undergone a ceremony yet, they should still be in their right minds.* All the other villagers were merely puppets for the chieftess, even Aila's own parents.

As she watched Dee chase after the children in the wake of their prank, she made her decision. Dee seemed like a good person. Aila had thought so from the moment they shared breakfast together. *If she won't listen to what I have to say, I'll just have to give up. But it's worth a shot.*

Dee was the most beautiful lady she had ever seen, even prettier than the chieftess. Aila didn't want Dee to become another victim. If Dee had indeed come from a proper town, then she might know someone who could help them.

There was something else Aila had noticed about Dee: her impeccable etiquette and graceful manner. *I wonder if this is what aristocrats are like.* Aila had never actually met one, only heard rumors, but there was something about Dee that just exuded nobility.

When the sun set, she shared her thoughts with her friends.

"Sounds good to me. Maybe she knows people who can help us."

"And they might delay my ceremony if there's a big fuss when she leaves."

Aila still wanted to save her friends. She wouldn't let anyone else sacrifice themselves; she'd be the one to put out the torches if it came to it.

As soon as night fell and the supervisor was asleep, they snuck out. Aila's heart leapt into her throat when she nearly slammed into Dee rounding a corner. She guided Dee and Kiel to the forest to make sure no one overheard them, then told them everything she knew.

When Dee stood at her full height afterward, backlit by the moon, she had looked like the lunar goddess Aila had heard about in stories. Dee's black hair billowed behind her in the wind, glimmering in the moonlight.

"I swear I will save you all," Dee told them.

She was in more danger than any of them, yet she smiled with strength and confidence. It reminded Aila of her mother before they had ever come to this village. Her heart swelled with warmth, and the tears fell freely.

Dee embraced Aila, stroking her and promising everything would be okay. Aila sobbed into her chest. She got the hiccups, which was embarrassing, but her friends were bawling along with her. Aila reached out and hugged them both. Dee had affirmed their doubts about the village. It was such a huge weight off Aila's shoulders. All the fear locked inside her finally began to dissipate.

Aila would never forget this night for as long as she lived. Even if she was punished for helping Dee, she was sure the memories of this moment would carry her through. Dee's deep-blue eyes were etched in her mind, along with her confident words and gentle smile.

"I may not look it, but I have more power than the chieftess," Dee had told them, a fearless smile on her lips. She was so beautiful that it sent a chill through Aila.

Aila had long prayed to the Capricious God—the god her family had worshipped before coming here—to send someone to save them. This time, she asked for something different. *Give me the strength to save my friends. Save Miss Dee from this place. I finally have the courage to move forward, so please, I beg of you…give me the strength to put an end to this nightmare with my own hands.*

## Chapter 19:
## The Villainess Endures

"SO, ALL OF THE VILLAGERS who've been disposed of were taken to the chapel's basement, correct?" Claudia asked. Of everything Aila had told her, that stuck out to her the most.

"Yes," Aila confirmed. "I saw them taking the stairs down."

"And the only room in the basement is the dispensary, right?"

"As far as I know."

Did that mean the chieftess had disposed of these people in the dispensary? There was nowhere else to go, after all.

"Miss Dee," Kiel cut in, "I think we should take a closer look at the basement."

"If you do, you should do it while it's still dark out," Aila suggested. "The chieftess will be in her house all night. Whenever she brings people over, like tonight, she never leaves."

Claudia opted not to press for more details in that regard. From Aila, she knew that nobody went in the chapel unless they were processing herbs. Otherwise, it was the chieftess who kept inventory and maintained the place. Perhaps the villagers subconsciously avoided the building because they knew that was where troublemakers went to disappear.

"Is the place not locked?" Claudia asked.

"I don't think so. No reason to," Aila said. "The chieftess checks inventory daily. If anything was stolen, she'd know immediately."

This was a tiny settlement. If anyone was acting suspiciously, the other villagers would notice. It was likely part of their teachings to keep an eye on one another. Everyone understood what would happen to them if they stole anything.

"Thank you. Let's part for now," Claudia said. "We'll see what we can find at the chapel." She and Kiel would need time to come up with an escape plan based on what they had learned from Aila and her friends. "You three should go back to your beds."

Aila nodded. "All right. There would be too many of us if we went with you anyway. That basement is pretty cramped." She made Claudia and Kiel promise to let them know as soon as they had a plan. "We'll do whatever it takes to help!"

"I know, and we'll definitely need you when the time comes," Claudia said. The girls' assistance was crucial to get everything in place to pull off their escape. The villagers would be suspicious if Claudia tried to gather any supplies herself. "We'll be depending on you. But you mustn't do anything dangerous."

"Got it!"

Aila and her friends were smiling as they parted ways. Claudia wanted to make sure they never had a reason to stop smiling again.

"Let's go to the chapel." She took Kiel's hand, and the two of them walked up the slope to the building. Just as Aila had said, the door was unlocked.

Claudia knew it would be dangerous to navigate without a light source, so she took one of the lanterns near the entrance, lit it, and hid it beneath her skirt.

Kiel gaped at her. “Won’t your skirt catch fire?”

“The flame is contained within the lantern. We can’t risk anyone noticing the light and discovering us, can we?”

Maids’ skirts were made of thick fabric to prevent tears on the job. It was perfect for dimming the lantern so that none of its light shone through the windows. Claudia had to stoop a little as she walked to illuminate the ground in front of them. She led them down the aisle, toward the stairs.

“Do you think there’s another room besides the dispensary down there?” she asked.

“There must be. Especially if this is where she’s been disposing of villagers.” They stopped at the top of the stairs. Kiel’s eyes fell on the dry leaves that remained there. He had dropped them when they first came to investigate, saying it would help them hear anyone who might follow. “You didn’t notice that any of the leaves had been stepped on when we left this afternoon, did you?”

“I didn’t.”

In that case, where had the chieftess come from if not the stairs? It was something that had been bothering them both. The only possibility was that there was another room in the basement.

Now that they’d made it to the staircase, there was no reason to keep the lantern hidden. Claudia lifted it out of her skirt and they

cautiously made their way down, one step at a time. At the bottom, she pressed her hand to the wall, checking for anything unusual. She couldn't trust her eyes alone.

"Nothing suspicious on the surface," Claudia said.

"Hmm. If we consider that she appeared behind you, she must have come from outside."

When the chieftess appeared, Claudia's back had been to the entrance of the dispensary. If there was a door inside the room, Claudia would have noticed her.

"It would have been difficult to avoid the leaves to come down the stairs," Claudia reasoned.

"Are you implying we were so focused on our investigation that we just didn't hear her?" Kiel shook his head. "I know I might not look it, but I *am* a detective." One with terrible luck, and he knew it. That was why he'd spread the leaves in the first place. And, as he claimed, he was not such a dimwit that he would forget to listen for them crunching under someone's foot. Little tricks like these had been valuable tools in conquering his bad luck.

"Then there must be something we overlooked," said Claudia. It didn't help that the basement was so dark.

Dried leaves had tumbled down to the bottom of the steps, possibly because of all the traffic up and down the stairs since Kiel first sprinkled them. Stepping on one such leaf, Kiel tripped and fell, his legs sliding out from under him.

He yelped as he landed hard on his bottom. “Why am I always so unlucky?”

“Are you all right?”

“I landed on my rear, so I’m fine.” Kiel pressed a hand to the wall to steady himself and heave back to his feet, but froze. He leaned closer to the wall, inspecting it. “Hold on a sec… Hey, I found it! A hidden door! See this piece here? It’s not made of stone, it’s made of wood.”

Like the rest of the building, the walls were made of stones; only the doors were made of wood. The spot he’d pointed out was five rows up on the wall.

Claudia crouched and ran her hand along the wall. “You’re right. These aren’t real stones.” She held the lantern a little closer. The wood was masterfully camouflaged to look like stone. To create a convincing texture, the wood was painted with what seemed to be crushed gravel. She knocked her fist against it; the feel was entirely different.

“It’s even set low to the ground so no one will notice by feeling along the wall.” Kiel had only discovered it because he’d slipped, putting him at eye level with the fake stone.

“Sometimes I can’t tell whether you’re lucky or unlucky.”

“Unlucky!” Kiel said with great emphasis. “If I were lucky, I wouldn’t have had to fall over to see it!”

She giggled. “I suppose you have a point.” It was hard to call him lucky when he had to injure himself for clues. “But how do you

suppose we open it?”

“Let’s look for a depression or a cavity. Anywhere your fingers can catch that feels different.” Kiel felt along the wall. “I think this is it!”

The wooden section of the wall silently slid open. Kiel had found a spot that, when pushed, activated the controls for the door. The secret entrance was quite small—a hair more than fifty centimeters tall, and just shy of fifty centimeters wide.

A muscular man would need to turn sideways to fit, and a heavyset person wouldn’t make it inside at all. *Now that I think about it, there isn’t a single overweight person in this village,* Claudia thought. That could be because their custom was to eat meals together, and they were somewhat limited in what they could consume. All their food was rather simple and bland.



The darkness loomed low, like a great beast lying in wait for prey. Claudia held out the lantern and twisted to fit through, throwing herself into its waiting maw. Once they emerged on the other side, they found themselves in a spacious chamber. In the middle was a workbench, much like in the dispensary.

"I wonder if this is where the chieftess makes the aphrodisiac and hypnotic."

Though similar, this room went farther back than the dispensary. Kiel was busy exploring when he groaned in disgust.

Curious about what he'd found, Claudia held out her lantern and made her way toward him. What she saw made her jerk her head away immediately.

There was a shelving unit along the wall, lined with jars. There were dozens upon dozens of them, more than she could count, and inside were various parts that she could only assume had belonged to humans.

"They look like specimens preserved in formalin," Kiel said. "Disgusting."

They wouldn't find any more answers by staring, so they moved on. The room felt less claustrophobic on the other side of the workbench. They soon came upon a chair left conspicuously in the middle of the floor.

"Urk… It's got restraints," Kiel muttered.

Leather belts hung loose around the arms and legs of the chair. There was a table nearby covered with what looked to be medical

implements.

"So this is where she disposes of them," Claudia said.

At the very back of the room was a much larger workbench with faded red stains all over it. An enormous saw hung on the wall behind it. The air around it was thick with something she couldn't place, but it made her head pound.

"It seems like," she said, the words sticking in her throat, "she was doing experiments on humans."

"You're exactly right." Kiel joined her, holding a sheaf of papers that appeared to be documentation of just that. "If the other room is the dispensary, then this is her research lab. Judging from her notes, the hypnotic is still in development."

The document listed several side effects, including slowed processing abilities and personality dissolution.

"Now I know what ingredients she's using. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like she's written how she processes them."

"Perhaps they only discuss that verbally and don't keep a record," Claudia offered. It would be dangerous to have such information written down. Outsiders, like them, could then get their hands on it. If the chieftess was trying to keep this secret, and she certainly seemed to be, then she wouldn't want to leave any evidence.

"Oh well," Kiel said. "Having the ingredients is something! Looking at the tools she uses to make the stuff, it can't be too complicated. A specialist could probably examine the final product and figure out how it was made."

As desperate as they were for anything to use as evidence against the chieftess and the village, Ultea would know they had been here if anything went missing. Claudia and Kiel knew better than to take chances and quickly left the laboratory behind. By the time they returned to the chapel's main floor, they both felt more at ease.

Kiel took a deep breath. "The air up here feels so much cleaner."

"There must be ventilation down there if they process medicine, but it wasn't much help in that room. Not with what we saw," Claudia replied, and Kiel nodded.

"That must be where she was when we were down there before. I bet the other villages I investigated had hidden rooms just like that one."

They closed the door and took care not to leave any trace of their visit. With their search over, they returned to the house where they'd been staying. As they crept closer, Claudia noticed a light moving around inside. Panic seized hold of her.

"Oh no! Have they noticed we're out of bed?" Kiel whispered.

"Let's head in and see what's going on. If they're awake, we'll act like nothing is amiss. We can tell them we had trouble sleeping and went for a walk."

"Got it!"

Claudia tiptoed to the front door and pressed her ear against it, trying to pick up any noise from within.

The wife was muttering to herself. "What am I going to do?"

Claudia grabbed the knob and swung the door open.

"Goodness!" The woman jumped. "There you are! Where have you been? It's the middle of the night."

"I'm sorry. We were having trouble sleeping," Claudia said, reciting the story she'd agreed on with Kiel.

"Please let me know if you're going to go out at night." The wife sighed. "It's my own fault for not saying so sooner. My husband isn't here, so I was beside myself."

Claudia's brows rose. "He's not here?"

"He is with the chieftess tonight." The woman put a hand to her chest. "Oh, thank goodness you came back. I was afraid the chieftess would think I failed in my duties if you went missing, even though I've been checking on you like she asked."

*So Aila's father is with the chieftess.* Bitterness spread through Claudia's mouth. But that wasn't the most interesting thing the woman had said. Although she gave them a warning, she didn't admonish them any further. Claudia and Kiel retreated to their room.

"So she's been keeping an eye on us," Claudia said once the door closed behind them.

"She was really worked up. I don't think we have to worry about her reporting this."

If the woman were to tell the chieftess that they'd gone missing for an unknown amount of time, she would only get herself in trouble. She seemed anxious to avoid that.

"The villagers may keep an eye on each other, but they don't seem very vigilant," Kiel added.

"That's likely because they think there's no way to escape once they've been brought here. And it may also be due to the side effects."

"Of the hypnotic, you mean?"

She nodded. "Exactly. It seems like that's what they use in these ceremonies, doesn't it?" Aila had mentioned how much her parents changed afterward. "Aila said her parents have been spacing out, like they're completely different people. I can only surmise those are side effects of the drugs."

"That makes sense. Maybe that's also why they're not more on guard." He scoffed, "Pretty audacious when they've kidnapped a duke's daughter and turned the whole country against them."

"'The whole country' is quite a stretch," Claudia said. "But the chieftess might try to use the hypnotic on us without waiting for our ceremonies."

"And what, she thinks she can get away with everything if they brainwash us so we don't report it?" He shook his head. "It's way past that point."

"Yes, it most certainly is." Sylvester would never let the chieftess get away with what she'd done. "Besides, the government is aware that victims in captivity may often form a bond with their captor. Such instances are well documented."

"I've heard about that from the authorities. When a person is in a tense or stressful situation, it can wear them down mentally and impair their judgment."

"While there isn't an abundance of such cases on record, they are common enough that I trust our justice system would value evidence over witness statements," said Claudia.

In Claudia and Kiel's case, the villagers had ambushed the merchant's wagon to capture them. That attack was a crime by itself.

Kiel grimaced. "It's pretty scary that a drug could mess with someone's head that badly."

"Yes. Medicine can be a wonderful thing, but it can also be terrifying."

"True. Honestly, the painkiller they make is pretty incredible. My rear didn't feel sore at all after I used it."

For a moment, Claudia was stunned. "Yes," she said slowly. "I had forgotten we were ever sore to begin with." She hadn't remembered until he mentioned it, in fact.

Based on what Kiel had heard from the apothecaries peddling the analgesic, there were no side effects and it was extremely potent. It was so popular that their stock sold out almost as soon as they received new product. Kiel's companion had tested it and found nothing amiss. The analgesic truly seemed to be a wonderful medicine.

The moment the villagers ambushed the merchant's wagon, they had all but guaranteed an investigation. The bigger question was whether Kiel and Claudia could keep themselves safe until help arrived.

"We need to think of an escape plan," Claudia decided.

"Yeah. Thanks to all the info from Aila and her friends, we've got some options."

They spent their time after that working out a plan, pausing only briefly to venture to the kitchen for some water.

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"The weather is wonderful today." Claudia stretched her arms over her head after stepping out of the house the following morning. Kiel rubbed his eyes, still groggy.

Since the skies were clear, they were to have breakfast in the plaza once more. But unlike yesterday, the whole village was abuzz with excitement.

"I wonder if the messenger returned?" Aila had told them he would be back this morning at the earliest. "If he did, that cannot be good for us."

The messenger in question was supposed to bring instructions for what to do with Claudia, and there was a chance they'd move her to a different location.

She shook off her unease and forced herself to face forward. "There's no point in losing spirit. Let's go to the plaza." Agonizing over things wouldn't change them. Better to spend that effort gathering information.

Kiel grinned at her, eyes crinkling. "I like your resolve, Miss Dee."

She giggled at him. “Why, thank you. I like your resilience, refusing to let your bad luck get the best of you.”

“I think we’d make a good couple.”

If Sylvester had heard that, he wouldn’t show his feelings on his face, but his smile would be wintry cold. *Oh, how I long to see him.* She believed, in her heart of hearts, that she would soon. But at the moment, she missed him more than ever, perhaps because of the terrifying things she had seen yesterday—or perhaps because the excitement in the village felt like a bad omen. Claudia prayed they would be reunited soon so she could feel his arms around her.

As soon as they arrived at the plaza, the chieftess greeted them with a wide smile on her face. Claudia knew then that her gut feeling had been right; this was bad news.

“Miss Dee,” said Ultea, “The time of your ceremony has been decided! We will be doing it tonight!”

“That’s awfully soon, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry it’s on such short notice. Normally, we’d give you a bit more warning, but everyone is anxious to have it as quickly as possible.” Her grin stayed plastered on as she added, “We simply cannot wait for you to join us.”

*I would rather not think about what exactly it is they can’t wait for.* Claudia didn’t need the added stress.

Oblivious to Claudia’s growing dread, the chieftess continued, “It will be a busy day for you. You need to purify yourself before the ceremony.”

"Would it be all right if I did so in the chapel?" Claudia replied. "It's a momentous occasion, isn't it? I would like to pray to God beforehand."

"My, what a wonderful idea! Yes, feel free to use it. Our fellow villagers aren't in the habit of prayer. I don't see any sense in forcing them to change, do you?"

Ultea's words implied that the village's unique beliefs weren't religious in nature, though Claudia thought it more likely it was the chapel the villagers avoided, not prayer. It didn't seem like they held any animosity toward the church, probably due to their alliance with Nigel.

"I will let the other villagers know not to go to the dispensary today," said Ultea. "You may use the chapel whenever you like. As soon as I've finished my own preparations, I will send for you."

Claudia wasn't sure what had Ultea in such high spirits, but she appreciated the offer to warn the other villagers away.

Aila and her friends were visibly concerned by this new development. Claudia found a moment to whisper to her, "Let's meet in secret later." She let them decide where. Now that they had a deadline, they had to hasten their plan and get ready to escape.

## Chapter 20:
## The Villainess Plots Her Escape

A VILLAGER CAME TO SUMMON Claudia for her purification while she was praying in the chapel. That was what they called it, though it turned out not to be anything special. All she needed to do was take a bath at the chieftess's house.

The hours whizzed by. Soon enough, the sun was about to reach its zenith.

*I've done everything I can. All that's left is to pray it goes smoothly.* The Capricious God would enjoy himself more if she made it entertaining, right? She gazed up at the altar before she left the chapel entirely. *I swear I will fight tooth and nail before I ever give up.*

When Claudia arrived at the chieftess's house, she shed the maid's uniform she had been wearing since she arrived. The women who were there to attend her let out audible sighs as they examined her naked form. There were four of them in total.

"Your body is so beautiful," said one.

"How does a lady achieve such a wonderfully sculpted form?" wondered another.

They took turns showering her with praise. The fact that they were curious about her beauty routine suggested that they were no different from other women. And yet, these four had already undergone their own ceremonies.

"The chieftess asked us to take special care in your purification."

"If you're concerned about anything regarding the ceremony, please don't hesitate to ask us."

"Once the ceremony begins, all your worries will melt away."

The atmosphere of the bath was relaxing. Since the chieftess had insisted they clean every inch of her, they did just that, scrubbing her hair, her nails, everything.

"We aren't being too rough, are we? Does it hurt?"

"No, it's fine," Claudia said. She refused to let them clean her more delicate areas, insisting she would take care of those herself. No one argued with her. Once she was finished, they applied oil to her skin to keep it moisturized. All told, it took about two hours from beginning to end.

"Phew. We did an incredible job, if I say so myself."

"Now, now. Miss Dee is naturally beautiful."

"Well, I won't disagree with that…but we did good work, didn't we?"

The women handed Claudia a brown dress. No sooner had she put it on than shouting erupted outside.

"Fire!"

A look out the window revealed a tower of smoke rising from the chapel.

"How terrible!" Claudia cried, then whirled to the other women. "Do you think they'll be able to put it out?"

"Of course. The men will take care of it! They're so anxious about the ceremony, they'll work as hard as they can to earn their reward."

The four women stood there, unconcerned. Claudia tried egging them on. "But isn't the dispensary inside the chapel? What about the herbs?"

"That's true… I do worry about that."

"Herbs burn quite easily, don't they?" she pressed. "I was told your medicine is used in the ceremony."

"The chieftess already set some aside for tonight, but it could be a problem if we lose our surplus."

"Yes, I'm terribly worried about what the fire could do. Shouldn't someone go to check on things?" Claudia's face crumpled, emphasizing her anxiety. If the fire got too out of hand, the men might need help to put it out.

"All right," one of them finally conceded. "I'll go have a look." She started toward the door. Before she reached it, it flew open.

"The fire's bad! We need everyone out there!" It was one of Aila's friends—the girl whose ceremony would come after Claudia's. "The chieftess called for all the adults to help!"

"Oh dear! Miss Dee, you stay here. We'll help take care of the fire."

With the girl directing them, the four women hurried out of the house, leaving Claudia behind. Claudia waited for quiet to take hold before she dashed out the door. The evening sky had turned crimson,

pierced by a thick column of smoke from the direction of the chapel. Villagers were racing toward the slope, buckets dangling from their hands. Thanks to Aila's friend, those who'd been guarding the entrance had scrambled to join the rest of the adults, so the coast was clear.

*Just like we planned.* Claudia, Kiel, and the village girls had orchestrated the fire. It had been easy to accomplish after the chieftess warned the villagers away from the chapel. There had been no guarantee that the fire would start at the right time, so Kiel had stood by to ensure everything went smoothly. He was the one who assembled the ingredients to start the fire, purposefully creating a thick, black smoke.

Kiel and Aila and her friends wouldn't be attending the ceremony, so they didn't have to prepare with the rest of the adults. They were free to use their time however they liked. They had started the fire just behind the chapel so that once the adults discovered it, it would be easy to put out.

There was no time to waste.

Claudia sprinted to the stables. It wasn't very dark outside yet, so the torches weren't lit. That was exactly why she and Kiel had picked this time to act, while there was still a bit of light out. People always lowered their guards near dusk. Even though there was less visibility as the shadows grew, people tended to convince themselves that they could see well enough.

In the capital, twilight was a prime time for carriage accidents. Drivers failed to realize how much visibility was reduced and would

not adjust accordingly. Those with experience were even likelier to overestimate themselves than newer drivers.

*From what they've said, the villagers haven't had any newcomers in a while. I can only hope they've let their guards down.* She and Kiel had been careful to act like compliant captives. They would have the best chances of escaping if no one suspected them.

Claudia took the route to the stables that Aila had described, diving into the adjacent bushes to hide. Once the stablehands had finished for the day, only two villagers stayed back to stand guard. Anyone wanting to escape would need a horse, after all.

She waited for Kiel. Her young friend soon appeared, wearing that familiar beret, and took a dramatic fall right in front of the stables. Claudia slapped her hands over her mouth to silence her gasp. She didn't hear Kiel blurting out his usual complaint, but the noise of the fall attracted one of the guards. The child shot up and took off running, knowing that getting caught would spell trouble. The guard immediately gave chase.

*Please stay safe!* Claudia hoped she'd be able to come back for her friend, but she couldn't let this stop her. She had to run. Before they commenced their plan, she and Kiel had agreed that should anything unexpected happen, at least one of them needed to get out of the village.

*It's fine. I can do this.* She took a long, shaky breath and steeled herself. Knowing she had to keep going at all costs, she emerged from the bushes.

## Chapter 21:
## The Guards Are Deceived

"HOW COME WE'VE GOTTA stand guard even on a ceremony day?"

"Just to be on the safe side, obviously. You'll still get to participate, so stop whining." He bit back the other words he wanted to say, like, *Not that you deserve it, after all the trouble you've caused.* The other man had been the wagon driver during the operation. The guard glared at him through narrowed eyes.

*The chieftess is too soft on him,* the guard thought. In his opinion, the driver was a liability, but the chieftess had looked after him since he was a child. He seemed to have a special place in her heart. Yet the guard still respected her judgment; despite her obvious fondness, she hadn't appointed him as their leader.

Bringing the duke's daughter, Dee, to their village when the master had warned them not to had been a mistake. There was no doubt about that. Nevertheless, the guard was ecstatic that she would soon be one of them. *You don't see women that beautiful every day.* No matter what future village inductees might look like, he very much doubted any woman would match the duke's daughter.

*Even the chieftess seems pleased with her.* He had never seen her happier than when she'd decided on doing the ceremony instead of handing Dee over to the master. Ultea seemed intent on making Dee her successor. He could see why, and he fully supported the idea.

Anyone could tell Dee was different from most. He would be more than happy to support her as the next chieftess in leading them forward.

*Some of the women might get jealous, though.* Happiness was shared among everyone, but that didn't mean there was never any discord. The villagers griped and grumbled, but they never opposed the chieftess. Nothing was more terrifying than getting on her bad side.

*Is it time for the ceremony yet? I'm sick of waiting.* The guard had tried to placate the driver by assuring him this was all a necessary precaution, but privately, he thought it was silly too. Guard duty was a complete bore. Once newcomers had undergone a ceremony, they'd give up ever trying to leave. The men watching the entrance were probably yawning right about now. They were only carrying out their duty because they knew the chieftess would welcome them into her house in the coming days to reward them for their dedication.

Something was different about today, but he couldn't put his finger on it. The guard stood there, gazing absently toward the village. An elbow dug into his ribs.

"Hey, look!" said the driver. "Is that smoke coming from the chapel?"

"You've gotta be kidding me." The guard was unnerved, watching the black smoke billow into the sky.

The dispensary was in the chapel's basement. It would be disastrous if they lost their stock of herbs. He was debating whether

to abandon his post to help extinguish it when he saw people racing up the slope to the chapel.

"If they've already got that many people on it, they should have it handled," he reasoned.

They weren't allowed to leave their posts unless it was a real emergency. If the villagers needed more hands, someone would come fetch them. But even still, he couldn't tear his gaze away from the smoke.

"Shit. This can't be good."

"Don't you think we oughtta do something?" said the driver.

It was some distance to the chapel from the stables, so they couldn't hear much from their position, but they did see the plume of fire. Some of the villagers were breaching the doors to the chapel, but once they did, an explosion blew open the doors and knocked everyone back.

The guard couldn't stand by any longer. He stepped away from the stables, trying to get a better look. All he could see were the villagers at the chapel panicking. He was about to edge closer when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a familiar boy face-plant into the dirt.

*How did he get so close without me noticing?!* he thought, rattled. The boy seemed to realize he'd been seen and took off running. Odd that he would be here with all that fuss at the chapel. *Is he responsible?!* Maybe the boy had done it as a prank, and it had gotten out of hand, so he decided to run.

“Hey! Wait right there, you!” the guard bellowed, taking a step toward him. When the boy ignored him, the guard’s suspicions grew.

“What’s going on?” asked the driver.

“That kid, Kiel, just ran off. I’m gonna go after him; you stay here and keep watch.”

“Who gives a crap about the brat? Leave him.”

The driver had a point. It wasn’t like Kiel could go far without a horse. Yet the way he’d hightailed it out of there had the guard itching to follow.

“The ceremony’s tonight,” he told the driver. “I don’t wanna ignore a possible problem.” With that, he sprinted after Kiel.

There was quite a bit of distance between them now, since he’d dawdled for so long. *Don’t think you can outrun me so easily!* He enjoyed the chase, his legs pumping and carrying him closer. Finally, he was on the boy. He launched forward, snatching Kiel by the arm.

“Why am I so unlucky?!” Kiel’s voice hadn’t dropped yet, but he sounded more feminine than the guard remembered.

Scrunching his brow, he yanked the boy around to face him and gasped. “Aila?!”

Her face crumpled. “You’re hurting me, sir!”

Startled, he tore his hand away. “Why’re you dressed like that?”

She was wearing Kiel’s clothes, not her own. She even had on his beret and spectacles. Her pigtails were tucked away inside the hat, so he hadn’t seen them.

"Kiel asked me to put on his clothes and run around," Aila explained.

"He *asked* you to do this?"

"Yeah. I don't know why, but I've never worn anything like this before! I thought it sounded fun, so I said yes." Aila didn't seem the least bit remorseful about what she'd done. Apparently, she thought it was all a game.

"It's my fault for jumping to conclusions," the guard muttered, then paused. "Wait, why did he ask you to do it?"

"I dunno. He didn't say."

"Figures." The guard shook his head. "I'm going back to the stables. Looks like something bad is happening at the chapel, so be a good girl and scurry back to the dormitory."

"Yes, sir."

The guard made sure she was headed in the right direction before he hurried back to his post. He had a feeling he knew what Kiel was up to. Just as he feared, by the time he got back, the driver and both horses were gone. This had been a distraction from the start—a trap—and he'd fallen for it.

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"Damn it, this is so boring." The driver was initially surprised when the fire broke out at the chapel, but the excitement quickly passed. All he could think about was what would happen tonight. *I'll*

*finally be able to have her.* His loins ached at the thought of the duke's daughter. He hadn't forgiven her for kicking him in the groin when she'd first been captured. Yet when he thought of her, his body grew so hot that his mind went blank.

*Never thought I'd feel this way. Is this what they call love?* The driver had engaged in physical acts with all the village women since becoming an adult. He'd even had sex with some of them outside their monthly ceremony. He was quite experienced in bed by this point, but never before had his heart been in such disarray.

Dee was busy purifying her body at the moment—as she had been since afternoon—in preparation for the ceremony. *Man, I can't wait.* Picturing her made drool dribble down his chin. He swiped it away with his sleeve. He probably looked ridiculous.

"How far did that moron go?" he wondered aloud. His partner for the day still hadn't come back after running off after that brat. There was no reason to bother with the kid, but the other guard was dedicated. If he didn't come back soon, the driver wanted to use the opportunity to rub one out. As soon as the urge hit him, he ached for release. It was almost painful. He thought he might burst if he didn't relieve himself.

Just then, he sensed someone near the entrance to the stables. "Hm?" When he looked up, he couldn't believe what he was seeing. He rubbed his eyes. It was her, the duke's daughter. Her hair was still damp from her bath.

*Am I imagining things?* He had been thinking about the ceremony so much that maybe he was hallucinating. He stumbled

toward her, as if drawn into her orbit. The driver made it only two steps before she turned tail and fled.

"Wait!" He chased after her, but when he exited the stables, he didn't see her anywhere. "Guess it was just my imagination."

"It wasn't."

"Whoa!" His whole body jumped. There she was, standing near some bushes.

"Hey," she purred at him. "Come here. But go slowly. I want to enjoy the moment."

"What the hell're you…?" He shook his head. "You're supposed to be at the chieftess's house."

"Don't you get it? I snuck away on purpose." Her voice fell away, but her lips kept moving. He could read the words, *"I came to see you."*

His mind was having trouble processing this. As soon as he realized the implication of her words, he could barely contain his excitement. "You mean—"

"Don't make me spell it out." Then, when he started toward her, she shook a finger at him. "Ah-ah. Remember what I said? Slowly."

"Why?"

"Because…doesn't the anticipation make it more exciting?" Her damp locks clung to her cheek as she tilted her head at him.

The driver swallowed hard. Everything about her was bewitching. The chieftess had the allure of a mature woman. Her voluptuous body had a sultry aroma that always went straight to his

head and made him forget himself. He couldn't count how many times he'd indulged in her, his lust taking over. He had enough experience with the fairer sex that he could keep his wits about him, or at least he'd thought he could. *But I've never seen a woman like this before!* His whole body vibrated with need for her. It overrode any better judgment.

Dee's face fell in disappointment. "Does it not excite you?"

"No, it does!" the driver blurted out.

They hadn't even done anything yet and he was already breathing hard. He wanted to throw her to the ground and have his way with her right then and there, but the last threads of his reason held him back. Did he care if she was disappointed in him? Could he withstand if she found him boring? What if she said she wanted another man over him? The very thought was too much to bear. He vigorously shook his head, trying to dispel his fears.

"Fine," he said finally. "I'll go slowly. That's what you want, right?"

"Yes. And in return, I'll slowly reveal myself to you."

*Will she really?* He was skeptical, but she didn't give him long to doubt. She began to lift her dress, revealing her smooth, pale legs. He was entranced. Each thundering step he took, her hem inched higher, brushing across her skin. First he could see her ankles, then her calves, and soon her knees. His heart pounded in his chest so painfully that he pressed his hand over it, as if that might steady it. His tension and arousal hit a crescendo. He worried blood might spurt from his nose.

Dee flashed a mischievous smile at him, and he thought he might faint. She was so captivating, so beautiful, so endearing. *She's unmatched.* The driver had entirely forgotten his grudge against her for kicking him in the groin.

The dress she wore was plain, with a tubelike wrap with holes cut out for the neck and arms and the sleeves sewn on. Dee's chest was fuller than many of the other women's, so the fabric of the dress stretched a little too tight, and then it fell too loosely around her slender waist. The shape of the dress wasn't made to accommodate the curves of a woman's body, but somehow it couldn't mask the seductive shape of Dee's.

He could hardly wait to explore every inch of her. His lower region strained, reaching the limits of its patience. He had already been on the brink before she appeared.

"Surely this is enough," he said, hoping she'd indulge him.

"Ah-ah. You just have a little farther to go." Her gaze lowered to her skirt. "And there's still more to show you."

Now that he was closer, he could see how luscious her skin was. He couldn't wait any longer. His arms reached for her, and he took a lumbering step forward. Before his hands found their mark, something slammed into his back, followed by a blow to his head.

## Chapter 22:
## The Villainess Is Rescued by a Prince on a White Steed

"MISS DEE, are you all right?!"

"Yes. It doesn't look like he'll be moving anytime soon. Let's get going."

While the other guard was distracted, the real Kiel had stolen both horses. The original plan had been for Claudia to knock him out with a punch, but since Kiel had already mounted his horse, he'd managed to swing his foot into the driver's back. Claudia had capitalized on the moment and clobbered him too. The man was down for the count. Claudia dragged the body into the bushes before mounting her own horse.

"That sock is deadlier than I expected," Kiel said, nodding to the makeshift weapon in her hand.

"Useful, isn't it? When you don't have any weapons at your disposal, it will serve."

She had used a sock filled with stones to render the driver unconscious. It was much more powerful than her fist, even in the hands of a lady.

"Aila pulled off her part admirably," said Claudia.

"Yeah. She led that other guard pretty far."

Claudia nodded. "He didn't even notice her hair was the wrong color, it seems."

"We can thank the twilight for that. He probably couldn't get a good look and truly thought it was me because of the hat and clothes."

Darkness hadn't fully fallen yet, but in the dim light that remained, it was hard to perceive differences in color. The guard's assumptions had gotten the better of him, much to their relief.

"And those spectacles you wear for show came in handy too."

"I never dreamed I'd use them for this." Kiel had given Aila every piece of clothing he had, down to his spectacles, to make the disguise convincing. He'd donned the brown outfit that had been hanging in their closet instead. As far as anyone could tell, he looked like one of the village children.

The two urged their horses forward, anxious to leave before the sun set completely. Everything had gone exactly as they'd planned it. Thanks to the explosion at the chapel, none of the villagers had noticed anything amiss at the stables. It had been a bit of a gamble, as they weren't sure whether the explosion would work. And though Claudia and Kiel had coordinated everything, the plan itself was Kiel's idea.

*I'm impressed he knew about dust explosions.* These occurred when combustible, powdered material was dispersed through the air in high concentrations near an ignition source. The general populace understood that it was dangerous to scatter flour in the air near heat, and that was the basis for their plan.

After breakfast that morning, Claudia had asked Aila and her friends to gather flour and rope. They strung up the bag of flour

inside the chapel and hooked it to the front door. That way, if anyone tried to open it, the flour would spill into the air. They'd also taken the candles from all the lanterns and lined them up on the floor. There was no guarantee it would cause a dust explosion, but if they managed it, they would have an even bigger distraction. The reason they didn't bother setting the chapel on fire directly was because they didn't know how long it would take to spread. Their goal was to escape before nightfall, so they needed something that would draw people's attention at just the right time. To that end, Claudia had requested that no one enter during the day and had Aila and her friends rally people to the chapel when the fire broke out.

There was no way to tell whether the chapel doors had been opened; Claudia and Kiel were at the stables by that point. But the way the fire suddenly billowed suggested they had succeeded.

*So far so good,* she thought.

The torches by the village entrance hadn't been lit, and the guards were gone when they passed through. Nearly everyone had gone to the chapel, which meant few were left in the village. *We need to get as far away from here as we can before sundown.*

Now that they'd stolen the horses, no one would be catching up to them anytime soon. Once they put enough distance between themselves and this place, they could slow down. They would follow the wagon's grooves in the earth to find their path. The most important part was to keep moving and not waste time.

Suddenly, Kiel groaned. "Why am I always so unlucky?!"

Claudia guided her horse closer to Kiel. His horse was rapidly falling behind, and after a few more strides, it crumpled to the ground.

"Looks like this isn't going to work."

Kiel's horse had only been resting since morning, when it was ridden in by the village messenger. The long, hard hours had taken its toll on the beast.

"Thank you for everything," Kiel told his horse before dismounting to join Claudia on hers.

They'd already known there was a chance that this horse would be too exhausted to ferry them the whole way, that it might not have the energy to keep going after a point. It hadn't been bad luck, not really. Kiel had only lamented his misfortune to encourage himself. That much Claudia was sure of. Since he was the more experienced rider, she let him hop up in front of her and take the reins.

*It's gotten much harder to see.* They were following the wagon grooves through a forest glade, but once darkness fell, it would be hard to tell whether they were on the right path.

The horse's hooves clopped against the dirt path as they resumed their journey.

"They won't be able to catch us in the dark," Claudia said.

"True. Hopefully we can find someplace to rest, though."

The farther they went, the less threat the villagers posed. There was still a problem, though: while they'd packed food and lanterns, they had no feed for the horse. Assuming they made it safely through

the night, they would need to find water right away. Aila and her friends had investigated every inch of the land within the confines of the village, but they knew next to nothing about the surrounding area.

Right as Claudia was thinking that they should stop and rest, a light emerged from the darkness. A torchlight. Someone was close. Her shoulders stiffened. Whoever it was, they seemed to have spotted Kiel and Claudia.

Kiel yanked the reins. "Run!"

But the horse didn't respond. It had already slowed down, ready for a break. Though it wasn't quite as fatigued as the other horse, it hadn't fully recovered. Dutifully, the horse tried to pick up speed, but it was too slow. While they were stuck, barely moving, their presumed pursuers were rapidly approaching.

*Hurry. Hurry!* Blood pounded in Claudia's ears, panic searing her every nerve. Seated behind Kiel, she could only clench her fists and pray.

A hand seized her arm.

"Miss Dee?!" Kiel shouted, craning his neck.

Claudia was wrenched from the horse. When she toppled to the ground, pain shot through her body like a thousand tiny needles.

"Tch! Useless, the lot of them. Can't even follow orders."

How could they have been found? The man who'd grabbed her was from the village. He kept her in a vise grip and jabbed his foot into the horse's belly. It reared back with a loud whinny.

"Whoa!" Kiel cried.

"Kiel!"

He was thrown off the horse's back, landing out of sight.

She still had the sock full of stones in her hand. She tried to use it to resist her captor, but she was so winded from her fall that her aim was unsteady. Her attack landed with much less strength than she had hoped. Worse, her attempts to resist the man only incensed him further.

"If this is how you're gonna be, I'll take you right here and now!" His whole body vibrated with rage.

Claudia had no idea what happened to Kiel after he fell from the horse. She had no other way to protect herself. All she could do was hold her arms in front of her like a shield. On instinct, she curled into a fetal position and snapped her eyes shut, anticipating the violence to come. But the blow she was anticipating never came. Cautiously, she opened her eyes.

"Are you all right?!" The voice that rang out was so familiar, but it must have been her imagination. She was so desperate to see him, to hear him—she must have conjured him up in her mind.

Then her captor collapsed, and she knew for certain that it was no hallucination. The person standing above her was the very man she had fervently been praying to see again—her beloved.

"Dia, are you injured?" Sylvester had arrived on a white steed, of all things, and had the moon at his back when he gazed down upon her.

She was captivated.

His silver hair, his golden eyes, all of him seemed to glow. Claudia's gaze moved to the sky. Everything around them was a striking shade of blue. It was the blue hour—the moment before complete darkness, when the last light of the sun painted the sky blue—and it was the perfect backdrop for Sylvester's silvery visage.

He whipped his sword to the side, shaking off much of the blood that coated it, then gracefully slipped off his horse. "Dia, answer me." His eyes were filled with worry.

Before she knew it, she'd thrown her arms around his neck to cling to him. "I'm all right," she managed. "Oh, Syl, I've missed you so."



“Same here. I was terribly anxious to see you again, Dia.” His arms wrapped tightly around her.

Claudia’s eyes welled with tears. She wanted to break down and cry right then, but she was too worried about Kiel to surrender to emotion. She turned her head and saw Tristan helping Kiel to his feet.

“I’m sorry I took so long,” said Sylvester.

“You made it just in time,” she told him, voice trembling with relief.

Everything would be all right now.

Claudia pressed her check to Sylvester’s chest and closed her eyes. There was no time for a lengthy, sentimental reunion, but for at least a little while, she wanted to indulge in something she had so dearly missed. His hand brushed her cheek, gentle and affectionate. She sucked in a breath and slowly exhaled, forcing herself to focus.

“I don’t know who that man was,” she began, “but I’m sure he has ties to the village.”

“Dia, please. Take all the time you need to recover,” he coaxed her.

Instead, she abruptly asked, “Say, did you have the royal stables prepare you a white horse just for this?” He was like a storybook prince, coming to save her on his noble steed. It wasn’t the first time he had come to her aid; he’d taken the initiative before to rescue her himself. She wondered if he was using romance novels as inspiration to win her affections.

"No," Sylvester said evenly. "I took the horse they had available so I could come quickly."

Just a coincidence, then.

"Are you fond of white horses or something?"

And he didn't even make the connection between white horses and romance.

"No. I have no particular preference," Claudia answered honestly.

Other noble ladies would swoon at the idea of Sylvester on a white horse. She had a sneaking suspicion that Louise in particular would be delighted. Claudia wavered whether to tell him about how common a trope it was, then she decided against it.

*Sylvester is so incredible that he hardly needs a white horse anyway.* And he was hers. That was all that really mattered.

"How much do you know about these villages?" Claudia asked him.

"I have a pretty good idea, based on what Helen and the detective's companion have shared with me. Looks like my Shadows couldn't find you."

"They were here too?!"

"I sent them as soon as we had an idea of the village's location, but perhaps they ran into too much trouble."

The royal family's Shadows were skilled in covert operations, but even for them, it would be difficult to enter an isolated village—

especially during the daytime. Even more so if they weren't aware of the village's peculiarities.

"Since you managed to escape, we can rendezvous with them shortly. I'll know more about any difficulties once I receive their report. Now, I hate to ask when I know how exhausted you must be, but I want to take all the villagers into custody. Can you fill me in on everything?"

"Of course."

Claudia was eager to debrief, but Sylvester insisted she undergo a medical exam first. He escorted her to one of their carriages; they had brought a doctor along for this very purpose. Claudia was soon given a clean bill of health. Kiel hadn't sustained any serious injuries either, much to her relief.

"Man, these seats are cushy!" Kiel exclaimed.

She giggled at him. "Here I planned to have you ride in our estate carriage, yet you've already been spoiled by the royal family's."

The doctor was gone, and Sylvester and Tristan had piled in so that they could listen to Claudia and Kiel's statements. Kiel's reaction to the comfy seats in the carriage helped calm Claudia's nerves as she launched into a full explanation about the village, including how they had managed to escape.

"A dust explosion? That was a creative diversion." Sylvester sounded genuinely impressed.

Without that, they might not have been able to flee so easily. Kiel had done well.

"As for you…" Sylvester's eyes darted to Kiel. "Will sharing your information cause any problems?"

They had told him about the underground research room. Claudia wanted the evidence seized, but Kiel was investigating the medicine for his aristocratic client. From Sylvester's words, it sounded as if he'd already identified that client.

"It's no trouble," Kiel said. "To tell you the truth, I have no interest in power grabs or regional conflicts. I think it's better that the evidence goes toward arresting the right people instead of someone else's profits. I'd be happier seeing justice done."

"That's the best decision, but you'll be making an enemy of your client," Sylvester warned him.

"Is it too much to ask you to protect me?" Kiel responded, undaunted.

Sylvester grinned, eyes crinkling. He cast his gaze to Claudia and huffed a sigh. "Regardless of what I say, I'm sure Dia will insist."

Claudia knew Kiel would be in a real bind in the wake of all of this, especially if he was allying himself with them. There was only one answer she could give: "If you have need of me, I would be more than happy to be your shield."

"You are far too kind, my lady!"

She'd been hoping he would continue to treat her as a friend and an equal, as he had these past few days—although it would be trickier when other people were watching. At the end of the day, she was part of the aristocracy and Kiel was not. No matter how much

courage he had brought her in her most trying moments, others wouldn't value that over etiquette. Such was the nature of society. Kiel understood that, hence his acting more formal.

"To the village, then," said Sylvester. "I wish I could send you straight home, but we cannot afford to lose any manpower."

The village sat at the border between the royal family's territory and the Thomases' region. Not wanting to ruffle any feathers, Sylvester had been forced to cobble together a modest squad. He had already told Claudia of the precarious political situation, so she had no complaints about staying. In fact, she wanted to be there to see this come to an end.

On the way, they discussed the village's ceremonies. Everyone had sour looks on their faces.

Tristan hung his head. "If only we'd known about it all sooner."

"We need to do better," Sylvester said stiffly.

Sylvester and Tristan had known about the villager's insistence on isolation, but they had no idea that children—because that was what they were, not yet at full maturity—were forced to participate in these ceremonies. Had they been aware, they could have used that as grounds to intervene before it came to this. The village's refusal to connect with the outside had made it difficult to get that level of intel, however. There was no way they could have known. Sylvester's comment suggested he recognized their failure in this, but the only thing they could do was learn from it. He was always quick to focus on what they could do rather than what they hadn't done.

"The better question is, how should we go about this?" Sylvester muttered. Once they reached the village, he and his men would have to arrest everyone there. There would be panic in the village, which was why Kiel had been moved to a different carriage. They didn't need an audience for this; Claudia was only allowed to stay on the caveat that she didn't interfere.

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Everything ended with much less fuss than she'd expected. Some villagers tried to resist, but there was little they could do against armored knights. Aila and her friends, as well as all the other children in the dormitory, were gathered safely. It was easy to secure them because they were already in one location.

Claudia stayed by Sylvester's side, watching as he shuffled through the endless stream of reports. Tristan scurried about, acting as a liaison between the men in the squad. The scene stuck out in Claudia's memory as her first time seeing the prince and Tristan wrap up a case like this.

After everything had calmed, Sylvester shifted closer to her. He had been peering out the window ever since they arrived at the village.

"Wouldn't you rather lie down?" he said.

"I'm tired," Claudia admitted, "but I don't think I could sleep even if I wanted to." Her mind was still buzzing from their escape. She

had even walloped a couple of people with a stone-filled sock! "Instead of a bedtime story, why don't you fill me in on everything?" she asked sweetly.

"You're the only noble lady who would want to know such things," he said with a hint of exasperation. "Won't it be harder to sleep after hearing all the gory details?"

"Not at all. It will bring me greater relief to hear them from you than anyone else."

"You know exactly what to say to get me to do your bidding." Sylvester gently bumped his forehead against hers, then picked up the reports in his lap. "But there wasn't much resistance, so there's little to tell."

She'd overheard the gist when his men had come to deliver the reports in the first place, so she had an idea of how everything had gone.

"I suppose I can tell you the aftermath. We secured all the children in the dormitory and have taken them into our care. All the adults have been arrested. Transporting them will have to wait until tomorrow morning. As for the children, we'll probably keep them here and send in some people to mind them."

"You're not going to bring them into town?"

"I considered it, but it would be easier to send someone here to watch them than try to cobble together a place for them to stay on such short notice. Of course, if staying in the village is too traumatic, I will have them moved immediately."

That was the part that had concerned her, so she was satisfied that he'd addressed it. Aila and her friends had wanted to escape the village because they didn't want to be forced through a ceremony. With that threat no longer lingering over their heads, they might not mind staying, but at least Sylvester would take their preferences into account.

"The village chieftess sustained serious burns from the dust explosion at the chapel," said Sylvester.

"So she was the one who opened the door." Claudia nodded to herself. Ultea had likely been trying to rush inside to ensure there was no damage to the dispensary or her research room.

"We'll need your assistance to identify everyone."

Sylvester and his team couldn't take the villagers at their word, and they had to be sure none of them assumed false identities. All the adults would be charged with something. A judge might be willing to account for the circumstances of those not directly involved in any crimes, but it was hard to be sure of the consequences this early.

"We will continue the investigation, if only to collect additional evidence," said Sylvester. "On the surface, to start, they'll be charged with the abduction of Kiel and a servant of Duke Lindsay." They couldn't publicize that Claudia was a victim.

When he informed Claudia that Nina was impersonating her back at her family estate, her eyes went wide. "Goodness! I never expected her to pose as me again, least of all in circumstances like these."

"It seems she'll continue to be a valuable asset."

With Helen at her side, Nina was acting commendably as Claudia.

"That boy with you said he would help us deal with the other villages," Sylvester told her, not even trying to be respectful.

She smiled at him and gently said, "Kiel, you mean."

"The two of you have gotten awfully close. Inevitable, maybe, with everything you endured."

"He is very capable."

"I'll admit that. Even having financial support, it's incredible he managed to discover so much about these villages from the outside. I struggle to understand why he would have accepted a case like this, knowing the dangers involved."

Claudia had a feeling Kiel's bad luck was part of it somehow. Her smile tightened. "And who is his client?"

"Lord Demitor."

"Aha." She nodded slowly as she took in this information. That might have explained why Kiel was eager to associate himself with the daughter of a duke; Lord Demitor was part of the aristocratic faction. Kiel would need someone as or more powerful than the earl to protect him. "He holds distribution rights for medicine, as I understand."

"Indeed. He hired the boy because he noticed new drugs circulating the black market in his region. The aristocratic faction is on the verge of complete collapse. He probably wanted a greater share of the market to shore up his position and gather enough support to

unify his faction. We would be in much greater danger if Lord Demitor had gotten his hands on these drugs first." Sylvester pressed his fingers to his brow, massaging the wrinkle that had formed there. "We haven't been regulating the medicine trade in our territories. Even if we'd discovered these drugs ourselves, we wouldn't have investigated."

The capital was the most densely populated part of the nation. All sorts of product moved through the black market, too quickly to be traced. Claudia had a certain level of insight thanks to her position as leader of Rose Garden, but even she didn't know everything that happened in the darker alleyways.

"If someone dies, that gets the authorities' attention, but an aphrodisiac isn't worth the resources," Sylvester continued.

This was especially true since aphrodisiacs were things of myth. Most people used the term to mean sexual stimulants. In fact, the drug produced in the village was much the same. Aphrodisiacs had existed in some form or another throughout history, but they were defined so nebulously that they were hard to regulate.

"I have a feeling Nigel had a hand in enforcing their isolation so none of this information could spread and invite scrutiny," said Sylvester.

"Speaking of which, the messenger the village sent to contact him returned quite quickly."

The prince shrugged. "The man who attacked you probably had answers, but I cut him down. I doubt they had direct contact with the cardinal."

"He had someone else represent his interests, then? Is that what you mean?"

At that, Sylvester could only say, "Hopefully we'll know once we question the villagers."

If they were truly brainwashed, then odds weren't good that they would provide any valuable information. Claudia racked her mind for anyone else who might be able to give them what they needed, and her thoughts returned to the Shadows.

She turned toward Sylvester. "Did your Shadows report back yet?"

"Yes. They arrived this morning, but as expected, they never found a way into the village. They waited for some kind of sign, and as soon as they saw all the chaos happening inside the village, they entered to prevent any pursuers from impeding your escape."

The Shadows hadn't wanted to provoke the villagers unnecessarily and expose Claudia to further danger, so they had remained in hiding, waiting for an opportunity.

Claudia's mouth dropped open as the realization hit her. "That must be why there was no one guarding the entrance when we left."

She hadn't given it much thought at the time, assuming they'd joined the rest of the villagers at the chapel. Sylvester went on to explain that they had chased her, but he'd reached her before they did.

"Now then, think you can get some sleep?" He gently stroked her head, his words indicating he was done discussing the village. "I

doubt you'll have much time to yourself once we return home. You should rest while you have the opportunity."

"You're right. I shall leave the rest to you, then."

"Yes, I'll take care of everything," he assured her. "No need to worry."

Claudia climbed into the very back of the carriage, where a bed had been prepared. She threw herself into it and, with Sylvester's comforting presence behind her, let her eyes slide shut.

## Chapter 23:
## The Villainess Returns Home

CLAUDIA AWOKE WELL before the royal carriage pulled up to her family's estate. Emotion welled in her chest the moment the Lindsay manor came into view through the window.

*I'm finally home.* Only now did she realize that she'd missed more than just Sylvester. Her heart thrummed with anticipation as they slipped past the gate and into the driveway. Claudia could scarcely keep her composure, fidgeting in her seat.

Sylvester grinned at her. "Everyone has been looking forward to your return."

He had sent a messenger ahead to let everyone know Claudia was safe and would be home soon. She could already see a figure on the manor's steps. When she made out who it was, her breath caught in her throat and heat built behind her eyes.

The carriage rolled to a final stop, and her hand twitched. She wanted to burst through the door and charge out herself, but she resisted. Sylvester bent forward, intending to disembark first so he could escort her, but he didn't get the chance. Someone else—not a servant, but her own brother—wrenched the door open.

"Hey! Virgil!" Sylvester barked at him.

Virgil ignored the prince and dove into the carriage, arms reaching for her. "Dee!"

"Elder Brother!" He pulled her into his arms and held her tight. Claudia couldn't hold back the tears anymore. Her hands pressed against the broad expanse of his back. His chest was solid and firm but brought her more comfort than she'd ever known. The warmth of his body enveloped her.

She was really home. Despite everything, she had made it home alive.

Claudia hadn't thought about her family at all back in the village. Perhaps it was an unwitting attempt to preserve her sanity. Otherwise, she might have lost herself in loneliness. Now she didn't have to put on a brave face. Virgil was home, more than the house itself was. He always waited for her return, always provided a safe place for her. Wherever Virgil was, that was home for Claudia.

People referred to him as the Ice Scion in high society, and to some degree he had to be, as the heir apparent of their dukedom. But as he whispered into her hair, his voice quivered. "I'm so glad you're okay." His cheek pressed against hers, and it was damp; he'd been crying too.

"I'm sorry…for worrying you so much," she choked out between sobs.

"It's fine," he said quickly. "As long as you're all right, nothing else matters." Virgil stroked her head, and his kindness brought a fresh wave of tears pouring down her face.

The two of them clung to each other inside the carriage, not leaving until their tears dried up. Sylvester didn't interrupt their reunion. He remained in his seat, cheek resting on his fist as he

watched them. When Virgil left the carriage and insisted on escorting Claudia himself, Sylvester quirked a brow but didn't protest. For today, at least, he was willing to let Virgil have the honors.

"As much as it pains me to leave you, I must return to the castle," Sylvester told Claudia before he left. "Take care not to push yourself."

"Of course. Thank you for everything."

Sylvester had to report to the king, among other things. Claudia would be busy herself soon enough. Once she resumed her routine, there wouldn't be much time for rest; her engagement ceremony was almost upon them. She watched in the drive as the royal carriage pulled away.

Virgil placed his hand at her back. "I had the maids draw a bath for you. You have appointments later today, but you should be able to rest for a few hours before you see to them."

Nina had covered for them by acting as Claudia's double, but there was only so much she could do. There was still much to be done that required Claudia herself. All of that had been delayed until her return.

Claudia headed straight for the bath rather than stopping by her own room. Sylvester had procured a Lindsay maid uniform for her, so she'd changed into her original disguise back in the carriage, discarding the brown dress the villagers had given her.

*Where is Helen?* Claudia had expected to see her beloved maid at the front entrance with Virgil, but Helen hadn't been there. Was she still with Nina, keeping up the act? From what Claudia had heard,

when Helen returned from their terrifying misadventure, no sooner had she reported what happened than she went straight back to work without a moment's rest. While Virgil had assured her that Helen was uninjured, Claudia wanted to see her for herself and make sure she was in good spirits.

Claudia slipped into the bathroom. Her maids hurried toward her and helped her out of her clothes. And out of nowhere, Helen appeared beside her.

"Helen?!"

"Yes, Lady Claudia?"

Helen guided Claudia toward the bathtub, acting the same as she had before their mishap. But when Claudia studied her more closely, she noticed that Helen's hands were trembling. Claudia forgot her nakedness and launched herself at Helen, capturing her in an embrace.

"I missed you so!" she cried.

"Me too," Helen rasped, voice thick with emotion. "I missed you, Lady Claudia." Helen's arms pulled tight around her, and Claudia buried her face into her best friend's neck. Helen's scent flooded her nose.

"Why didn't you meet me at the entrance?" Claudia asked.

"As embarrassing as it is to admit it, I wasn't confident I could keep my composure. I thought I could distract myself by keeping busy, so I chose to ready the bath for your arrival." Then she added, in a tight voice, "I must apologize to you, my lady."

"There is nothing for you to apologize for." Claudia had suspected Helen would blame herself for being the only one rescued from the ambush. She remembered the way Virgil had stroked her head and decided to do the same, caressing Helen gently to comfort her. "You were a victim too. The culprits are the ones responsible for what happened, not you."

"But—"

"I absolve you of any guilt. Even if the rest of the world blamed you, I would defend your innocence. Is that not enough to reassure you?"

"Of course it is. I care about your opinion most of all." Helen sniffled, holding back tears. When her eyes finally cleared, she flashed a smile at Claudia. Helen had been the one to comfort Claudia so many times in her previous timeline, and this moment brought back fond memories.

Claudia kissed Helen's cheek. "I love you," she said. "I'm glad you were safe."

"I-I'm glad you were too." Helen's eyes shimmered, tears brimming over.

They were mistress and servant, but in this moment, their bond stood stronger than their stations. Claudia studied Helen; her eyes were swollen and red. Claudia's gaze followed the tears that tracked down Helen's cheeks. She tenderly traced the wet trail they left behind, hoping somehow she could heal the hurt in Helen's heart. Helen giggled, as if she found Claudia's touch ticklish.

"Lady Claudia, you'll catch cold if you don't get into the bath soon."

Claudia flinched. "Oh. I had forgotten my state." She was overcome with embarrassment to realize she'd been clinging to Helen while nude this whole time. Her skin flushed. What made it worse were the witnesses—the other maids who'd been watching the entire scene. They averted their eyes when she looked at them, pretending they hadn't seen anything.

At Helen's urging, Claudia finally climbed into the bath and let the maids wash her. All tension flooded out of her when she was submerged in the warm water. She lay there, listening to the rhythmic sound of them rinsing her hair. Nothing could be more relaxing than this. It was a struggle to resist the temptation of sleep.

## Chapter 24:
## The Villainess Becomes the Crown Prince's Fiancée

UNLIKE A WEDDING, where the betrothed were required to make their oaths before God, an engagement ceremony was for the couple's friends and family, an opportunity to garner their approval. There was no need to hold one in a church. Thus, their ceremony would take place not at the cathedral but in the castle's grand ballroom.

Claudia arrived early that morning and claimed one of the side rooms near the ballroom. Only royalty could use these quarters, so she had never seen the interior before.

Once the maids finished getting her ready, she stepped in front of the mirror to look herself over. Her dress was a bluish white. The skirts were made of long, intersecting pale-pink frills that were hemmed with golden thread. The design of the dress was a nod to the other two bridal candidates, Louise and Charlotte, and their support of Claudia now that she had emerged as the prince's chosen. The colors were muted and tasteful. The design of the collar pulled the dress together, making it look stylish but mature. Her hair was tied back in a long, low braid, completing the image.

Even if they weren't exchanging vows, this was still a ceremony. The maids had taken special care in grooming her hair, ensuring she looked put-together.

Two strong arms wrapped around her from behind. The maids nearly jumped out of their skin, afraid of creases in her dress.

Sylvester understood their concerns. He kept his embrace loose to not disturb her outfit; he had to be careful not to distress his own suit as well. Not that this seemed to concern him—he was much more interested in her.

Sylvester looked more dapper than usual with his hair slicked back. He wore the same sort of formalwear she had seen him in before, though the detailing on his jacket was more elaborate. The threadwork was all so fine, she worried even the slightest touch might leave a mark. His sleeves were sewn with black and white lace; the accent colors, stripes of blue and black, were intended to match her. It spoke to his love for Claudia. She opted not to think about it too much, lest she become embarrassed.

"Once we've presented ourselves in the grand ballroom, we will join a parade around the capital. It will begin at the city center, and we'll take the main road back to the castle, so you'll be in the public eye for quite a while. Upon our return, we'll have a meal with my parents. There'll be no time to relax."

"And that's why you're taking this opportunity to recharge?" Claudia teased.

"I would grip you tighter if I could, but your maids already look faint. You'll have to forgive me for not showing you my full affections."

She giggled at that. "Every time you move, they look so panicked, it's as if they're watching someone balancing a champagne glass." Claudia felt bad for them, but she couldn't help the mirth that flooded her at the reflection of their grimacing in the mirror.

And yet, despite her amusement, the tension didn't leave her shoulders. Sylvester lowered his face to her neck. He could probably feel how stiff she was.

*It's not that I'm scared. At least, I don't think I am.* It was everyone else who seemed on edge. Their nervous energy infected her.

Claudia was accustomed to being in the public eye to some extent. She had been Sylvester's unofficial fiancée for a while. There was no reason for her to feel intimidated now.

Sylvester brushed his lips against the shell of Claudia's ear. She flinched, nearly jumping out of her skin. "Syl?"

"I'm not doing anything naughty," he assured her.

"You can't say that with your lips pressed to my ear."

"Oh, you can feel that?"

"You're incorrigible." Claudia glared at him through the mirror. His gold eyes were hooded, his lips pulled into a grin. She was tempted to elbow him, but her body wouldn't move.

Sylvester caught her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a chaste kiss to the back. "Don't taunt me. I already struggle to control myself."

"I am not teasing you," she said primly, chin raised. "I am cross with you."

"Hard to believe that with those eyes you're making." He peeked at her reflection in the mirror.

When their eyes met, they froze. Claudia wasn't sure how whether a second or an eternity passed between them. She was captivated by his golden eyes, like sparkling stars in the night sky. Her lips longed for his, but they couldn't indulge themselves. Her maids might really burst into tears if she let Sylvester ruin her makeup.

Claudia let out a shaky breath, unable to contain the heat building inside of her. Sylvester jerked his head away, as if he too was struggling to restrain himself. He likely wanted to nuzzle the top of her head with his cheek, but the decorative clips in her hair prevented him from doing so. His cheek instead hovered awkwardly above her.

"That's right," Sylvester said, trying to change the subject as a distraction. "We've been so busy, I haven't had the opportunity to tell you about the village."

"Have there been new developments?"

Although Nina had performed as her to avoid suspicion from high society, Claudia had errands of her own when she returned, such as the final dress fitting. Many matters had hinged on her input, and those Nina could not do on her behalf.

Similarly, Sylvester had been preoccupied with the aftermath of taking control of the village. They hadn't been able to spend much time together. His countenance betrayed no exhaustion, but she suspected that was the work of cosmetics.

"The government has finally secured approval to interfere in drug distribution," said Sylvester.

The village laboratory and all its contents had proven to the rest of parliament that it was possible for average citizens to concoct

dangerous drugs. Henceforth, only places with government-issued licenses would be allowed to produce medicine, and authorities would regularly inspect the drugs and ingredients circulating the market.

All of this had been a devastating blow to Lord Demitor, who'd previously held the sole rights to drug distribution. He wasn't losing his entire network and financial earnings, but the royal family would now stick its nose in wherever needed.

"The materials left behind in the laboratory told a clear enough story for us to estimate how it began," Sylvester went on. "They created the analgesic first."

Analgesics were common on the market. Anyone with the right knowledge and the requisite tools could make them. That said, the one produced in the village was more effective than any other Claudia had seen. Whether that was due to the clean spring water or the herbs they used, she wasn't sure.

"That's what must have caught Cardinal Nigel's attention. The villagers seemed to refer to him as 'the master.' Since they didn't use his official title, he likely wasn't acting in his capacity as a church official but as an individual."

It was only an assumption that this "master" was Nigel, actually. There was no concrete proof, though there was substantial enough circumstantial evidence for them to feel certain. Nigel had started by offering them advice, slowly climbing to a position of authority within the villages. His influence brought about great change for them. Through human experimentation, the chieftess managed to create the aphrodisiac and hypnotic.

"He instilled in them a desire to isolate themselves as protection from outsiders. That worked well for them while he was still in Harland."

Once Nigel was exiled and could no longer maintain contact with the villages, Lord Demitor—as well as the crown—took notice.

"We still aren't sure if the villagers are in full possession of their faculties, what with the effects of the drugs. The cardinal must have had the same concerns, which was why he prepared stand-ins for himself."

The villagers had given statements about a proxy they could contact. Sylvester had been worried that they might not get much out of the villagers, since most were kept in the dark, but that information at least hadn't been a secret. Possibly because there was no way for investigators to link it to Nigel.

"So that's who attacked me outside the village," Claudia said as realization dawned.

"Exactly. We assume he was heading to the village to confirm if it really was you they'd captured. Since there are so many of these villages scattered throughout the kingdom, we must assume the cardinal has other representatives to manage them all. We will continue investigating that possibility."

Kiel's information helped to locate many of the other villages. Since they were all involved in creating drugs, the royal family had ordered the governing regions to round them up.

"The villagers who told us about the proxy were still unwilling to share how they made the medicine. But we have a good theory

already, even without their help," said Sylvester.

"That's wonderful news." Claudia knew from personal experience how potent the analgesic was. She wanted it to be more widely available for the people of Harland.

"There were traces of their methods in the dispensary and laboratory. Our doctors have a general idea of how they did it. We might find more clues when we scour the other settlements. Even if we don't, I doubt it will take us long to figure it out."

The news wouldn't be made public. Research would be conducted under the pretense of creating a *new* medicine. Facilities would be erected where the villages had previously stood, and production would continue as it once had. The best way to replicate the medicine was to use the same ingredients and conditions as before. These facilities would be funded by the government, and with those funds they could further develop the land. The children from the village would continue to live there, their lives changed for the better.

"None of the children wanted to leave, by the way," Sylvester told her.

"I suppose that's only natural. As isolated as they were, that village is still their home." Claudia breathed a sigh of relief. She was glad everything had ended well. If Harland hadn't stepped in to help those children, she would have. "I'm glad you were able to resolve everything before our ceremony."

"Barely." His gaze flicked to someone in the doorway—a servant who had come to summon them. "Let's focus on today, shall we?"

Sylvester had been surprisingly calm and composed through everything. Initially, Claudia feared he might lose his head. Knowing him as well as she did, she hadn't expected otherwise. Whenever she was involved, Sylvester's darker side rose to the surface.

*I was worried he might want to lop off all the villagers' heads.* But so far, he had shown none of his more extreme impulses. Perhaps it was because this had been an official challenge from the king himself.

Claudia straightened and gently placed her hand on Sylvester's proffered arm. All the high lords and ladies and their families were supposed to gather in the grand ballroom for Sylvester and Claudia's arrival, but it was surprisingly quiet in the hallway. Claudia's heels clicked against the floor, echoing loudly around them. They headed to the balcony overlooking the ballroom. This, too, was a first for Claudia.

A servant announced their arrival, and the doors swung wide before them. As they stepped inside, her eyes moved to the chandelier dangling from the ceiling. It wasn't lit, but the sunlight streaming through the windows made its gems sparkle where they hung.

The silence held even after Sylvester and Claudia stepped up to the balcony's railing. Claudia had never done anything like this before, so she wasn't sure why no one was saying anything. The man escorting her had far more experience.

Sylvester wore the same gentle smile he always did. He leaned in and whispered, "They're all too stunned by your beauty to speak."

"Don't be silly."

Everyone knew her; there was nothing new for them to see. Though if their reaction meant she'd made a good impression, nothing would make her happier.

She kept her face pointed straight ahead, but her eyes darted toward Sylvester. Something about this was a little odd to her. In her previous timeline, Claudia hadn't been to the royal castle to see it, but she knew someone else had stood beside Sylvester then.

*"Elder Sister."*

She could barely remember Fermina's voice at this point. It was a faint memory. Her half-sister had once struck fear into the core of Claudia's being, but the girl had already been disowned. She no longer had the standing to warrant an invitation to Claudia's engagement ceremony, let alone her wedding. It was a reminder that Claudia was living her life anew.

The warmth of Sylvester's hand brushing against her reminded her that this was reality. When those luminous golden eyes met hers, they softened and crinkled, his smile growing wider. Perhaps she was biased, but she thought he was far more beautiful than she was.

After greeting the lords and ladies present, Sylvester followed the arranged routine and made his oath: "I, Sylvester Harland, do hereby swear to take Claudia Lindsay as my fiancée."

"And I, Claudia Lindsay, do hereby take Sylvester Harland as my fiancé."

Right as they finished, the crowd erupted in cheers. Claudia barely had a moment to take in the fervor before a shadow fell over her. Sylvester had appeared before her in a blur, leaning in and capturing her lips for the briefest of moments before he pulled back, his warmth lingering long after.

"I don't believe this was part of the plan," she said.

"Don't be so rigid. You're not a bridal candidate anymore."

She stared hard at him. "You're still holding that against me, are you?"

His lips tugged up on one side. "I think it will take some time yet for my pride to fully recover."

She remembered the moment they had shared, when he caught her in the hallway as she was leaving that tea party in the royal castle's gardens. Their first kiss had been all passion without a hint of tenderness.

"My heart is beating so fast, I'm afraid it might shatter," Claudia told him.

He took her hand in his and pressed it flat against his chest. "Mine is the same. It's hard to control my emotions; they're like a raging flood threatening to burst forth." His voice strained, as if it was taking every ounce of control to keep himself in check. When he leaned in close, his breath was so hot on her skin that she feared she might lose herself to passion as well.

"Syl, everyone is waiting," she reminded him.

"I know. Let's show them all that we belong to each other."

As they descended the stairs, Claudia felt like she was walking on clouds. But as soon as they reached bottom, she met with eyes the same color blue as hers—yet much harsher, with a glacial coldness to them. It brought her back to her senses.

Virgil was smiling, but it didn't reach his eyes. "While I congratulate you both on your engagement, I would also like to take this opportunity to remind Your Highness that Dee is still a Lindsay at this time."

"I'm aware. There's no need to overreact to a simple kiss," Sylvester replied tersely.

There were already sparks flying between the two; Claudia could practically hear them crackle. *Actually, this is probably the first time we've kissed in front of him.*

Her brother understood the nature of their relationship, but perhaps it wasn't easy watching a man show such affection to his precious baby sister.

Canary-yellow hair bounced into view, and it was then Claudia realized how easily Kiel had snuck up on her. He was here as a friend of the Lindsays. It must have emboldened him to elbow his way to the front to greet her. He was strong-willed despite his youth, and she was pleased to see him.

"Lady Claudia, congratulations!" Kiel said.

"Thank you, Kiel. I'm glad to see you in such good spirits."

Misfortune seemed to haunt his steps, but he had yet to let it get him down.

"People nearly spilled their drinks on my head a few times, but Lord Virgil saved me!" Kiel sagged with relief. "I feel like no matter what trouble comes, as long as I'm with someone from your family, I'll be all right." He had a big grin on his face as he said it, but his words indicated his luck was as bad as ever.

*If we can help him shoulder it, that's all I can ask.*

After that, Claudia and Sylvester made their rounds in greeting the other guests. There was some tension in the air when they reached Raul. He was here as the Barian king's younger brother, a representative of the royal family. He congratulated them, as was expected of him. The heartbreak they had both felt at the graduation party was absent this time. Perhaps it was because there were so many guests requiring her attention that she couldn't afford much for Raul specifically.

Cardinal Nigel's replacement was present for the festivities. He would be the one to lead the ceremony when she and Sylvester married. As a duke's daughter, she'd greeted him on many occasions during other social events. Even so, her smile was stiff in his presence.

There were more guests at their engagement party than she had ever seen for any event. The splendor of it was short-lived. She found the constant stream of people exhausting, but she tamped down the urge to sigh.

## Chapter 25:
## The King's Younger Brother Is Enchanted by the Crown Prince's Betrothed

RAUL HAD VISITED THE CASTLE more times than he could count, but his nerves were raw that morning. The grand ballroom brimmed with guests both domestic and foreign. Among them, he'd even spotted Prince Seraphim of Arakaner. Yet this was a modest celebration compared to what they had planned for the actual wedding. The scale of it made him want to sigh; he could tell how earnest Sylvester's affections for Claudia were.

"What're you nervous for?" Lestea, his right hand, wore a beautiful smile even as she quipped at him.

"Shut up," Raul snapped. He was half tempted to smack her. "I'm surprised you can keep that grin on your face."

"Why wouldn't I? My liege's happiness is *my* happiness."

He scoffed. "Yeah, sure."

Lestea's devotion to Claudia was genuine. The problem was that Lestea's affections were a bit twisted, so to speak. He couldn't imagine she was truly celebrating Claudia's union with Sylvester.

Lestea was clad in her usual menswear for the occasion. Raul had given up trying to dissuade her. When the couple they were here to celebrate didn't mind her defying conventions, there was no point in him quibbling over it. Even Virgil, Claudia's older brother, hadn't

chided Lestea for it, and he was a real stickler about etiquette. But since Claudia was fine with it, that superseded all else for Virgil.

The Lindsays had claimed the front row for themselves, their right as family of the bride-to-be. Near them, though, was a young boy Raul didn't recognize.

"I'm guessing that's Kiel, the boy detective?" he said.

"Apparently, he's promising enough for the Lindsays to take him under their stewardship," Lestea replied. And they had even brought him along to the engagement ceremony. They must have really taken a liking to him.

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. I heard he managed to make incredible progress investigating those villages all on his own."

Raul had heard about villages with connections to Cardinal Nigel. In his case, the rumors pertained to their potential existence in Bari, not Harland. They had yet to discover any, perhaps in part because of the enormous mountain range that spanned their border.

His hand clenched into a fist. Claudia's disappearance was initially presented as an accident. Only later did he learn that she'd been abducted. And the whole time, he could do nothing to help her. *Makes me feel silly for thinking I could provide her other options if she needed them.* He'd sounded so arrogant butting heads with Sylvester over it, when in truth, he was powerless in this country.

That was only to be expected, if he was honest with himself. Here, he was a guest. An outsider. The only way he had been able to help was by meeting with Claudia's double to keep the public from realizing she was gone. It was the one instance where being an

outsider had proved beneficial. No one would suspect that neighboring royalty would spend long hours with an impostor.

Raul's contributions had helped sell the farce, but it hadn't brought any relief to the throbbing pain in his chest. Even if Claudia thanked him personally in the next few days, it wouldn't help. The pain would continue to fester inside him.

*Sylvester was the one who saved her.* When she needed it most, it was Raul's rival who stepped in for the rescue. That alone spoke volumes about where they stood. Even in Claudia's love life, he was an outsider.

Raul's very thoughts were like salt in his wounds. His heart ached, stung. But at least Claudia was here. When he first heard she was missing, his vision had gone dark. The despair he felt then was far worse than the heartbreak he suffered now.

He was about to drop his gaze but stopped himself. He needed to steel himself, remember what he was here for. This was a celebration. He could wallow in self-pity later. Right now, he had a duty to fulfill as the younger brother to Bari's king.

While he was preoccupied trying to rally his spirits, Lestea's icy blue eyes met his. She wore her usual gorgeous smile. He had a feeling she saw right through him, and while he didn't much care for it, he suspected she was experiencing something similar herself.

Lestea hadn't been allowed to join the rescue party. Raul's participation had naturally been out of the question because of the attention it would draw. Lestea's exclusion was for a very different reason: Sylvester thought she would be a hindrance.

When Harland's prince assembled his squad to rescue Claudia, he was concerned Lestea might not follow orders, which would only impair their mission. No, in fact, she might endanger the whole thing if she couldn't be kept under control. On the other hand, if left to her own devices, she might take off and attempt something on her own. Raul had volunteered to keep an eye on her, for both of their sakes.

Lestea's expression betrayed no emotion, but he suspected she was screaming on the inside. Everyone shared that feeling of panic. Sylvester, Virgil, and even Raul were all barely holding it together, their emotions teetering on the brink.

"It's about time," said Lestea. "I want to give my liege my full attention when she comes into view, so please don't distract me by speaking."

"I could say the same to you," he spat.

On the surface, it was like everything had returned to normal. But the wounds on his heart would not heal so easily. Not for him, or Lestea, or even Sylvester. It was only when he saw Claudia in the flesh that he could forget the pain for a time. *I need to see that she's safe. See that she's hale and whole and burn that image of her in my mind so I don't forget it.*

When at long last Claudia appeared in the grand ballroom, Raul was struck speechless. Her black hair was pulled back in a sleek low ponytail, and she wore an exquisite dress with a collar. She was adorned with few accessories, choosing to appear more modest for her unveiling. Her ensemble was incredibly formal, but it matched her dignified comportment. Claudia carried with her an air of tranquility.

He wasn't the only one at a loss for words; the whole ballroom had gone silent. Everyone stared at her in a daze. Her glossy raven hair cascaded down her back, embodying a graceful elegance without sacrificing taste. Her blue eyes, illuminated by the sunlight streaming in through the windows, gleamed bright even as their color remained dark as the deep sea.

Raul couldn't tear his gaze away. He wanted to stare at her forever, his heart yearning for her.

*I'm hopeless.* Heat built behind his eyes. Raul gritted his teeth, biting back a wave of emotion. *I really do love her.* As stupid as it seemed, even now, he really did. It didn't matter if it was pointless or ridiculous; his heart screamed out the words. *Claudia, I love you.*

Why couldn't he give up on her? He'd asked himself that question countless times now. No answer ever came. It was foolish to expect any reason to emerge. Watching Claudia and Sylvester exchange their vows did nothing to sway his affections.

"I wonder if the day will come that I can move on?" Even as he voiced the question, he didn't know the answer. All he knew was that day was not today.

"Why should you?" Lestea piped up, despite the rhetorical nature of his musing.

"You're just saying that."

"I mean it. I really am rooting for you." She smiled at him, and it wasn't mocking. "You know better than anyone that I prioritize my liege above all else."

He frowned at her. “I have to wonder at the audacity to say that to my face when you’re supposed to be *my* right hand.”

“Personally, I’m glad you still have such strong feelings for her,” Lestea went on, ignoring his comment. “After all, one can’t predict what will happen in the future, can they?”

The future held all manner of possibilities. Sylvester might lose power at some point. Even assuming he achieved victory over all his political opponents, there were any number of diseases out there. One of them could claim his life.

“I hope you’ll continue to wait, no matter how long it takes. Who cares how it makes you look? Bari Kingdom already has an heir to the throne. You are free to love whomever you wish.”

That was true to some degree, but he was still royalty. He didn’t have the same freedoms afforded to Lestea. If a threat arose in their kingdom, he might be ushered into a political marriage, and he would have no right to refuse. But Lestea surely knew that. She only meant that he should love freely while he had the chance.

“I’m not sure how I feel about having your support,” Raul said bitterly.

“Only because you can’t be honest with yourself.”

She had some nerve saying that after she’d betrayed him. How long could they banter like this?

“You’re the one who leaked information to Sylvester, aren’t you?” It wasn’t a question. He already knew. Sylvester had pressured into compliance all the nobles Raul had bribed. The evidence Sylvester

had gathered wasn't anything Harland would have been able to get their hands on alone.

Lestea grinned at him.

"Don't forget that I can't protect you anymore," he said.

"You're too kind."

Even if he wanted to save Lestea—and he would—he wouldn't be able to. She likely understood his emotions from his tone. If Bari caught on to her spying for Harland, her life would be forfeit. Not that discussion changed anything; Lestea had only been allowed to live because she'd agreed to be a double agent.

"My liege is the one who saved my life. I won't let it go to waste," said Lestea.

"You're impossible." He smiled bitterly, exasperated with his right hand and close friend. *But maybe there's no reason for me to change either.*

With that, he stepped away to congratulate his beloved.

## Chapter 26:
## The Villainess Reflects

ONCE THE CEREMONY IN the grand ballroom was over, the parade through town to unveil the prince's betrothed awaited them next. All they had to do was ride through the middle of the capital, but Claudia was expected to smile the entire time. Minutes felt like hours.

*I never experienced this in my previous lifetime.* The only parade she recalled from her brothel days was the one celebrating the birth of Sylvester's child. Everything in this timeline was so different.

Confetti and flower petals danced through the air, catching the light. As she watched, it sank in for her just how much her decisions this time around had changed her fate. This wasn't an end but a turning point. It filled her with joy to share this moment with someone she loved.

*I'm so happy.* And it wasn't the kind of happiness the village had tried to impose on its people. No one had forced her to feel this way, nor was she thinking it because it was expected of her. Her happiness was her own.

As these thoughts whirled in her head, Claudia kept a smile on her face, grateful for all the people who had come out to watch the parade and celebrate the occasion.

The sun was setting by the time the parade wrapped up. Claudia had been up preparing since early morning, and as Sylvester had predicted, they weren't given a moment's rest. The instant they

returned to the castle, she had to change clothes and reapply her makeup. She still had a dinner to attend with the king and queen. Claudia had spoken to the two of them before; the queen had even invited Claudia to her tea parties. *But that doesn't make me any less nervous!* She kept her anxieties locked away in her mind, unable to voice them.

Claudia was a duke's daughter, and Duke Lindsay was the second most powerful person after the king. A princess had married into their family several generations back. Yet despite their high status, it was nothing compared to royalty—the most revered family in the country. The king and queen were the father and mother of the nation. Even though Claudia knew she would one day occupy the same position, it didn't intimidate her any less.

If Claudia was asked whether she felt uncomfortable around the king and queen, she would have to refrain from answering. And even that felt blasphemous.

"Are you all right?" Sylvester asked her.

"I don't know," she answered instantly.

"There's no need to worry. I wouldn't let anyone hurt you, not even my father."

She gave him a look. "That doesn't inspire confidence, actually." The last thing she wanted was to witness a spat between the two. Her hope was for the dinner to end uneventfully.

Sylvester and Claudia entered the dining hall. He bowed and she curtsied, saying, "I would like to pay my deepest respects to Your Majesties." They quickly took their seats.

The king smiled warmly, golden eyes crinkling into gentle crescents. “This is a private affair, so please, don’t stand on ceremony.”

“Thank you. That is greatly appreciated.”

Claudia had heard from Sylvester that the king always made a point of eating breakfast with his family. Similarly, this dinner signified how much he valued those bonds. But Claudia was not so shameless that she could indulge in his kindness. She maintained proper etiquette.

*The one saving grace is how similar they are to Sylvester.* It wasn’t just that they shared physical features; it was the way they moved, the way they spoke, the idiosyncrasies of their manner. All of it was familiar in a comforting, endearing way.

King Halbert was known for being strict, a quality that overshadowed all others in the minds of most, but it was because of this that people had so much faith in his leadership. Throughout the centuries of kings, he was considered the ideal monarch. Perhaps Claudia’s mother had been so stern with her because she thought him an exemplar of aristocratic conduct.

Queen Alesteia was, in Claudia’s mind, the embodiment of a dignified adult woman. She kept her long blonde hair swept back and gallantly asserted her authority when necessary. The queen had even come to see Claudia at the academy when her engagement to Sylvester was unofficially decided.

Together, Halbert and Alesteia were everything a good king and queen should be. It was a bit of a wonder how Sylvester had come

from the two of them, given his darker tendencies.

"My son tends to be a bit selfish, I'm afraid," said Alesteia. "Today must have been exhausting for you."

Claudia swiftly shook her head. "Oh, not at all. He supported me through everything. The day went by so fast that this all still feels like a dream, as embarrassed as I am to admit it."

"You looked beautiful. I am sure you'll be even more stunning on your wedding day. I can hardly wait for it to come," Alesteia gushed, hand on her cheek and eyes glimmering.

Claudia's mind drifted to Martha, head maid of the Lindsay estate. The woman had been on the verge of tears when she saw Claudia off that morning. Claudia didn't have particularly fond memories of her mother, but she couldn't shake the loneliness of no longer having one. The queen's doting words filled the gaping hole in her heart.

*She approves of me.* Alesteia seemed eager to have her as a daughter-in-law. And for that reason, Claudia took her words as they were rather than assuming the queen was offering empty praise. There was no point in adding even more to her anxieties by wondering over the queen's sincerity.

The king's gaze cut to Sylvester. "Don't go getting full of yourself because you have her now."

"I won't." Sylvester took a sip from his glass. "You don't have to tell me."

They had both taken drinks at the same time, perfectly mirroring one another in how they held their glasses and how far they tipped them back. It truly solidified for Claudia how alike they were. Hardly surprising, considering they were father and son, but it was almost uncanny—even if this mimicry *was* something that had been ingrained into Sylvester by tutors.

"It is good that the two of you can drive each other to improve, but one mustn't take it too far. Balance is important."

*Balance.* Claudia thought the king meant those words more for her than his son. She stood out more than most ladies her age, she couldn't deny that. It might've been one thing if her beauty was her sole defining feature, but she had power and influence too.

Sylvester smoothly quirked a brow. "Is that why you called us here, to scold us?"

"Of course not," Halbert replied. "We summoned you to celebrate your engagement. I have faith that the two of you will complement each other and handle any problems that may arise." He angled his head back, pressing the rim of his glass to his lips and looking every bit like an older Sylvester.

Claudia blinked slowly. It was the first time she had ever seen the king's fatherly side. There was so much affection in his gaze it was almost unnerving, casting upon her the same feeling of warmth as spring sunlight. She hadn't realized until now that Sylvester had been afforded far more of his parents' love than hers had ever given her. And now that she was to be their daughter-in-law, it would be afforded to her too. The very idea staggered her.

The king and queen were truly happy to celebrate her union with Sylvester. She finally felt like she understood what parents looked like—or what they were supposed to, at the very least.

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Claudia couldn't recall how the food had tasted, but she was absolutely certain she would remember this day for the rest of her life. The hour had grown late. She was to stay in the castle for the night, both because the servants had prepared a special room for her as the prince's betrothed and because the queen insisted on it.

Her quarters consisted of a bedroom and a drawing room. All the furnishings were brand new. Among them was what was called a Sylvester-style armoire. The back panel was a mirror, and the doors were made of glass so people could see what was inside without having to open them. Sylvester had conceived the design himself, and it was immensely popular with people who loved to display trinkets and the like. He wanted somewhere for Claudia to keep the things she loved, to help make the space her own. She was grateful for this kindness, since she still wasn't used to being in the royal castle.

After bathing, she threw open the doors to her room and stepped inside. She froze when her eyes landed on the bed. Someone was already there, clad in silk nightclothes.

"Did I enter the wrong room?" Claudia asked nervously.

"Nope," Sylvester said.

"Well, in case you have forgotten, we aren't to spend our first night together yet."

Today had been their engagement ceremony, not their wedding. She was still officially a Lindsay.

"Sorry, but I haven't the patience for rational arguments." As soon as she was close enough, he seized her in his arms and pulled her onto the bed. His whole body quivered as he pressed his face into her chest.

"Syl?"

He let out a long, heavy exhale. Slowly, he started to speak. "When I heard you'd been taken, I thought I'd go insane. The beast in my belly woke from its slumber. I feared it would devour my insides, tear through my skin, and take over. I swear I even heard the sound of teeth tearing through meat, of bones snapping. Even imagined the blood spraying from my stomach, staining my vision red."



While she couldn't see his expression, she ran her fingers through his silver hair, hoping it would bring him some comfort. *I didn't realize how much he had bottled up inside.* Sylvester had only *looked* composed. Inside, he had been fighting his own demons.

"I only managed to leash it because saving you was more important than anything else. My emotions came second to that. But now it feels like the beast might bare its fangs, that the terror might overwhelm me again. The fear that I might still somehow lose you." His voice trailed off before he continued, "That even though you're here with me now, I might lose myself and forget how precious that is." His voice was thick, as if he was on the verge of tears. He was still fighting his inner beast.

"I'm right here," she promised. "And I'm not going anywhere." Claudia kissed his head, willing it to keep his demons at bay.

"Dia, I don't think I can ever forgive myself. It was pure luck that I managed to reach you in time. And even then, that man had already left bruises on you."

He was referring to how she'd been wrenched off her horse. The man's fingers had dug into her skin so hard he'd left marks. They would fade completely in a few more days, but regret had already carved itself into Sylvester.

"If I could have, I would've burned all those villages to the ground." He wanted to erase everything with ties to Cardinal Nigel. "But even if I had, I don't think it would have been enough."

She agreed. There would always be some new threat on the horizon. They had many more trials and tribulations to come.

"No," Claudia said, "it's not a realistic solution."

"I know. That's why I feel like I'm about to lose my mind."

"To lose your grip on reality, you mean?"

"Do you think I would feel better if I let go?"

"I think you would find it far more miserable than anything you're feeling right now."

He let out a strangled laugh. "Yeah, I guess you're right. If I let the beast take over, I wouldn't be able to feel your warmth anymore."

She cupped his face in her hands and drew his gaze up. "It's all right. The two of us will overcome whatever awaits us." The king had even given his blessing, believing the two of them capable of surmounting any obstacles. "Everything will be okay, Syl. If you cannot trust yourself, then trust me." *Because I trust you.*

Claudia leaned in to plant a kiss upon his brow. Then she kissed his cheek, the tip of his nose, and finally his lips. Each peck was filled with her affection. Through hooded eyes, she saw the way his silver lashes trembled.

"I can't live without you," he said.

"What a coincidence. Neither can I."

She felt him slump against her, the tension draining from his body. "I love you, Dia."

"And I love you, Syl."

With no more need for words, they kissed. His hand stroked the top of her head, sliding down to trace the edge of her ear. Pleasure hummed through her body, a moan slipping from her mouth. They did

not stop for a while after that, though they kept themselves chaste. When at long last they did separate, they were both panting.

"I'm sorry for being so selfish when you must be exhausted," Sylvester whispered.

"Honestly! I'm completely wiped out," she teased. "But it makes me happy when you depend on me." Claudia liked knowing she could be his haven. She was proud to be someone special to him. "Can you swear to me you won't ever hold in things like this?"

"As long as you want to share my burdens, I will."

"That's a promise. If you ever go back on it, I won't forgive you." Claudia hugged his head to her chest again. He didn't try to resist. It was rather adorable how obedient he was being. She quite liked being the assertive one sometimes.

The warmth of his body was so comforting that she soon fell asleep.

## Chapter 27:
## The Villainess Visits the Freshly Remodeled Village

CLAUDIA'S FIRST TASK as the crown prince's betrothed was to visit the village developing the new medicine for distribution. She rode there in a royal carriage with Sylvester, Tristan, and Kiel.

Sylvester was none too pleased about Kiel joining them, and he didn't even try to hide it. Kiel's companion was absent for the moment; Nina's chamberlain, Darton, had taken it upon himself to train the man.

"Kiel has a vested interest," Claudia told her fiancé, "as he was involved with the investigation of these villages."

Sylvester frowned. "And that means he needs to ride in the same carriage as us? Allow me to remind you that we had to repair a perfectly functional wheel because of his ill fortune."

"W-well, I wouldn't say *perfectly* functional. It was quite old and had probably lost some of its durability." Claudia was trying to defend Kiel, but even she wasn't fully convinced.

"I was impressed by how quickly you had it switched out, as if nothing had happened in the first place!" Kiel said, a bit too enthusiastically. "Personally speaking, I'm glad to be traveling with you!" His tone was appropriately polite for present company, but he was as dauntless as ever.

"You shouldn't make your cursed luck other people's problem," Sylvester scolded him.

"Actually," Tristan cut in, "given how unlucky he is, isn't that exactly what he should do? Virgil saved him from being covered in wine at the engagement party, didn't he?"

Kiel clapped his hands together. "I can see why you're bound to be the prince's right hand! You're a clever one!"

"Oh, you think so?" Tristan grinned, easily flattered and therefore oblivious to Sylvester's glowering.

Kiel had already begun to ingratiate himself with Tristan. Their presence disrupted what might have otherwise been alone time for the couple, but Claudia was enjoying the lively conversation.

Due to their guarded escort, their journey was a slow one. They had to stop and rest somewhere for the night before they reached the village.

"It doesn't even look like the same place," Kiel said when they spilled out of the carriage.

Some things were the same: the forest at the edge of the village, the carpet of grass that spread as far as the eye could see, and the crisp air. But the village itself was unrecognizable. The stone chapel had been demolished without a trace, leaving a flat plot of empty land. The other buildings had been remodeled, including the one used as the children's dormitory. The most notable structure now was the research center—a wooden workshop dedicated to processing and producing the analgesic. More workers would be moved in to staff it, meaning eventually the village would transform into a town with the workshop at its center.

As Sylvester and Claudia stood there, the first person to greet them was an administrative official sent by the royal castle to oversee the site. He was essentially here to take the place of the village chief. Since the finer details of the analgesic were confidential, no new chief would be appointed.

Claudia spotted a familiar face behind the official and couldn't help smiling. It was a girl with brown pigtails. Aila's face was pinched from nerves, but she looked far healthier and happier than Claudia remembered. Claudia had been eager to see her again.

"Aila! It's been so long. Have you been well?"

"Yes! Madam—Miss?—um, Claudia?"

Claudia giggled. "No need to be so formal if you aren't comfortable. You can speak to me as you did before."

Although Aila and the other children were under the government's care now, their environment and the people in it had changed drastically. To top that off, Aila had learned that the woman she'd considered a fellow victim was someone far above her in status. Claudia was not only a noblewoman but the future crown princess. It was stressful enough for Aila to be separated from her parents; Claudia didn't want to be a further burden to her.

"Okay, thanks," said Aila. "We're learning proper etiquette, but I've still got a long way to go."

"Are you fully provided for?"

"Completely! We've got clothes, dishes, anything you can think of—and everything's brand new! Actually, I kind of worry if it's okay

for us to have all this. The person looking after us now is really nice. They can be pretty scary when they're angry, but even then, it's still better than how unsettling the chieftess was."

Aila and the other children were living as a group with their new caretaker. It had been a fairly smooth transition because they were already accustomed to dormitory life, so save for the new schedule imposed by their caretaker, not much else had changed for them.

The adults of the village who hadn't been implicated in any crimes were under observation until the drugs had completely left their systems. They weren't yet allowed to visit the children without supervision.

"Do you miss seeing your parents every day?" Claudia asked.

"Hmm. Some of the younger kids cry about it," Aila said, "but not me. I still get to see them once a month. Besides, when they do go back to their old selves, we can live together again."

Claudia was relieved to see the anxiety gone from Aila's face. The children's caretaker had submitted a report, which Claudia had read through before she came, so she already had an idea of how things had developed. While Aila was still certainly haunted by the trauma of what she had been through, she at least had some hope back in her life.

Once Claudia and Aila finished discussing the present, the girl's eyes met Kiel's. "Is your luck still as bad as ever?" Aila asked with a grin.

"Yup!"

"You sound way too proud of that."

Kiel shrugged. "I think it's one of my more charming qualities!"

"It's impressive you're so intent to overcome it." And that, Claudia thought, *was* his best quality. He'd turned his own bad luck on its head to become a detective, after all.

"Then I'd better work hard too!" Aila said.

"I think you've already done plenty of that," Claudia remarked.

"No way. There's still so much I have to learn! But that's the fun part, having so much I can do. I'm having fun, and I'm happy." Aila's life was much different now than it had been when her future was set in stone and nothing she said or did could change it. Now she could learn pharmacology if she wished, and she was allowed to do simple tasks like gathering ingredients.

As happy as Claudia was to see her so motivated, she thought to herself, *Aila's a clever girl. She must sense it, even if she's not wholly aware.* The kindness Harland had shown her and the other children wasn't altruistic. Everything they had provided was compensation for keeping their mouths shut about the medicine.

All the other villages would be working to produce the analgesic, so they'd temporarily enter the royal family's jurisdiction. Starting with the generation after that, they would have to negotiate with the regional lord for the extent of their oversight, but the administration would continue to have a hand in the villages' future as a matter of national security—to make sure word of the medicine didn't leak to

other countries. The freedom afforded to Aila and the other children was still somewhat limited because of it.

Nevertheless…

"Thank you, Miss Dee!" Aila said, beaming at her. "You kept your promise and made my wish come true!"

Claudia's heart stuttered, and she struggled to blink back tears. She hadn't done it on her own. "Of course. We made a promise. And without your help, we would never have succeeded."

Aila had made such a difference. Unwilling to fall in line and remain in her isolated village, she'd fought for change to the bitter end. If not for her determination, things wouldn't have turned out the way they did.

"I should be the one thanking you for saving me, in fact," Claudia added. "And I will continue to fight for your rights and best interests." She wanted Aila and her friends to have the freedom to choose whatever they wanted for themselves in the future.

Her engagement to Sylvester was finally official, but that change in status hadn't meant any real achievement. *If I had never been involved in this case, I would never have known about Aila.*

No, if anything, this situation had impressed upon her how immature she was. She had only been able to aid Aila and her friends because Sylvester was already involved. She wouldn't have given up trying to help regardless, but she wasn't sure how much she could have managed on her own.

*Something has to change.* Even without Nigel as a constant thorn in their side, Harland had plenty of problems. Solving one didn't mean their work was over.

Claudia lifted her gaze. Cloudless skies stretched out as far as she could see. She took a deep breath, and clean, crisp air filled her lungs. *I'm going to be crown princess.* Her responsibilities would be far greater than ever before. She couldn't afford any more mistakes. But the pressure on her would be proof that she was finally standing shoulder to shoulder with Sylvester.

She peered up at her fiancé, her eyes meeting his warm golden ones. He resembled his father greatly, but there were traces of his mother there too. *Someday, the two of us are going to be king and queen.* Claudia would become the mother of the nation, and with that status, she would have far greater power than she did now. That degree of influence could save people or condemn them depending on how she used it. But her intention was the same as it ever was. If anything had changed, it was the strength of her conviction. *I want to build a society free of the traumas Aila had to face.*

Claudia greatly admired Queen Alesteia. Even if she never became as great as her predecessor, she at least wanted to use her power to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. That was her promise to the people, one she would carry with her as crown princess and subsequently as queen.

While Claudia was making such promises to herself, a splash of water filled the air.

"Why am I so unlucky?!" Kiel wailed, soaked to the bone.

Aila burst out laughing.

*I can't let myself forget her smile,* Claudia thought. It would be a reminder of what she needed to protect, and how she could never stand by while victims like Aila existed.

This marked a new beginning.

## Side Story:
## The Boy Detective Lives Up to His Canary Nickname

MORNINGS STARTED EARLY on the ranch.

As the night's dew sparkled on the grass, people were already stirring. By the time all moisture had gathered into a single droplet on a leaf and rolled to its tip before dropping to the ground, the transformation had begun: night into day. At dawn, the cool night breeze had mingled with air warmed by sunlight, but its passing left the leaves completely dry. That was when the ranch came alive, its people spilling outside.

One such person had a head of voluminous blond hair that bounced with each step as he emerged from his house, stretching his arms. He leaned his head back, peering up at the sky. Light glinted off the rounded spectacles sitting on the bridge of his nose.

"Mm, it's nice and sunny!"

Like anyone living on a ranch, Kiel woke with the sunrise—but unlike the rest of his family, he devoted his labor to studying. Only after his grandfather, a former butler, had gone over etiquette and other lessons was Kiel finally released. It wasn't that he hated learning; on the contrary, he enjoyed it greatly. The time he spent with his grandfather wasn't nearly as stifling as his cousins seemed to think.

There was just one thing he couldn't stand.

"I'm gonna head to town today!"

Whenever he stayed in one place for too long, he got the itch—this restless urge to go somewhere else. His grandfather had given up trying to pin him down, so Kiel was allotted time in the afternoon for "self-study." According to his grandfather, restlessness diminished with age. Kiel didn't buy it. He was of the mind that this was his personality, not something he would grow out of.

When Kiel told his mother he'd be going out, she hollered out, "Make sure you don't stay out too late!"

Her voice echoed behind him as he raced to the outskirts of the ranch. There was no real need to hurry, but the breeze was at his back and his footsteps felt light. He flew down the slope from his house like a little bird gliding low over the grass.

For generations, Kiel's family had owned a ranch on the crest of a high hill. Everything at the top was their property. The town sat a short ways past the base of the hill. If he ran, he could make the trip there in about thirty minutes.

The town was visible from the top of the hill, so it was a direct path with no obstructions. There was no chance of getting lost along the way. Likewise, someone in town could see if a person was making their way down the hill from the ranch.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

Kiel had picked up too much momentum, so he bent his knees to slow down. Even though he was used to this route, he had to be careful not to tumble. If he did, the whole town would be ready to tease him by the time he arrived.

The town was modest compared to some others; it had no main gate or checkpoint for entry. Once on a main road, one was already in town. It had a marketplace, but there were few buildings to it. Also, the town had no distinct districts; apparel and barber shops were nestled between people's houses.

Kiel's town was typical of what one might find in the countryside. It was not so impoverished as to be dilapidated, but nor was it particularly prosperous. It was the most average of average places, where people had enough to get by. In fact, by the town's standards, Kiel's family was considered wealthy for having so much land—acres and acres of pasture.

When Kiel first began to visit the town, the people called him "ranch boy Kiel." Commoners didn't have surnames, so instead, children were associated with their parents' work or given some appellation to distinguish them. His nickname had since become "Canary Kiel," in part because of his hair color, though there was one other reason.

"Hey there, Canary Kiddo!" a middle-aged man called out when their eyes met on the street. "How're you doing?" The town was one of those communities where everyone knew everyone else.

"Great, thanks! I actually just arrived." He abruptly paused. "Uh-oh." Kiel's gaze flicked from the man to a teary-eyed eight-year-old girl. He recognized her face. His gut told him there was about to be trouble, so he spun around to leave, but the girl was too quick for him.

"Kiel! I can't find Meeko!"

"Urgh, why am I so unlucky?!" Kiel hadn't gotten the opportunity to explore or do anything interesting. He'd barely even arrived, and already he was being dragged into something against his will. He threw his head back and glared up at the sky.

"Oh, here we go. The canary's singing again," the man said.

That was the other reason people called him a canary: canaries stopped singing when they sensed danger. This was the exact opposite of Kiel, who warbled loudly at misfortune. Still, his hair color made it hard not to compare the two. Plus, so long as Kiel was uttering his motto, whatever trouble he faced had to be trivial. When in true danger, canaries weren't the only ones to go silent.

"Sir, can't *you* help her?" Kiel asked the middle-aged man.

"Hate to break it to ya, but I'm a lot better at losing things than finding them. I'll leave this one to you, boy detective."

Kiel sighed. This man wasn't any help. Resigned, he shuffled toward the girl. He could have ignored her and run for it, but she would have just gotten angry and chased after him.

"I can't find Meeko anywhere," the girl complained. "Did you steal him?"

"Why would I do that? We have our own cats at the ranch."

"But Meeko is the cutest cat in the world!"

"Yeah, yeah. Are you sure he's not just patrolling his territory?"

"No. He's usually sleeping right about now."

Meeko was the girl's long-haired cat. He had brown coloring around his eyes and back, but the length of his nose and belly were

white, giving him a distinct two-color pattern. He wasn't the only cat in town. They seemed to have their own social rules, most notably maintaining and patrolling their own territories. If two cats encountered each other, a fight would break out. To keep things peaceful, the cats had a habit of patrolling their territories at different times.

This girl loved Meeko so much that she had previously followed him to see where he went throughout the day. Kiel had joined her once, curious whether her observations about the cats' habits were accurate. From what he remembered of the occasion, she was right: this *was* the time Meeko liked to nap in his favorite spot.

As Kiel suspected, the girl resorted to her usual blackmail. "Kiel, you better help me! If you don't, I'll tell everyone you stole Meeko!"

"Okay, I'll help."

No one would believe her even if she did try to blame him, but when Kiel was still new in town, he'd been too afraid she would ruin his reputation to ignore her threat. His cooperation had emboldened her. She now thought threats were the best way to enlist his aid.

None of the adults would fall for the eight-year-old girl's accusations, so Kiel could very well make false promises, forget about the cat, and go home when he felt like it. But he also knew that she only acted like this when she was desperate. The girl wouldn't threaten him unless Meeko was involved, and since she knew where to draw the line, he wasn't bothered by her attempts at coercion.

*I know what it's like to have grown-ups look down on you.* They had taken to calling him the boy detective, but they rarely treated him

like an adult. That was why he'd resorted to putting on fake glasses, hoping it would make him look more intelligent.

"I'll check his favorite spot and see if I can find any clues. In the meantime, do you mind double-checking the other places he might be?" Kiel figured, given the tears in her eyes, that she had already visited all the usual spots.

The girl's tears were drying up; she seemed more composed now that she'd secured his help. "You got it. I'll start in the northern part of town and go from there."

"There's no telling what might lurk in the brush, so you'd better stick to the busier parts of town. Don't wander, okay?"

She nodded obediently. "Somehow all that stuff sounds more convincing coming from you." She knew the kind of trouble he was always finding himself in.

Kiel honestly doubted she would find her cat on the main roads, but there was no need for her to endanger herself looking for him. *I bet he'll come home for lunch anyway.* Kiel was just trying to distract her until then.

The two parted ways, and Kiel started toward Meeko's favorite napping spot. Rather than look for the cat, he was more interested in finding out why Meeko had deviated from his usual schedule. It was too odd. If Meeko went on patrol earlier than usual, he risked running into another cat and getting injured in a fight. There had to be a reason, and Kiel was going to find it.

He headed toward one of the alleyways off the main road. Right as he entered, someone bellowed, "Watch out, kid!"

Kiel froze. “Huh?!” He spun in the direction of the voice in time to see a young man carrying several stacked wooden crates filled with apples. The man was losing control of them, and Kiel was right in their path.

*If I can’t avoid them, there’s only one option!* Kiel crouched to brace himself; it was the best way of mitigating any damage. He curled up and prepared for impact. Several apples slammed against his back.

“Urgh, why am I so unlucky?!”

Fortunately, the man managed to balance the crates well enough that no more toppled out. When Kiel peeked up at him, the young man was white as a sheet.

The nearby greengrocer ignored him and made a beeline for Kiel, extending a hand to help him up. “You okay? None of the apples hit your head, did they?”

“Nope. A few landed on my back, but that’s all.”

Satisfied there had been no serious injuries, the proprietor rounded on the young man. “Show more caution, would you?! I only hired you—reluctantly, I might add—because you insisted you were strapped for cash. But if you can’t watch where you’re goin’, you’re a liability!”

The young man set the crates on the ground and frantically bowed before his boss. “I’m sorry!”

Though Kiel’s back still smarted where the apples had hit, he knew from experience that the bruises would be nothing serious. He

smiled at the two men and said, “It’s okay.”

“I’ll make sure to drop by your parents’ ranch later,” the owner promised.

“Nah, there’s no need for you to go to all that trouble.”

Stubbornly, the man shook his head. “Nonsense. You got hurt on my watch, kid. The least I can do is apologize to your folks in person. Here, take some of these with ya.” He handed Kiel enough apples to stuff his pants pockets full. Though they were smaller than other apple varieties, they filled his pockets to the brim. He barely managed to fit the last ones; they were halfway protruding, threatening to spill.

*Oh well. If this makes him feel better, I’ll take them.* It was much harder to walk like this, but he dragged himself onward to his destination.

This particular alley was tucked behind a row of houses, which obstructed the sunlight that filtered through. People had taken to calling it Shady Street due to the gloom. Shelving units sat behind the houses alongside large, open jugs of water. Meeko’s favorite napping spot was atop one of these shelves, which had sun and shade in equal measure. Meeko liked it because he could shift out of the sun if he got too hot. *He’s a calculating slacker.*

Despite Meeko’s laziness, his young owner declared him the most beautiful cat in the world and groomed him regularly. There was never a speck of dirt on him. He was much cleaner than any of the other cats, and there wasn’t a townsperson who didn’t know him.

Although Kiel had expected as much, his shoulders slumped when he saw that Meeko’s favorite shelf was empty.

"Where could he have gone?" And why?

As Kiel scanned the area, he caught a whiff of a very distinct smell. It wasn't anything he'd experienced before. He followed the odor and discovered a shadow at the corner of the street, where a man was sitting on the ground.

*A vagrant? But he doesn't look like one.* The man was covered in a layer of grime, but he was well muscled. Too well-muscled, perhaps. His biceps bulged like mountains, and his chest was so chiseled and buff that he was nearly bursting out of his shirt. The veins on his arms were prominent beneath his skin. He didn't match Kiel's image of a vagrant.

*He must be about thirty or forty. Looks more like a bandit than anything. I should keep my distance and see if I can get any more information.* Kiel made sure he was close, but not within grabbing range.

"Hey, you alive?" he asked.

The man slowly lifted his head and looked at Kiel, but he made no other response.

"What are you doing here?" Kiel tried again. He sounded like the town guard, and in truth, they would likely have the same questions for the man if they happened upon him during their patrol.

The man opened his mouth. Before any sound could emerge, his stomach growled noisily.

"Are you hungry? I have some apples." It was getting hard to walk around with them in his pockets anyway. Kiel tossed one to the

man without waiting for a response.

The man's eyes widened. He caught the apple easily and, in an instant, he had devoured the whole thing.

"Wait, you ate the core and everything? Uh, I've got more if you want." How starved must this man have been to inhale an apple like that? It was almost like a magic trick, the way he made them disappear so quickly. Amused, Kiel tossed over every apple he had. Each time the man caught one, he made it vanish.

"This is the last one."

Again, the man devoured the apple core and all. Then he lurched forward. Kiel braced himself. He'd given the man his apples because it was fun, but that didn't mean the man was a good person. As Kiel panicked, the man pressed his forehead to the ground, prostrating himself.

"Thank you for the food! I will never forget this debt for as long as I live!" the man said. His hair was an unkempt mess, as was his overgrown beard. Kiel had assumed he was past his prime because of the dirt on his face, but hearing the pitch of his voice, Kiel realized the man was much younger.

"No need to exaggerate," said Kiel. "Did you collapse from hunger?"

The man chuckled. "Ah, how embarrassing."

When Kiel asked what the man was doing there in the first place, he explained he'd come to town as the bodyguard for a

traveling merchant. Once the merchant had no more need of his services, he was at a loss for what to do next.

"Don't you have any money?" Kiel asked.

"Nope. The merchant paid me in food."

Kiel shook his head. "But you were his bodyguard. Weren't you compensated?"

"Yeah. With food."

"You didn't get any money?!"

The man scratched the back of his head. "Well, that wasn't part of the agreement…"

"Forget your agreement! That merchant scammed you!" Kiel shouted, losing his temper.

Traveling merchants faced countless dangers on the road, so they hired bodyguards to protect themselves and their goods. The more experienced the bodyguard, the higher the price they demanded for their services. Judging by how built this guy was, he'd earned nothing but some food for high-value work. Even assuming he was no good in a fight, he looked imposing enough to make any thief think twice about crossing him.

Kiel sighed. "I'm surprised you managed to live this long if you're so gullible."

"I used to be a mercenary."

"But not anymore?"

As far as Kiel knew, the only people who worked as bodyguards *were* mercenaries. So how could this man not be one? He soon had

his answer when the man explained that he was from Parte Kingdom.

"Oh, now I get it," Kiel said. "So you were a mercenary in the army."

"Yep."

"But Harland isn't at war right now, is it?" The area where Kiel lived had long enjoyed peace. He had never heard of anyone in this region requiring the services of a mercenary from Parte.

"Since I owe you such a great debt, I'll be honest with ya," said the man. "I ran away."

"From what?"

"The battlefield."

Kiel jumped. "You did what?!" He hadn't anticipated the man was a deserter. From what Kiel knew, people were terrified of meeting Parte warriors on the field because they were so fierce.

"Well," the man continued, "to be specific, I ran *after* the battle was over."

"You're allowed to do that?"

"Nope." The man shrugged. "I made it here by the skin of my teeth, if you can believe it."

Kiel's brow furrowed, his curiosity mounting. "Okay, but how did you manage to cross the border?"

"I was able to pass when that merchant hired me as his bodyguard."

The pieces were coming together. No wonder the merchant had hired him: even though this bruiser was a suspicious fellow, he was willing to work for free and too gullible to demand more. The merchant probably bribed the border officials, figuring even that expense was cheaper than paying for a real bodyguard.

"But it's okay," the man added.

"What's okay, exactly?"

"They aren't gonna send investigators after a guy like me."

That made sense. Parte Kingdom was a small nation. It couldn't afford to waste manpower hunting down a single deserter. "Still, wouldn't it set a bad precedent for them to just let you go?"

The man shrugged again. "Running from the battlefield is shameful. Most of our people would rather cut their own throats than run off."

"Yet you, uh… What's your name?"

"Oh, right. I'm Igor."

"So, Igor, you ran away despite the shame?"

Igor nodded. "Yep. I knew what it would mean, but I was too much of a coward to slit my throat." He went on to say that he hated the sight of blood. He couldn't even stand the violence he helped perpetuate. As soon as the battle was over, he ran from the field and never looked back.

It was hard to imagine from Igor's sunny attitude, but he must have struggled in deliberating whether to desert. He spoke with great

self-deprecation, resigned to how his actions made him look. Though Igor shed no tears, Kiel had the sense that he was crying deep within.

Kiel let out a long exhale, opting not to pry further into the man's past. "All right, so what are you going to do now?"

"What do you think I should do?"

"Can't you figure it out yourself? How long have you been sitting here, anyway?"

"We arrived first thing this morning, and the merchant said I was out of a job before I even had any breakfast. So…"

"So you collapsed here," Kiel finished for him. "You know, if you want to find work, you should probably wash up. You smell ripe."

Igor frowned. "Merchant told me the same thing. Seems like the people here don't smell the same as us folks from Parte."

"I think I've heard something like that. Anyway, do you wanna rinse off? I'll tell you where the well is so you can get water."

"Really?! Hey, are you a messenger from the Capricious God himself?"

Kiel wrinkled his nose. "Of course not. But I guess I'm capricious enough. And since I forgot to introduce myself earlier, I'm Kiel. A detective."

"A detective!" Igor echoed, awe in his voice. "That's incredible!"

"Do you even know what a detective is?"

"Not a clue!"

Kiel slapped his forehead. *This is pointless!* At least the man was motivated. Kiel directed him to the well and advised him of a few places that might be in need of a brute.

"I can't thank you enough for all your help!" said Igor.

"Just make sure your next job pays you properly."

Now he knew why Meeko had strayed from his usual routine. With that mystery solved, Kiel left Shady Street behind. *Meeko probably couldn't stand the stench.* Cats' noses were more sensitive than those of humans. Not to mention Meeko probably didn't like having a stranger encroaching on his napping spot.

Kiel returned to the main street, where he heard the clamor of dismayed voices. Curious, he waved to someone who was standing near the scene. "Hey, do you know what happened here?"

"Oh, it's you, Kiel. There was a bit of an incident and the authorities were called. They already got witness statements, so there's nothing to worry about now." Odd that the man refused to divulge more. Kiel tried to nudge him to share, but the man said the same thing Kiel had heard dozens of times before: "It's nothing a kid like you should be worried about. Hold on, weren't you looking for Meeko? I'll bet he's gone back home since it's lunchtime."

Kiel gave up trying to get more information. If the man was that eager to change the subject, he had no intention of telling Kiel about whatever it was. *Must've been something violent.* Had it been an ordinary accident, people would've shared what happened, turning it into a moral lesson. The man's vagueness suggested it wasn't something he felt comfortable discussing with a child.

Although that only piqued Kiel's curiosity further, he headed toward the home of Meeko's owner instead. When he arrived, Meeko was eagerly scarfing down treats from the young girl.

"He came back as soon as it was time for lunch!" the girl said. "He's a good boy, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he is."

The adults had been right about Meeko coming back when he was hungry. The girl seemed satisfied with how things had turned out.

No sooner did Kiel slump with relief than his stomach growled in protest. "I think I'll head home for lunch too."

"Sounds good. See ya! Thanks for helping me look for Meeko!" She beamed at him, and any lingering annoyance disappeared. This whole thing had been an incredible pain in the neck, but at least he'd gotten in her good graces.

As Kiel was strolling toward the slope that led back to his house, the vice captain of the town guard called after him. The man had just turned forty-two this year and had silvery gray hair. He was popular with all the townsfolk—men and women alike—because he was such an attentive listener. When he flagged Kiel down, Kiel assumed he had business to discuss, but the first words out of the vice captain's mouth dispelled that notion.

"Just wanted to remind you to report anything suspicious. You've got good intuition about these sorts of things. Wish the rest of our men would learn from your example."

"Happy to be of any use I can," said Kiel. "But you don't usually leave town, do you?"

In the town guard, the captain ranked at the top, followed by the vice captain, then the chief of the patrol unit, and at the bottom of the ladder were the guards in the unit itself. The captain and vice captain didn't usually come to crime scenes themselves. Kiel had only ever met with the vice captain at their headquarters before.

"You know I'm being transferred out of here soon, right?"

Kiel nodded. "Yeah, I heard it was a promotion in recognition of your abilities, and that you would be moving to a major urban area."

"You have an impressive vocabulary," the man said with a laugh. "No wonder your grandfather thinks so highly of you."

The vice captain had accepted the transfer three months ago. Rumor suggested it was a soft promotion in preparation of being elected to captain, due to his long years of service and many accomplishments. It had apparently made him nostalgic for his roots, so he'd decided to venture out of his office and investigate personally.

"I'll try to find the time to drop in on your grandfather soon. And to be clear, it's not because I'm after that top-shelf liquor all the boys have been buzzing about."

Picking up on the nuance, Kiel said bluntly, "I'll tell Grandpa to have some ready for you."

Since Kiel was often plagued by misfortune, the authorities had taken to escorting him back to his house. His grandfather bestowed them with the best alcohol in his possession as a show of gratitude.

More than that, actually—it was also a way to loosen the lips of the local authorities. They were a valuable source of information for Kiel's grandfather now that he was retired and out of the loop. His generosity had made the town guard quite fond of Kiel indeed. They were even permissive enough not to scold him when he arrived at the scene of a crime and began investigating himself.

*Mainly because if I show up, they can use that as an excuse to escort me home and drink more of Grandpa's booze.* It worked out for everyone, though, so he had no grievances.

In fact, if he could snag one of the guardsmen and bring them back for drinks, he might be able to get information out of them about the earlier incident. To that end, Kiel would need to find someone off-duty on his way home.

His stomach rumbled, reminding him of his hunger. *Lunch first!* Kiel scrambled up the slope, eager to reach home.

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After lunch, Kiel tried to slip out of the house to return to town but was stopped by his grandfather. The former butler insisted on a spur-of-the-moment exam to determine whether Kiel had been studying diligently. Kiel swallowed his complaints. Protesting would only encourage his grandfather to forbid him from leaving, and that was the least thing Kiel wanted.

By the time he finished the exam (with passing marks, of course), and reviewed the material assigned by his grandfather, the sun was already beginning to set.

"Hm. You've been wandering off to town almost daily, so I was afraid you weren't keeping up with your studies. But it seems I was wrong," said his grandfather.

"You wouldn't let me go anymore if I wasn't."

"Smart boy. Keep it up." The old man patted Kiel's head with a wrinkled hand.

Kiel's mind was already elsewhere. *I wonder what that incident was.* The more people tried to hide from him, the more curious he became. It was frustrating that he would have to wait until tomorrow to bring one of the town guard home for answers. And yet, much to Kiel's surprise, the answers came to him first—and from an unexpected source.

"'Scuse me, anyone home?"

The greengrocer from earlier that day had come to apologize.

"Oh, I completely forgot about that," Kiel muttered to himself. He'd been so preoccupied after finding Igor collapsed on Shady Street that the misadventure with the apples had completely slipped his mind.

The greengrocer had brought a bushel of juicy-looking apples, and his grandfather offered the man a glass of liquor.

Kiel's mother smiled at their guest, but it didn't reach her eyes. For his part, Kiel kept close to his grandfather. He could guess his

mother was livid with him for not reporting his injury sooner.

"Sorry about what happened, Kiel," said the greengrocer. "The young lad's normally more careful than that."

"You mentioned that he's working for you because he doesn't have much money, right?" Kiel asked.

The man chuckled. "Overheard that, did ya? Yeah, he made some bad investments." The owner was happy to share after downing some alcohol. "His first mistake was borrowing from a loan shark, but he managed to survive. At least until recently. The sharks have gotten stricter with collections, so I hear."

"That must have him rattled," Kiel's grandfather said.

"Yep. He's got no clue when they'll come knockin' next, so he's all jumpy. That's why he lost control of the load. Saw the local guard and lost his nerve."

Kiel and his grandfather exchanged glances. That was suspicious. Debt collectors might have been after him, but he wasn't a criminal. If anything, the authorities would be his only protection if the loan sharks closed in.

"Why would that scare him?" Kiel ventured.

"I asked him the same thing. He was too spooked to give me a straight answer, just said he felt like a criminal." The young man was plainly a victim. But, as the shopkeeper explained, loan sharks had been hounding him relentlessly; he was so worn down that he couldn't think straight anymore. "And then there's that whole incident from earlier."

Kiel leaned forward. “What happened?”

“Apparently, someone else in town borrowed from this shark, who decided to make an example of him and beat him to a pulp in an alleyway. Luckily, the vice captain stumbled on the scene. Problem is, the culprit ran the second he said something, so he got away before they could catch him.”

Kiel’s grandfather furrowed his brow. “The vice captain caught them in the act, hm?”

“Speaking of,” Kiel interjected, “the vice captain said he’d come by soon, Grandpa.” The topic had finally reminded him to pass the message along.

“Oh? How kind of him to go out of his way.”

The owner’s attention moved to Kiel’s grandfather. “The rank-and-file have been walking on eggshells. Can’t make any mistakes in front of their higher-ups. Plus there was that…ah, what was it again? Oh, a raid. They pulled a failed raid.”

By raid, he meant a police search on a building, Kiel knew. The owner further elaborated that it had been on a supposed underground casino, but when the authorities arrived, it was already abandoned.

“Seems like they’ve got a mole.” The shopkeeper was tipsy enough at this point that his eyes were glazed.

Kiel gawked at him; this was the first he’d heard of any such thing. “You mean there was an illegal casino near our town?” he asked, voice hitching in shock.

"Nah, not near here. Our guards were called in as backup, though. I only happened to overhear when I went to the next town over to deliver some fruit."

Unfortunately, Kiel couldn't as easily get his hands on information from neighboring towns; that was a bit out of his purview. The local authorities wouldn't bother talking about what happened now that the raid had failed. If it had been a success, word would likely have reached Kiel by now.

More importantly, Kiel was glad to have learned what happened earlier, on top of this news of a failed bust. He would be even happier without having to face a lecture from his mother once the greengrocer left, but alas.

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Both of Kiel's parents were ready to ground him, but he managed to talk them down and return to town the following day. He'd sated his curiosity, but he was anxious to follow up with Igor. After all the effort Kiel had made to help the man, he hoped Igor had at least avoided collapsing again. That loan shark seemed to be widening his sphere of influence lately. With Igor's gullibility, Kiel was afraid he might get caught up in trouble.

Kiel visited all the places he'd recommended to Igor for work. He didn't find the man at any of them. In fact, no one seemed to have seen Igor at all.

"I guess he never even tried to find a new job," Kiel grumbled to himself, wondering if Igor's enthusiasm had been a farce.

*I guess I've still got a long way to go until I'm a good judge of character.* Maybe Kiel had gotten caught up in how thankful Igor had seemed. Anyone would be flattered by that level of gratitude.

While Kiel ruminated on his mistakes, he headed for the well—the first place he'd directed Igor. No sooner did he arrive than a shout rose up behind him. "Young sir!"

"Huh? Igor?" Kiel whirled around, but the young man who'd called his name was almost unfamiliar to him. Gone was the scruff on his face, his unruly hair now cropped short. Igor looked ten years younger—or perhaps it was more accurate to say he finally looked his age.

After a thorough wash, Igor's hair had returned to its natural color: a bright chartreuse reminiscent of fresh spring grass. But the man's body was still a solid wall of muscle. Kiel had to crane his neck back to peer up at Igor standing at his full height; Igor was over two meters tall. On closer inspection, he noticed Igor wearing a reddish-brown apron that was comically too small for his body, one Kiel had seen before.

"You're working at the inn?" Kiel asked.

"Sure am! When I came here yesterday to use the well, the proprietress approached me!" That was how he'd managed to find a job without having to look for one.

"I guess you're not like me. You're lucky."

"I might be, huh? The proprietress has been real nice helping me clean up, since the guests'll be seeing me working around the place. Oh, and she's paying me money!"

"Good. Though money *is* usually exchanged for goods and services."

At least Kiel wouldn't have to worry about Igor collapsing in an alley. Something else intrigued him, however, so he accompanied Igor back to the inn. Working there probably involved some degree of physical strength, but as far as Kiel knew, the proprietress wasn't in need of more staff. He hadn't mentioned her place to Igor for that very reason. There must've been some reason she had gone out of her way to hire him.

"Good afternoon, ma'am!" Kiel greeted her.

"Ah, if it isn't Canary Kiel. Now that I think about it, Igor said you looked after him yesterday."

He shook his head. "I just gave him some apples."

"He was praising you as his savior." The proprietress paused, attention moving to Igor. "Igor, we just received a shipment of vegetables. Be a dear and carry them to the kitchen."

"You got it, ma'am!"

Her gaze cut back to Kiel. "Not the sharpest tool in the shed, but he listens well. I'm glad to have him."

"I didn't realize you were shorthanded."

"I'm not, but it's been getting more dangerous around here lately. Figured he'd make a good bodyguard, and thankfully I can

afford some extra help."

That fit precisely with Kiel's suspicions. She'd indeed had another reason to hire Igor.

"Does it have anything to do with the loan shark?" Kiel asked.

"My, you've really got your ear to the ground!" She smiled at him and nodded. "I was worried after what happened yesterday. We'd have trouble if any shady characters came around here. My son wouldn't be any help."

"What's that about me?"

*Speak of the devil.*

The proprietress's son, Pierre, popped his head out. He was a slender man, half the size of his portly mother. With his reedy build, he wouldn't be much help in a fight. Their female guests only liked him because he happened to be quite handsome.

"Where'd you wander off to in the middle of work?" the proprietress groused.

"I had a good reason," Pierre huffed back at her. "The vice captain was here to ask if I knew anything about yesterday's big to-do."

"Goodness, the vice captain is investigating personally?"

Since the vice captain hadn't been able to stop the criminal's escape, he had taken it upon himself to work the case with the rest of the guard.

"Hopefully one of our guests can help somehow," the proprietress said, voice laced with concern. "Pierre, you know the

victim, don't you?"

Pierre shrugged. "I've seen him at the pub. And I know he runs a cleaners, but that's about it."

From what Pierre said, the investigation didn't seem to be progressing much.

"Excuse me!" called a guest from their room.

"On my way!" the proprietress hollered back. She left her seat at the main desk and waddled off.

As soon as she was gone, Pierre knelt in front of Kiel. "Hey, what do you think about going with me to the neighboring town soon?"

Kiel immediately knew where the conversation was headed. The greengrocer had mentioned an illegal casino last night, but the neighboring town had its own form of legal gambling. "Even if I come with you to the horse track, I can't tell you which horse is going to win."

"You can try!"

"The only thing I can tell you is whether they're in good form."

Since Kiel's family raised horses, people often asked him for betting advice. In truth, Kiel didn't spend much time with the horses, but he still knew more about them than the average person. He was also well spoken, so he could precisely describe a horse's condition. His "advice" had earned him the gratitude of many men who frequented the horse track—but at the end of the day, the horse and jockey were a team. Even a horse in perfect condition wasn't

guaranteed to win. No one could perfectly predict the winner; that was what made it gambling.

"Then do that! It'll be plenty!" Pierre pleaded.

Kiel scrunched up his nose. "No. You'll just blame me if the horse you pick doesn't win. Besides, my mom warned me not to get involved with gambling."

"What, so you do whatever Mommy tells you? You scared?"

"Antagonizing me won't do you any good," Kiel said curtly. "Besides, you can't disobey your mother either, now can you?"

"Like hell I can't!"

"How convincing. We both know you keep visiting the horse track a secret."

Blood drained from Pierre's face. "You'd better not tell her!"

Kiel sighed at him. "I promise to keep your secret, but in exchange, let's drop this." He considered telling Pierre that the proprietress already seemed to know about his gambling but decided against it. The image of his own stern-faced mother popped into his mind, sending a chill through him. To escape the memory, he hurried out of the inn.

Some of his childhood friends happened to be right outside when he emerged, and together, they began a game of hide-and-seek. Even detectives needed breaks occasionally.

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After hide-and-seek, they played tag, then pretended to be knights—the same sort of games they usually played. By the end of it all, the sky was stained crimson.

"I'd better get home," Kiel said to his buddies, and they were quick to agree.

"All right, see ya, Kiel!"

"Let's play again soon!"

And off Kiel went. As he strode down the main street toward the slope, he spotted a familiar head of gray hair. "Vice captain!"

"Hey, Kiel! Headed home?"

"Yes. Have you been investigating?"

The vice captain shrugged a shoulder. "That is my job." It wasn't really, not at his rank. But the man knew it might be his last opportunity to investigate a case personally, so he was intent on seeing it through. "It's a shame that I haven't made any progress, though."

"You don't have any leads?" Kiel asked.

"Afraid not. The good news is that the victim regained consciousness, but he's in shock from the attack. All he remembers is that the perpetrator was male."

"You were patrolling the area when you discovered the scene, correct?"

The vice captain nodded. "Yep. I happened to pass by and heard the victim screaming. Sensing something was amiss, I hurried to the source, but the culprit had already escaped."

"Would you mind pointing me to the scene of the crime?"

"Let's see…" The vice captain glanced back down the road whence he'd come and launched into a description. The place was surprisingly close to Shady Street, just the next block over. Shady Street didn't directly connect to the alley, but it still surprised Kiel that the crime had happened so close to him.

"Did you notice anything?" asked the vice captain.

"No. I was nearby at the time, but since the streets don't connect, I doubt I'll be of any use."

"Oh, all right. Well, if you see anything suspicious, be sure to let me know."

"Of course."

Igor's face briefly popped into Kiel's mind. *No, that's silly.* When they met, Igor had been nothing but suspicious. But he couldn't be involved with the crime if he'd been on Shady Street at the time. Unless he could teleport, there was no way he could have made it there from the alley. The vice captain would have heard about Igor by now if he had been investigating all day; someone new arriving in town was big enough news that one of the townsfolk would've mentioned it.

"Sorry to change the subject," said the vice captain, "but is your grandfather home?"

"He sure is. He's looking forward to seeing you."

"Then I guess I should drop in, eh? I'd like to pick his brain while I'm at it."

Kiel made a sweeping gesture toward their hill. “You’re more than welcome.”

His grandfather had become famous for climbing from the position of ranch boy to butler for an aristocratic family. All the townspeople, the authorities included, came to Kiel’s grandfather for advice. Kiel wore the title of boy detective proudly, but his grandfather outshined him by a mile. Though Kiel was partly vexed by it, he was also very proud.

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The following day, Kiel returned to the inn where Igor was working. His grandfather had taken an interest in Igor and was eager to ask him some questions. Apparently, the old man was intrigued by how Igor had made it past the border. Seeing his grandfather’s eyes shine with curiosity, Kiel realized how similar they were.

*Grandpa’s gonna talk his ear off,* Kiel realized, which was why he’d come to see when Igor would have the free time to entertain him.

The proprietress wasn’t at the front desk, but another woman was. When Kiel inquired about Igor, she told him, “The proprietress told him to come along to her house. Said a delivery was mistakenly brought there instead of to the inn and she needed him to fetch it.”

So he was out doing some heavy lifting.

Kiel pressed the woman for the proprietress's address and headed out. He was making his way down the street to her residence when a resounding *bang* cracked through the air, loud as a wagon crash. It wasn't something one heard every day. His stomach lurched; something had to be wrong.

Right as he reached the proprietress's house, Pierre shrieked from inside, "Eek! Murderer!"

Panicked, Kiel threw himself at the door, which was already ajar. It swung open, slamming into the wall with the force of his entry.

"Pierre! What's going on?!" Kiel demanded.

"Kiel!" Pierre cried shrilly. "Th-th-this guy killed my mom!"

The only thing Kiel could see when he entered was Pierre's back. It wasn't until he pushed past that he saw the dining and kitchen area, where the proprietress was lying face down on the floor. Igor knelt beside her.

"No!" Igor shouted back. "I didn't kill her! She's not even dead!"

A knife protruded from the woman's back.

Pierre was too flustered to be of any use. Kiel sprang back out into the street, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Help, please! Someone's been hurt! She's losing a lot of blood!" The boy everyone had nicknamed Canary was using his voice to reach anyone who could hear, and the response was immediate. People nearby rushed to the scene.

"Are you injured, Kiel?!"

"Not me, the inn's proprietress! Can anyone here treat a stab wound?!"

"No amateur can handle a stab wound. We'll need to carry her to the doctor!"

While the other adults barked at one another, Igor took action and began to construct a makeshift stretcher. His finesse spoke to his time on the battlefield.

"Hey, Pierre's injured too! Did that guy do all this?" "That guy" referred to Igor.

Kiel hadn't paid any mind due to the circumstances, but Pierre had his hands pressed over his nose to staunch the flow of blood. He wasn't very successful: tendrils of blood had run down his arm, staining his sleeve, and droplets sprinkled across the floor.

"No!" Kiel cut in. "If Igor had punched him, he'd have blood on his fists." He was worried that Igor would be charged with a crime he hadn't committed, so he shared his observations. When he'd first arrived, Pierre and Igor hadn't been anywhere near each other. One might assume that Pierre had yelled after being struck—assuming he'd been struck at all—but the two of them hadn't even been facing each other when Kiel entered.

"I-I stumbled and fell on my way here," Pierre stammered.

"You've still lost a lot of blood. You ought to go along and have the doctor look at you," someone said.

They sent Pierre along with his mother. There was no telling when the doctor would find time for him, given the severity of his

mother's injury, but it was better than nothing. Kiel studied every detail of the scene until the authorities arrived to cordon it off.

"When I got here, the front entrance was locked," Igor told him.

That explained the loud noise Kiel heard on the way to her house: Igor had busted the door down. Kiel checked the latch and confirmed that the lock was still in place. It was a deadbolt, so when Igor crashed through, he'd torn through the door frame and damaged the wall. Kiel searched the house for any other exits, but it was locked down, windows and all. There was no way for someone to escape.

"So it's a locked room mystery?" Kiel muttered, skeptical. He resumed inspecting the scene. "How did you know to break in?"

"I heard something inside. Probably the proprietress falling on the floor. I tried calling to her, but there was no response, so I smashed the door in."

Igor and the proprietress hadn't arrived at the house together; she had gone ahead of him while he wrapped up at the inn. Once finished, Igor made his way here. Pierre arrived immediately after Igor broke in, and Kiel came moments after that. Since Kiel had heard Igor busting through the door, he believed Igor's account.

*This won't be easy to solve.* As he thought, the authorities were puzzled when they learned all the facts and likewise realized it was a locked room mystery.

Though Igor was the most promising suspect they had, there seemed to be no lie in his recounting of events, which made it even more confusing. The authorities ultimately decided to detain him to be safe, but they were still far from solving the case.

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Kiel was called in a few days later for an investigation of the crime scene. The proprietress was clinging to life, but she had yet to regain consciousness. None could rest easy until the culprit was caught.

Two others were brought along to the proprietress's house: Igor and Pierre, the latter of whom had gauze and tape covering his nose. They went through the events of the incident step by step with the authorities. No one offered any testimony that hadn't been heard already, so the mystery remained.

"The only suspicious person here is him," Pierre said, thrusting an accusatory finger at Igor. "Why haven't you charged him with murder?!"

"There is no proof," one of the officers reasoned. "There were no prints on the knife, and even you heard him breaking the door down, didn't you?"

"Well…yeah, I guess."

"If he was the culprit, he wouldn't have done that."

"Maybe he did it to throw you guys off!"

"Throw us off? He's our primary suspect right now."

Running would have been smarter than sticking around and risking suspicion. There was no need to lock the room. *And Igor wouldn't bother with it. If he was going to murder someone, he would*

*just do so.* Igor had shown how capable he was by fashioning that stretcher. He might have deserted the battlefield out of a distaste for violence, but surely he knew how to kill someone.

Kiel's gaze moved to the entrance. To preserve the scene, the authorities had replaced the broken door. The old one was propped against the wall. Igor was being kept in jail until the authorities were certain about what happened; they'd advised Pierre to stay at the inn.

The officer who had been arguing with Pierre wandered over to Kiel, likely tired of being harangued. "Kiel, have you noticed anything that might help us crack this case?"

Unfortunately, there wasn't much Kiel could offer. *I thought locked room mysteries were a thing of fiction.* But then, truth was always stranger than fiction, wasn't it?

He hummed in thought. There was blood on the floor from where the proprietress had collapsed. There didn't seem to be any splatter from the initial attack, only from blood loss after she fell to the floor, which meant the culprit wouldn't have had any on him. A few drops dotted the floor by the entrance, but those were from Pierre's nosebleed. If it had been the culprit's blood, then there would be a trail leading from the proprietress's body.

Kiel stood by the droplets and imagined the scene from Pierre's point of view, accounting for their difference in height as he did. Something was off. He glanced behind him to see if there were any other traces of blood. *There!* It was barely visible, but he'd found something.

"So, the answer was simple all along!" Kiel declared.

The officer grinned at him. “Oh? Found something, have ya?”

“It was never a locked room mystery!”

“Hm? You mean it was Igor after all?”

“No, no. Pierre did it,” said Kiel.

“What?!” Pierre screeched at him, spittle flying. “Why’re you blaming me?!”

Igor cocked his head from side to side, trying to work out the meaning of it all. “But, young sir, the door was locked. I swear it.”

“Yes,” Kiel said slowly, “it was locked because the criminal locked it.”

“Then no one could have gotten in or out, right?” Igor reasoned.

“That much is true, but this whole mystery is easily solved if you realize that the criminal never left the room to begin with.”

Igor was stumped. “We checked the house. No one else was here.”

“Indeed. No one else was here because the criminal had already left for medical treatment.”

Understanding dawned on Igor’s face. “Then you mean…!”

“Get it now?”

“The proprietress did it to herself!”

“No, of course not!” Kiel snapped, losing his temper. “Why would you even think that?! There was one other person at the scene besides you and me, Igor!”

Igor finally turned his gaze on Pierre.

"S-so what if I was here?!" Pierre stuttered defensively.

"The door was open only a crack, as if it was swinging closed when I got here," Kiel explained.

"So what?"

"So, if you had been as panicked as me and burst in, the door should have been wide open."

Pierre scoffed. "I must have closed it behind me."

"Perhaps you did. But that doesn't explain how your blood got here." Kiel stood beside the old door where it leaned against the wall, right where it would have been when swung fully open.

The officer gasped. "He was hiding behind the door!"

"You didn't know Igor was on his way, did you? You were startled when you heard him, so you tried to hide. You picked a blind spot so he wouldn't see you if he came in. It's no wonder he didn't, in his panic to reach the proprietress. When he busted the door open, it slammed into your nose. Then you stepped out of the shadows and pretended like you'd just arrived."

This was where Kiel had been naive. He hadn't truly understood what malice could do to a person, what drastic action someone might take if chased into a corner, or how the culprit might feel to see a boy his age proudly reveal his crimes in front of everyone.

Pierre loosed an enraged roar and surged past the authorities, eyes bloodshot. His hands whipped out, snatching at Kiel.

Terrified, Kiel went stock-still. One second Pierre was looming over him, the next he was bent unnaturally to the side.

Pierre let out a strange cry as he slammed into the wall. “Ngh!”

Kiel turned his head and found Igor standing beside him, fist outstretched. He’d saved Kiel. The terror had yet to subside and Kiel’s knees were threatening to give out, but no matter how scared he was, he had to say it. “Thank you.”

Igor gave him a pained smile.

*Ah, he really must hate violence even if it’s to save someone.*

The case had gotten messy at the end, but at least it was over. Pierre sustained no major injuries but was knocked out cold. After he came to, he meekly admitted to his crimes. He’d stabbed his mother over money troubles. He, too, had borrowed from the loan shark and was at his wits’ end. Knowing his mother had savings, he’d pestered her for a loan. When she refused, he had snapped and stabbed her. The authorities informed Kiel and Igor of all the details at their headquarters.

Igor heaved a sigh. “Glad that’s all over.”

“Yeah. You had it rough.”

When the guards had questioned Igor, they’d soon realized he was completely unfamiliar with the area and was too gullible and brainless to be much help as a witness. One of the officers had even confided in Kiel that it was exhausting just talking to him. Kiel kept that to himself, though.

“I’m off the hook because of you,” Igor told him. “I can’t thank you enough. And it’s great that the proprietress finally woke up!” She

had been on the verge of death; it was lucky she had regained consciousness.

"Indeed. She's awfully courageous in spite of everything that happened with Pierre."

When they went to pay her a visit, she declared in front of everyone that she would continue running the inn. Her son's actions had hit her hard, and it was obvious she was trying to keep her spirits up. The inn would temporarily close until she fully recovered. This unfortunately meant that Igor would have to be let go, but not all was lost.

"You'd better make sure she's well cared for," Kiel advised him.

"'Course! Until she's back on her feet, I'll stay with her and look after the house."

The proprietress had invited Igor to stay with her. It would help him to have a roof over his head while he found another job, and it would give the proprietress peace of mind to have someone with her who could take care of her needs.

"She was smart to snag you when she did," Kiel added, almost as an afterthought. If she hadn't hired Igor, there was no telling whether she would have survived her son's attack.

"I owe her a lot too."

"That's an understatement."

"I mean it from the bottom of my heart!"

Kiel nodded. "I know. It's obvious. Anyway, see ya."

The two parted ways at the entrance of guard headquarters. Kiel didn't feel up to strolling around town today.

"Kiel! It was quite impressive what you did."

Kiel glanced back to find the vice captain standing behind him. He offered to accompany Kiel so he could tell Kiel's parents about everything that had happened. Fortunately, Kiel hadn't been injured during the incident, but he had still been at the scene, and that was enough to worry his parents. Kiel welcomed the company. They left town and began scaling the slope toward Kiel's home.

"The case is over. Why don't you seem happy?" asked the vice captain.

"I made too many mistakes… I could've handled it better."

There had been no need for him to explain everything in front of the culprit; Kiel was so proud of solving it that he'd let it get to his head. It bothered him that his oversight had driven Igor to violence. His gaze dropped to his feet.

The vice captain patted him on the head. "You're still young. If you could do everything right at this age, what would you need us for?"

"The problem is that I didn't do a single thing right."

Today wasn't the first time he'd provoked Pierre. The other day, he had mocked Pierre for being in the same boat as him, unable to disobey his mother. That haunted him now. When he shared that story with the vice captain, the man burst out laughing.

"If that was enough to convince a man to kill his own mother, we'd have a world full of murderers. You heard what he said, right? He was in some real hot water, financially speaking. It had nothing to do with you."

Now that he mentioned it, that was true. But Kiel couldn't bring himself to smile. It was hard to swallow, like he had a fish bone lodged in his throat. "Hey, about the day of the loan shark incident…"

"Yes?"

"Sorry, I know this is out of nowhere. It just popped into my head."

"That's fine," said the vice captain. "What's niggling at you?"

There had been no further progress in that case. The culprit was still nowhere to be found.

*But what if…what if, like Pierre, the culprit never ran from the scene at all?*

Blood pounded in Kiel's ears. The pieces were clicking into place: the loan shark who had suddenly grown stricter with payments, the mole within the town guard who had ruined their raid. They had to be connected, Kiel just knew it.

*No. No, I must be overthinking this,* he told himself.

But why had the young man working for the greengrocer acted so rattled when he saw the authorities? Why had Pierre met with the vice captain the day before he attacked his mother? Assuming Kiel's petty antagonism hadn't been what spurred Pierre on, perhaps someone else's—the loan shark's—had.

*It can't be.*

Kiel prayed he was wrong. His tongue was so dry that it stuck to the roof of his mouth as he spoke. "Did you visit Shady Street that day?"

"Yeah. On my patrol, you mean?"

"Yes. That day, I was looking for Meeko. Did you happen to see him on Shady Street?"

The vice captain considered it. "You mean that pretty brown-and-white cat, right? No, I don't think I did."

"Oh, okay. One of the shelves on that street is his favorite sleeping spot, see. Did you notice anything odd in the area? Other cats wandering around?"

"Nope. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Liar. He was lying! That day, Igor had been slumped over on Shady Street. If the vice captain really had swept through that street first thing that morning, he would have spotted Igor. *So why is he lying?* The vice captain could have just admitted he never checked Shady Street. There was no need for him to insist otherwise.

*He would only do it for one reason: to turn suspicion away from himself.*

*"If you see anything suspicious, be sure to let me know."* The vice captain's words rang in his head. Someone must have told him that Kiel was searching for Meeko. Since the little girl had been looking everywhere, the vice captain would have known Meeko wasn't in his usual spot. But no one had mentioned Igor being on Shady

Street. That was why he'd said that the cat wasn't there—but nothing about Igor. No one would have forgotten to mention a sight as strange as a behemoth of a man collapsed on the side of the street.

"Ah, did I answer incorrectly?" drawled the vice captain.

"Huh?" Kiel flinched, eyes darting up to meet his.

The man's face was like a caricature of itself. Too stiff, too unnatural. He was smiling, but it was flat somehow. Unreal.

A chill ran down Kiel's spine. *Did he notice my suspicion?!* Kiel hadn't masked his emotions as well as he thought.

The vice captain stopped walking. Kiel stopped a few feet ahead of him, stuffing down the urge to scream.

"Looks like this is the end," said the vice captain, a smile still plastered on his face.

"The end of what?"

"There's no need to worry. I won't do you any harm." He made a shooing motion at Kiel. "Go on, run along to your grandfather and report your suspicions. In the meantime, I'll erase all the evidence. I had hoped to keep my log of debtors and sell it to a syndicate for a good price. But oh well."

"What?!"

They were only halfway up the slope by this point. Kiel's short legs were no match for the vice captain's. *Why didn't I say anything when other adults were around?!* He'd already been admonishing himself for making that mistake with Pierre, and then he'd done it again.

"Haven't you realized yet?" said the vice captain.

Kiel stared at the man, blinking slowly.

His smile finally morphed into something more malicious, maniacal. "You're my canary in the coal mine, Kiel."

"I am…?" It took a moment for the implication to sink in, and then Kiel's whole face heated with shame. "That's why you told me to let you know if I noticed anything suspicious."

"Yep. I pushed the envelope as far as I could, and if ever there was a risk of being caught, I planned to pull out. You can spill your theories to anyone you like, but without proof, no one can lift a finger against me. Besides, who are people more likely to believe? You or me?"

No matter how much Kiel might insist on the vice captain's guilt, he was a child. People would only believe his story if he had evidence to back up his claims. He had been the vice captain's convenient canary, helping the man sense when his cover was in danger of being blown. Kiel couldn't criticize Igor anymore for being deceived by that traveling merchant; he himself was just as gullible.

"Why am I so unlucky?!"

"Indeed. I quite like hearing you say that, you know."

Kiel glared at him. He was furious with the vice captain for deceiving him and disgusted with himself for letting it happen. But if he really was a canary, then it was time to do his duty. *I have to make sure everyone knows!*

The vice captain sneered at Kiel. He wasn't intimidated at all by an angry child. He was too focused on Kiel to realize the danger he was actually in.

"I'm going to go report this to my grandpa!" Kiel hollered over his shoulder as he took off running.

"Do as you like!" the vice captain called after, unaware that Kiel had not actually been speaking to him.

"Igor, you seize the vice captain!"

"You got it!" Igor bellowed.

Heat built behind Kiel's eyes. He was utterly grateful that Igor had tailed them. When Kiel had first noticed he and the vice captain were being followed, he'd nearly cried out in surprise.

*I'm sorry for making you do something you hate again.* Kiel had complete faith in Igor's strength. Despite the man's distaste for violence, he'd still hit Pierre to protect Kiel. Igor had proven he would do whatever was necessary when the situation called for it. Besides, he was a former mercenary from Parte. Even crying babes would be quiet in the presence of someone so menacing.

A loud *thud* echoed behind Kiel—the sound of someone slamming against the ground. It was followed shortly by the vice captain's strained cry. "Let me go!"

"No chance! It'll be easier for us both if you don't struggle!"

Igor had come through, just as Kiel knew he would.

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Kiel rallied everyone at the top of the slope: his grandfather, his parents, and even his other relatives. When they returned to where Igor had subdued the vice captain, Kiel tilted his head to the side, face scrunched. “Why did you pull his pants down?”

“Figured having them around his knees would make it harder for him to run. I used his belt to tie his hands,” Igor said proudly.

“Oh. So it’s not some kind of kink, then.”

Igor vigorously shook his head. “Not at all! I prefer to be the one tied up, personally!”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Kiel grumbled.

Why did Igor have such a habit of blurting out his thoughts? If he could learn to rein it in a little, he might manage some gravitas. An insult came to Kiel’s mind, but he thought better of it.

“Actually, why did you follow us in the first place?” Kiel asked.

“I didn’t like the way the vice captain was looking at you.”

Kiel stared at him, flabbergasted. “That’s all?”

“Yup!”

When Igor noticed the two of them heading up the slope together, he’d sensed something was amiss and taken off after them. It was that simple.

“Not a single thought in that head of his,” remarked Kiel’s grandfather.

“Here I was trying to be polite, and you just say it, Grandpa.” Kiel shook his head.

Igor was a meathead. A brainless oaf, to put it bluntly. But his instincts had come in handy this time.

“Thank you. Now it’s me who owes you,” Kiel said to Igor.

“Nah, this doesn’t count. I was helping out with your work.” Igor went silent for a moment. His face lit up. “That’s it! Young sir, I’ve got it!”

“Could you stop screaming at me? I’m right in front of you.”

“I’ll be your assistant!” Igor declared.

Kiel grimaced. “Come again?”

“I see now that your work as a detective puts you in quite a bit of danger,” Igor explained. “So that’ll be my job from now on—to protect you!”

“Hm. That would be reassuring,” said Kiel’s grandfather.

“Wait! I haven’t agreed to this!” Kiel cried.

“I think it’s a fine idea,” Kiel’s mother chimed in. “It will put my mind at ease. I mean, look at the man. He’s beefier than your father.”

Kiel’s dad was no slouch. Work on the ranch required substantial muscle, and his father took pride in being fit. He, understandably, was affronted by his wife’s statement. “Hold on there, I have plenty of beef!”

“Let’s not quibble about that right now,” Kiel told his parents. “I haven’t accepted this man as my assistant!”

"Make sure to let me know when you come into town. I'll tell the proprietress I've got a job as your bodyguard," said Igor.

"I just told you, I have *not* accepted you!"

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The vice captain had put the noose around his own neck by keeping evidence of his crimes. It was easy to find his log of debtors.

"It's his own fault for being greedy."

If the vice captain had sold his logs without trying to squeeze everything he could out of the men who owed him, he might never have been caught. Thanks to his blunder, Kiel's reputation surged. There was only one little problem.

"Hey there, Canary Boy. Shouldn't your assistant be with you?"

"He's *not* my assistant!"

The whole town (and Kiel's entire family) had come to recognize Igor as Kiel's assistant. With the boy's famously ill fortune, they were glad to see an adult with him for protection.

"You should be happy you have a perch, little canary," teased one of the townsfolk.

"Urgh. I can't wait to grow up."

"Ha ha! Yeah, you and every other kid out there." The man reached down and ruffled Kiel's hair.

The town was finally peaceful once more, the way it had been before all this fuss began.

**Bonus Story:**
**The Villainess Dances to the Aphrodisiac's Tune**

CLAUDIA WAS ON PINS and needles, even with the incident at the isolationist village Cardinal Nigel had been involved with and her engagement ceremony behind her. She was utterly restless, convinced there was always *something* she ought to be doing, and she couldn't bring herself to rest. In hindsight, it was probably the abduction that had her so on edge.

*I thought I was fine, but perhaps not.* It all had taken a bigger toll on her than she realized.

Recognizing the problem seemed to be key, for as soon as she acknowledged her stress, it was as if the curse the village had cast on her had broken and she could breathe again.

Claudia found herself close to the window, enjoying the sunlight on her skin.

"Lady Claudia, His Highness has arrived," announced Helen.

Sylvester had found time in his busy schedule to drop by her family's estate for tea. She hurried to the front entrance to greet him.

Claudia had grown accustomed to the sight of the royal carriage; by now, it was nothing special. But when Sylvester stepped out of it, he was caught by the sunlight. It reflected off his beautiful silver hair, drawing shadows against his cloak, which was adorned with decorations so fine they must have been crafted by a master

artisan. Summer was still a long way off, but the weather was warming up. Sylvester's cloak was made of thin, breathable material.

The moment she saw him, Claudia bowed her head. Though she couldn't see his expression, she sensed his eyes on her.

"Thank you for the invitation," he said smoothly. "Be at ease. Dia, don't tease me."

Claudia had no intention to tease him, but no matter their intimacy, she was part of the aristocracy and thus was required to pay him proper respect. She offered the usual pleasantries before lifting her head at last. His face was much closer to hers than she'd anticipated; so close, in fact, that she was wreathed in his shadow. Their noses nearly bumped against each other.

"Oh!" she blurted, stunned. "Um…"

He didn't move any closer. His eyes, like twin suns, just stared at her with such passion that her cheeks flushed and her pulse quickened. For a moment, she considered leaning into him. *No, you must keep your wits about you!*

The two hadn't been able to meet privately for a while. She was delighted to see him. In all honesty, she wanted to throw herself into his chest and lock lips with him.

*Who am I? I am Claudia Lindsay, a duke's daughter, for goodness' sake!* And the man in front of her was the crown prince. Due to their status, they could not indulge their feelings in public.

Claudia swallowed her emotions and kept a smile plastered on her face. Sylvester offered her a gentle smile in turn. She invited him

to her room, where there was a small table and two chairs for them to have tea. As he entered, Sylvester briefly glanced at the small, two-person sofa, but he moved past it. He took his seat across from hers, bending his head down even as he peered up at her.

"Dia, my dear fiancée." His voice was velvety-sweet.

Claudia clenched her hands. She could not let herself be taken in by his flirting; it wouldn't lead anywhere good. "Yes?" she said instead. "What is it?"

"I think you and I should be more honest with our hearts," he said, voice husky with meaning.

"The first time is too important," Claudia told him primly.

"Hm?"

"Once we cross that line, it will be all too easy to do so again."

"So you intend to remain the perfect noble lady, even with me?"

"It is a struggle for me too, you realize." Claudia longed to touch his handsome face, to let his calloused fingers caress her, to explore every part of her. She wasn't impervious to lust. "And right now, I fear we won't be able to restrain ourselves if we indulge even a little." She looked him straight in the eye, refusing to avoid his gaze. Surely he could see how much she desired him regardless, how eager she was.

Sylvester was the first to break eye contact. He sighed. "I surrender. You're right; if you asked me to stop partway, I'm not sure I could."

"I'm glad you understand."

"I am afraid I let myself fantasize too much in our time apart."

Claudia pursed her lips. "I will refrain from inquiring as to what, specifically, you were fantasizing about."

At Claudia's request, Helen poured herbal tea for them both to help clear their heads.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. I brought you a gift," said Sylvester.

Claudia eagerly leaned forward. "How exciting. What did you bring me?"

"An aphrodisiac."

"Pardon?"

Weren't they supposed to be distracting themselves from their carnal desires? What did he intend by giving her an aphrodisiac? Then it hit her. She had heard that word recently, hadn't she? That was one of the drugs the village had been making. Perhaps that was the real reason Sylvester had come, to report something to her. Now she felt crass for jumping to conclusions.

*Wait a moment. If his intention had been to give a report, he wouldn't have called it a "gift," would he?* Would one typically call a serious matter a gift? Certainly not.

Sylvester set out several small paper confectionery wrappers. Each contained a solid piece of chocolate, which came in various shapes like flowers and leaves. The sweet smell of cacao tickled her nose, bewitching her. Who would be upset about an offering like this?

Claudia chuckled. "I suppose this does qualify as an aphrodisiac in a way."

"After what happened in the village, I began looking into them. People used all sorts of different things throughout history, from vegetables to fruits."

Many ingredients that had been used effectively in nourishing tonics had also been used in aphrodisiacs in the past. During Claudia's brothel days, it was a popular topic among the courtesans. But it was probably new to someone like Sylvester.

"There were some even more outlandish ingredients, like animal genitalia. I'm more willing to believe in the effects of chocolate and liquor, though."

Sylvester plucked one of the chocolates and brought it to Claudia's lips. She parted them, letting him feed her. A velvety sweetness spread across her tongue, the cacao's aroma filling her nose. It wasn't as sweet as other chocolates she'd had, but that made the natural flavors of the ingredients stand out even more.

"You try it too, Syl," Claudia insisted.

"All right."

It was her turn to feed him. His pink tongue poked out, pressing against the chocolate. Before he completely captured it in his mouth, he licked her finger, sending a pleasant shock through her core.

*Syl himself is an aphrodisiac.* Her body stirred at his seductions, liquid heat coursing through her veins. Nothing could be more stimulating than this.

"The fact that our own body temperature can melt it makes it all the more sinful," Sylvester purred at her, grinning.

"It was delicious."

"That it was. Not sure if it's a placebo effect, but my body feels hot." Sylvester had left his cloak at the front entrance. He shrugged off his jacket where he sat, then peeled off his shirt, exposing the fine planes of his chiseled abdomen.

"Syl?!" Claudia cried.

"I can't sit still." He tossed his shirt aside and stood, planting one hand on the back of his chair. Then, half-naked, he spread his arms and pushed his chest out. She could see the way his muscles rippled beneath his skin. He stretched his arms in front, then behind him, hips gyrating.

"Hold on…you aren't belly dancing, are you?!"

Belly dancing wasn't native to Harland. A traveling client had told her about it when she'd worked at the brothel. The most captivating aspect of the dance was the undulation of the muscles in one's abdomen, moving to a rhythm. Most dancers wore beaded accessories over their chests and hips. Their clothes were always vibrant and exposed substantial skin, the beauty of their toned forms entrancing their audience.

Sylvester kept his upper body straight while his hips shook from side to side, substantial strength behind each little movement. She wasn't sure how or when, but his pants had changed into a billowy fabric with slits along the sides. Each time his hips jerked, the fabric shifted, giving her a glimpse of his pale legs. He moved with immense power, the muscles and sinew in his legs flexing. He spun around in a circle, and her heart leapt into her throat. A gust caught his pants and

nearly exposed him completely, but there was a slip of fabric strapped over his groin, keeping everything hidden.

*My goodness, that underwear barely leaves anything to the imagination.*

Most belly dances were done to slow music, but Sylvester was moving at a much faster tempo. Claudia would be scandalized if his unmentionables somehow sprang free with all his vigorous movement. Oblivious to her worries, he turned his back toward her, waggling his rear end in front of her. Through the billowy pants and underwear, she could still make out how chiseled his bottom was, and he was shaking it like there was no tomorrow.

"I can't do this," Claudia said finally. "I can't just sit here and watch." She slammed her hands against the table and shot to her feet. Sylvester flashed her a meaningful look, his golden eyes blazing with passion.

With a nod, she stripped off her own clothes. She wasn't even embarrassed. Helen hurried over at Claudia's request and helped her don her own belly dancing outfit. Once Claudia was changed, she took her spot beside Sylvester.

Claudia matched his fast rhythm and shook her hips. Her stomach undulated; her bottom bounced. She faced him, moved her head from side to side, spun around.

*This is our stage right now!*

They were two bodies in perfect sync, panting heavily from their exertions. Sweat dripped down their skin, sparkling in the light. They were glorious.

Sylvester's gaze said everything. He wanted to keep going, to finish this dance. Claudia wouldn't deny him. She wanted to ride out this wave of passion.

*We're going to keep dancing. Just you watch, Cardinal Nigel! You cannot stop us from shaking our booties!*

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"What in God's good name was all that?!" Claudia shrieked as she awoke with a start.

Sylvester had come to visit with chocolate, that much was true, and they had fed it to each other. But he had *not* stripped his clothes and broken out in dance!

"Is this the effect of the aphrodisiac?" she wondered aloud. Could that really have given her such terrifying dreams?

"No… No, it wasn't terrifying at all, was it?" As much as she struggled to understand her dream, Sylvester's dance had been a feast for the eyes. If she could, she'd love to see it one more time. "If I go back to bed, could I maybe resume that dream?"

Claudia sank back against her mattress and snapped her eyes shut. She may or may not have tried to return to the dream of Sylvester belly dancing so she could find out how it ended.

## Afterword

DID YOU ALL SEE THE ILLUSTRATION at the front of the book? I couldn't stop grinning from ear to ear when I laid eyes on it. Pleased to see you all again, I'm Bakufu Narayama.

Every time I receive illustrations from the artists, including the ones for the front covers, I always find myself wanting to frame and hang them. Seeing the art at the front of this book was the first time I wanted to put anything in a solid-gold frame. I mean, look at the one with Claudia and Kiel, with its decorative border! Then there's Sylvester with his strong hands supporting Claudia, her delicate back partially exposed in her dress. I want to stare at them forever.

In fact, I have a dual monitor setup and am looking at the art on one screen while I write this afterword on the other. A real treat for the eyes. I actually bought the dual monitors for drawing, but they've come in handy for other reasons. It's a special privilege for me as the author to have the full resolution version of the art for this book!

Although I'm using my desktop to write this, as it's my main computer, I do most of my writing on my laptop. I also have a Pomera digital memo pad that I bought recently. I used to have the old folding type, but I stopped using it at some point, and after a lot of thought, I decided to purchase a newer version. I had no idea it needed to update, and as you might expect, there was a bug that erased all my data (which was admittedly my own fault). Still, it's been useful. The

best part is that it starts up the second you open it. So lately, I have been using my Pomera, laptop, and desktop for writing and editing.

I have a fondness for gadgets, so I try out all kinds of things. Like, voice-to-text for writing and other new technology like that. But at the moment, I'm content with typing out my work.

When I'm out and about, I use my phone and a folding keyboard. There are quite a few cute portable keyboards available these days. I find myself wanting one, but the angel on my shoulder reminds me, "You already have one, don't you?" And then the demon says, "Sure, but wouldn't you feel more motivated to work if you were typing on something cute?" I'd like one of those typewriter-style ones.

While I struggle over wanting the best of both worlds, are you all aware that this volume will be going on sale at the same time as the next installment of the manga adaptation? The angel on my shoulder agrees that you should buy them together. Sorry for the sudden self-promotion there! But I think if it piques your interest, you ought to get it![1]

I would like to thank all of my readers and my family for their support, and my publisher for helping this work make it to print. I hope everyone will continue to support me in the future. I pray we meet again soon, dear reader.

Yours,

BAKUFU NARAYAMA

## FROM THE AUTHOR

### Bakufu Narayama

I love sparkly, kill-you-with-cuteness scenes in shoujo manga. Likewise, the illustrations at the front of this volume had my heart in a vise. Ah, they're so beautiful—so stunning, my pounding heart's about to burst out of my chest. This is love!

## FROM THE ILLUSTRATOR

### Ebisushi

Drawing the leads in their engagement attire after illustrating this series from the beginning has me a little emotional. I hope you enjoy Claudia's adventures with the boy detective as they unravel the mysteries of this eerie village!

# Footnotes

## Afterword

[1] This passage refers to the original Japanese publication dates.




# Thank you for reading!

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