



Rewriting the Fallen Villainess

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Description: Getting stabbed by a prince wasn't on my project management checklist. Neither was waking up as Lady Wren Lee, the infamous villainess of the wildly popular fantasy series A Kingdom of Infernal Flames. But at least I died knowing how the story ends, right?

Wrong.

After watching my adopted family murdered and being executed as a traitor, I've been granted a do-over—along with a cheat system sporting a snarky personality that would make any gamer jealous. Now I'm back five years before everything went to hell, armed with future knowledge, business acumen, and a very personal vendetta against a certain murderous prince.

This time around, I'm not playing by the novel's rules. I'm building an empire, gathering powerful allies—including lethally devoted immortal beings with their own villainous reputations—and making sure my family survives, all while navigating the deadly politics of a fantasy world that thought it could write me off as just another disposable villain.

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“Psst! Wren!”

Shifting from the screen in front of me, I turned to find Sara, my close friend and colleague, poking her head inside my office door. Her eyes sparkled with that particular gleam that usually meant either impending drama or life-changing news. With Sara, there was rarely an in-between—everything was either apocalyptic or absolutely amazing.

“Have you seen the announcement on social media?”

she asked, vibrating with excitement.

“What announcement?”

Sara bounced into my office like she’d discovered the secret to eternal youth. “Only the biggest news since sliced bread!”

She commandeered my mouse—a capital offense in most offices—and hijacked my computer. My carefully crafted PowerPoint presentation vanished beneath a tsunami of social media posts and entertainment headlines.

Seeing the familiar logo at the top of the webpage, I nudged my glasses up the bridge of my nose and stared, wide-eyed. My heart did a little somersault that would’ve scored a perfect ten in the Office Olympics.

“A Kingdom of Infernal Flames is getting a live-action,”

Sara announced with the gravitas of someone revealing the meaning of life. “And before you ask—yes, the casting is absolutely insane. Look at Adam McTavish. Look at him! If they’d ordered Jared Abaddon from a fantasy boyfriend catalog, they couldn’t have done better.”

Her fingers flew across the keyboard with the speed of someone who’d definitely won all the office typing competitions. Images flooded my screen, and there he was—Adam McTavish in all his glory, pale-gold hair and amethyst eyes straight out of the novel’s most detailed descriptions.

“Well,”

I admitted, “they certainly nailed the devastatingly handsome yet slightly murderous vibe.”

“And look!”

Sara squealed, scrolling faster. “Vanessa Smith as Marissa!”

“Ah yes, Vanessa Smith—the actress so popular she’s in everything except my weekend plans.”

“She’s perfect for Marissa!”

Sara clutched her chest dramatically. “Your favorite character brought to life!”

I couldn’t help but snort. “She’s your favorite, not mine. I like my heroines with a bit more spice than vanilla ice cream.”

“What?”

Sara's jaw dropped like I'd just confessed to a terrible crime. "But everyone loves Marissa! She's the heroine! The chosen one! The?—"

"The girl who trips over her own destiny so often she needs plot armor kneepads?"

I suggested helpfully.

Sara looked personally offended. "Okay, Miss Critic, enlighten me. Who does the fandom actually love most? Because clearly, I've been living under a rock."

"Well..."

I leaned back, savoring this moment like the last cookie in the break room. "According to the latest polls, it's our resident brooding wolf boy."

"Kaleb? Kaleb Wulfric?"

Sara's eyes widened to anime proportions. "The guy whose entire personality is 'grr' with a side of angst?"

"The very same. Apparently, the bad boy archetype hits different when he can actually turn into a wolf. Who knew?"

Sara frowned, her perfectly shaped brows drawing together. "He's just Jared's attack dog. They haven't even announced who's playing him in the adaptation yet."

"The power of fandom,"

I said sagely, spreading my hands. "Hell hath no fury like a wolf-shifter stan scorned. When they do announce it, that poor actor better have the brooding stare down pat, or social media will implode."

“Who’s second?”

Sara scrolled through more images, her manicured nails clicking against my mouse like a countdown to more drama.

“Obviously, Darius the dragon,”

I replied, already counting down to her reaction in my head. Three, two, one...

“Darius?”

Sara’s voice hit a pitch usually reserved for dog whistles. “The tyrant who burned half of Whitfall City because someone stole his favorite treasure? The same dragon who turned the entire Summer Palace into a smoking crater because, and I quote, ‘the architecture offended my eyes’? THAT Darius?”

“He destroys a lot of things,”

I pointed out reasonably. “Cities, palaces, mountains—it’s kind of his thing. Like some people stress-bake, Darius stress-incinerates. Remember when he reshaped the entire northern valley into a lake because he wanted somewhere nice to nap? Or that time he rerouted a river because he didn’t want to walk around it? The Whitfall incident was actually one of his more reasonable tantrums, if you can believe it. At least he had a reason that time.”

“And the fandom loves him for this?”

“Hey, when you’re a two-thousand-year-old dragon who treats the continent like his personal playground, casual terraforming becomes more of a hobby than a crime. Plus, have you seen his character design? That red hair that literally glows when he’s in one of his moods? Those smoldering dark eyes that actually smolder? The man’s

chaotic energy has its own fan club.”

Sara scrolled through more images and news snippets, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like ‘dragon apologist’ under her breath. “Third?”

“Lewis Lenoir, the demon prince.”

“Oh, now that I agree with.”

Sara’s professional demeanor evaporated faster than my weekend plans. “The psycho villain who can stalk me any day. Tall, dark, and homicidal—he’s such a daddy.”

Her giddy laughter bounced off my office walls as she swayed like a teenager at her first concert.

“You and your thing for murderous men in fancy coats,”

I teased. “Should I be concerned about your dating preferences?”

“Hey, fictional murderous men in fancy coats,”

she corrected primly. “There’s a difference. Besides, you know I’m into baddy daddy, and psycho Lewis is the ultimate baddy daddy. Who’s number four?”

“Taranis Abner.”

“Woo, Taranis!”

Sara clasped her hands together in mock swooning. “The hunk with the second male lead syndrome. I love Marissa, but leading him on like that? Not cool.”

She paused, then brightened like someone had flipped her internal switch. “Though I get it—Jared is the hero after all. Those amethyst eyes could probably get away with tax fraud.” Her fingers danced across the keyboard, searching for casting news about Taranis. “Who’s number five?”

“Obviously Marissa,”

I said, reciting the list like I was reading from a well-worn page. “Then Jared, Stefan—you know, the one who actually has more personality than a marble statue—then Isidore with his tragic backstory, Nowell who really deserved better plot development, and finally Wilmon, who I’m convinced only made the top ten because of that one scene in the rain.”

“The villains followed by the main cast,”

Sara mused, then turned to me with that particular gleam in her eye that meant I wasn’t going to like her next question. “So, spill. Since you’re not on Team Marissa—which is still shocking, by the way—whose fan club are you secretly running? Please, please tell me you’re not one of those Kaleb girls.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong with Kaleb?”

“Oh no.”

Sara clutched her chest dramatically. “You are! You’ve fallen for the brooding wolf boy aesthetic! Next thing you’ll tell me you think you can fix him with the power of love and belly rubs.”

“First of all”—I held up a finger, fighting back a laugh—“that’s oddly specific. Second, no. While I appreciate a good angsty backstory as much as the next person, my favorite character is actually?—”

Sara leaned forward, eyes sparkling with anticipation. “Actually...?”

I adjusted my glasses, bracing for the inevitable reaction. “It’s Wren Lee.”

Sara’s expression shifted faster than a mood ring in hot water. “Wren Lee? The villainess who threw wine at Marissa during her own engagement party? The one who spread vicious rumors about Marissa’s commoner background? The same Wren Lee who tried to steal Jared by throwing herself at him at every opportunity?”

She shook her head in disbelief. “The woman was basically a walking cliché of every mean girl trope rolled into one desperately jealous package.”

“We share a name,”

I offered weakly, knowing how feeble it sounded. “Plus, she’s just misunderstood.”

“Okay,”

Sara drawled, skepticism dripping from every syllable. “She’s misunderstood. Sure. Like how a tornado is just a misunderstood breeze.”

I couldn’t help defending my namesake, even as Sara playfully rolled her eyes. “Look, Jared and his noble friends aren’t exactly innocent. They make Marissa cry countless times and even leave her for dead. Not to mention all the plotting and that massacre?—”

“That’s different,”

Sara cut in with the conviction of someone who’d analyzed every plot point with color-coded sticky notes. “The heroine has to suffer—it’s character development. And those murders? Totally essential to the plot. It’s like how you can’t make an

omelet without breaking a few eggs.”

“More like you can’t have a fantasy kingdom without breaking a few laws of basic human decency,”

I muttered.

Before Sara could defend her beloved hero’s questionable life choices, my phone’s cheerful ringtone interrupted us. The caller ID displayed ‘Mom,’ and I felt the familiar mix of warmth and apprehension that her calls usually brought.

“Sorry, I’ve got to take this,”

I told Sara, gesturing at my phone.

“Yeah, okay. Have a wonderful weekend!”

Sara bounced off my desk with the same enthusiasm she’d entered with.

I picked up the call, bracing myself for what I knew would be Mom’s perfectly timed intervention into my love life. “Hi, Mom.”

“Wren, sweetie, just reminding you about our dinner date tonight.”

Her voice carried that particular tone that meant she was about to drop a social bomb wrapped in motherly concern.

“Contrary to popular belief, my master’s degree hasn’t completely destroyed my ability to remember family commitments,”

I quipped, though we both knew her reminders were as reliable as my morning coffee

addiction.

“Well, since you’re so good at remembering things,”

she segued with all the subtlety of a charging rhinoceros, “you’ll remember Toby? Margaret’s son?”

Ah, there it was. Mom’s version of a surprise attack would make military strategists proud. “Mom, if this is another one of your stealth matchmaking attempts?—”

“Can’t a mother invite old family friends to dinner?”

She managed to sound both innocent and wounded simultaneously—a skill I’m convinced they teach in some secret mom school.

“The same way you just happened to invite my fourth-grade teacher’s son to Christmas dinner?”

I countered. “Or that coincidental run-in with the pediatrician’s nephew at Easter?”

“Those were... networking opportunities.”

“Mom, I work in project management, not *The Bachelor*.”

“Speaking of projects,”

she said, pivoting with the grace of a professional dancer, “could you pick up a few things for dinner? Just some basics.”

Her basics turned out to be a gourmet shopping list that would make a celebrity chef sweat. “Mom, are we feeding the neighborhood, or is this just your subtle way of

ensuring I don't have time to escape before dinner?"

"Both,"

she admitted cheerfully. "Oh, and your father says hi. He's complaining that his youngest?—"

"The baby of the family who you all still treat like she's five,"

I corrected automatically.

"—never visits anymore. Eve and Luke miss you too. And Grace has news about the baby."

I sighed, guilt creeping in despite my best defenses. My overachieving siblings were probably the only reason Mom hadn't completely despaired of my life choices yet. "Tell Dad I love him and I'll see you all soon. With enough groceries to feed a small army, apparently."

"That's my girl. And Wren? Keep an open mind about tonight."

"Like how you keep an open mind about my perpetual singlehood?"

"Exactly! Love you, sweetie!"

The call ended with Mom's trademark blend of guilt-inducing love and tactical manipulation. I had to admire her technique—Sun Tzu would've been taking notes.

I began my end-of-day routine, shutting down the computer while gathering my things. My hand brushed against the familiar spine of *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames* as I packed my bag. Eve had been pestering me to bring it over—apparently, she

needed something more dramatic than the ER to escape into. Because saving lives wasn't exciting enough.

The book settled among my project notes and laptop like a guilty pleasure hiding among work documents. Speaking of my siblings, they were all living their best protagonist lives while I was here starring in *How to Dodge Your Mother's Matchmaking: A Professional's Guide*. Eve thriving in her controlled chaos of the ER, Luke creating masterpieces with his hands that made other carpenters weep with envy, and Grace running her booming fashion design studio while casually making our parents' dreams come true by producing the first grandchild. Because apparently being a successful entrepreneur and fashion designer wasn't enough—she had to overachieve in the family department too.

The evening had turned cold and dreary, the streets congested with the usual rush-hour crowds who all seemed to share a collective mission to make my grocery shopping as challenging as possible. I navigated through the familiar paths to the supermarket, mentally checking off Mom's list as I filled my cart. Basil for her famous sauce, tomatoes that would make any Italian grandmother proud, and—because I knew my family—extra snacks and a good bottle of wine. If I was going to survive another one of Mom's “casual”

family dinners with surprise guests, alcohol was nonnegotiable.

The wine selection took longer than expected—apparently, everyone else in the city had also decided that this particular Friday needed a hefty dose of fermented grapes. I finally settled on a nice Cabernet that cost more than I'd usually spend, but hey, if I had to sit through another round of “So, Wren, are you seeing anyone?”

at least I'd do it with good wine.

Standing at the pedestrian crossing, grocery bags heavy in each hand, I caught sight

of a billboard screen flashing A Kingdom of Infernal Flames advertisement. The costumes were stunning—a perfect blend of fantasy with touches of Victorian and Renaissance flair. Adam McTavish and Vanessa Smith dominated the screen, looking every bit the perfect Jared and Marissa.

I stood transfixed, watching the characters from my beloved series come to life before my eyes. My heart quickened—whether from excitement or something else, I couldn't tell. The way they'd captured the magical atmosphere of the novel was impressive, right down to the intricate details of the Whitfall City backdrop. Even the supporting characters looked exactly as I'd imagined them while reading, though I noticed they'd conveniently left certain plot-relevant scars off their perfect faces.

The ad faded to black, and only then did I realize how dark it had gotten. The streetlamps had flickered on. A chill wind whipped around the corners of buildings, carrying the promise of rain. Perfect—because this evening needed another layer of dramatic atmosphere.

The light finally turned green, and the crowd around me surged forward like a wave breaking shore. In the midst of the mass exodus across the street, someone knocked into me—hard. Not the casual bump of a distracted pedestrian or the gentle nudge of someone in a hurry, but the kind of collision that spoke of either extreme clumsiness or a complete disregard for other humans carrying breakable objects.

My grocery bags went flying, their contents creating an abstract art installation across the crosswalk. The wine bottle shattered on impact, its contents spreading across the pavement like spilled blood. Packets of pasta skittered away like escaping prisoners, while the tomatoes rolled toward freedom with surprising determination. Mom's perfectly planned dinner was creating a still life of disaster right in the middle of the crossing.

I dropped to my knees, trying to salvage what I could. The wine was a lost cause, but

maybe some of the other ingredients could be saved. A few kind souls paused to help, but most of the crowd flowed around me like a river around a stone, probably eager to clear the crossing before the light changed.

That's when I heard it—the roar of an engine, far too close and far too fast. Shouts of alarm rose around me as people scattered. Someone screamed, “Look out!”

I looked up to see headlights bearing down on me like twin stars about to explode. A car was barreling through the intersection, ignoring both the red light and basic human decency. Move! my mind screamed. Move, Wren! But my body refused to cooperate, frozen in place like a deer caught in headlights—which, given the circumstances, was an unfortunately apt comparison.

The impact came before I could even draw breath to scream. There was a moment of searing pain, a flash of blinding light, and then...

When consciousness returned, it brought with it waves of pain so intense I wished it hadn't. Every part of my body felt like it had been put through some sort of medieval torture device—and given my encyclopedic knowledge of fantasy novels, I had an unfortunately vivid catalog of references to choose from.

“You have awakened, my lady.”

Confusion knotted within me. Why was she calling me my lady? Shouldn't she be calling for an ambulance? There had been an accident—a traffic accident—just moments ago. Eve would absolutely murder me if I wasn't in her ER right now, probably while simultaneously trying to save my life. My sister was talented like that.

She leaned over and patted a damp cloth over my forehead. “You've been unconscious for two days. You were having quite a fever. Are you thirsty?”

I was unconscious for two days? I was sure I had only just gotten hit by a car heading toward me on the road. Eve would never let me stay unconscious that long without intervention—she had strong opinions about coma patients, most of them involving aggressive treatment plans and creative threats to wake them up.

Thirsty? Yes, I was rather. My throat felt like I'd swallowed an entire desert and chased it with sandpaper.

I managed a “Mm”

and a nod of my head, immediately regretting the movement as pain shot through my skull like an overeager drumline.

With a gentle touch, she helped me to sit up. Pain lanced through me, drawing a gasp that turned into an involuntary groan. She handed me something that looked suspiciously like tea—which was definitely not standard hospital protocol unless Crestview General had undergone some very dramatic changes during my unconsciousness.

I eyed the steaming cup warily but the parched wasteland of my throat urged me on. Bringing the cup to my lips, I drank like a kitten lapping milk for the first time—half eager, half afraid of the unfamiliar sensation. At least it wasn't hospital coffee, which Eve swore was actually just brown crayon water.

The woman watched with a mix of amusement and relief dancing in her eyes before saying, “I will inform his and her grace immediately that you have awakened. They have been worried sick since his grace brought you home, all beaten up like that.”

Home? A flash of memory sparked—a dinner invitation from Mom, complete with her usual subtle matchmaking attempts. But this woman spoke as if I belonged to some sort of nobility with the his and her grace bit. Last time I checked, my family's

closest brush with royalty was Luke's "King of DIY"

coffee mug.

And where were my parents? More importantly, where was Eve? She should be here if I was in Crestview General Hospital. She was one of the doctors, after all—the kind who terrorized interns and somehow made patients thank her for it.

As I tried to make sense of the woman's words, my gaze drifted around the room. It certainly didn't resemble any hospital ward I had ever seen or imagined—and I'd seen plenty during Eve's grand tours of "places Wren might end up if she doesn't take better care of herself."

Instead, it boasted all the grandeur of a palace chamber—classy chandelier casting warm light over walls plastered in elegant wallpaper, luxurious furniture strategically placed on lavish rugs that spoke volumes about the wealth and taste of its owner. Grace would have a field day analyzing this decor, probably while sketching designs for her next collection.

I squinted at the decor around me, each opulent detail another twist in this hallucination wrought from medication—or so I assumed. Maybe Eve had finally made good on her threat to give me the "good drugs"

if I ever ended up in her ER.

"Where... am I?"

my voice croaked out as I tried to take in more details.

Wait, why did my voice sound so high-pitched and soft? Was it because of the pain in my throat? I sounded like a child trying to play at being grown-up—all delicate and

fragile, nothing like my normal voice.

“Argyll Manor,”

she said patiently as if to a child just woken from sleep.

Argyll Manor? That name... it echoed with an eerie familiarity that tugged at my mind like *déjà vu*. My heart hammered against my rib cage—not solely from fear or pain but also from a growing sense of unreality that wrapped around me tighter than any bandage could.

“Why am I not at the hospital?”

The question left my lips before I could stop it.

The woman’s eyes widened slightly before they softened with empathy.

“Hospital?”

She chuckled lightly as if I’d made a quaint joke. “Oh, dear Lady Wren, we have our own healer who has tended to your injuries with utmost care.”

Healer? This was becoming more bizarre by the second. Eve would have an aneurysm if she heard someone calling themselves a “healer”

instead of a licensed medical professional.

My gaze landed on her attire—the uniform was something out of historical dramas or fantasy novels—a crisp black-and-white ensemble completed with an apron that seemed both archaic and completely out of place in modern America. Grace would have a conniption trying to date this particular fashion period.

“Are my parents here?”

There was an urgency to know about their safety and presence, a desperate need for something familiar amid this sea of strangeness. Mom was probably worried sick about the missed dinner, and Dad would be making his terrible “running late”

jokes to lighten the mood.

“They are attending matters in Whitfall City but will return shortly,”

she answered with certainty that seemed odd given the context, or lack thereof, in my current state of mind.

Whitfall City... It clicked then—the capital city from *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames* where... No, that was ridiculous. I’d clearly been spending too much time discussing fantasy novels with Sara.

The possibility seared through me like wildfire. It couldn’t be real. This had to be some sort of elaborate dream influenced by the book series or maybe even brain trauma from the accident playing tricks on my consciousness. Eve would have a field day with this particular hallucination.

“Thank you,”

I murmured automatically, because apparently even in the midst of a complete mental breakdown, my mother’s lessons in politeness still held firm.

The maid gave a small curtsy—a curtsy, of all things—and exited the room with swift steps as if eager to relay the news of my awakening. At least someone was excited about this situation.

Left alone in this palace-like bedroom, reality, or what passed for it, settled heavily upon me. If this was indeed Whitfall City from *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames*... If somehow by some impossible twist of fate I'd found myself transmigrated...

No... No way... This couldn't be happening... Sara would never let me hear the end of this.

I sank back against plush pillows as the room seemed to sway around me—or maybe it was just my head spinning uncontrollably—unable to process this surreal turn of events that felt ripped straight from fiction's most tangled plots. The pillows were impossibly soft, nothing like the utilitarian firmness of hospital bedding that Eve always complained about.

The door creaked open, a sliver of light from the corridor piercing the dimness of the room. Through it stepped the young woman who had tended to me, flanked by two figures whose presence seemed to command the very air. Even Grace, with all her fashion week experience, would have been intimidated by their bearing.

The man's broad shoulders were draped in a coat that melded Renaissance opulence with Victorian austerity, while the woman wore a gown that could have graced any royal court from the pages of history—or, more specifically, from *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames*' live-action drama I'd glimpsed on that billboard. The costume department would have killed for references this detailed.

The woman perched on the edge of my bed, her skirts whispering against the sheets like expensive secrets, while the man leaned over with an air of gentle concern that reminded me painfully of Dad whenever one of us was sick.

“How are you feeling, little one?”

His voice was rich and warm, like a hearth on a winter's night. The kind of voice that

commanded respect while somehow remaining gentle.

Did he just call me little one? Last time I checked, I was a fully grown adult with a master's degree and a concerning caffeine dependency.

"I'm glad you're awake,"

the woman chimed in, her tone laced with genuine relief. "The healer said he wasn't sure. You contracted an infection due to the wounds from the beating."

A beating? I knew I had been in an accident. A car was speeding toward me, that much was clear in my memory. Were they mistaken, or was I hallucinating this entire exchange? Eve would know—she always knew what was really going on with injuries. She had a sixth sense about trauma that bordered on supernatural.

To ground myself in some sort of reality, I reached out tentatively and brushed my fingers against her hair. It felt soft and real under my touch, nothing like the drug-induced hallucinations Eve had lectured about during one of her many "medical facts you should know" dinners.

"She's your mother now, Wren,"

the man added softly.

I turned to look at the man, and then my head throbbed with such intensity I couldn't suppress a groan. Then came a deluge of memories—scenes and sensations that overwhelmed me with their clarity and emotion yet felt alien all at once. They rushed through me like a river bursting its banks, leaving me gasping for breath and grappling with confusion and fear. If this was what Eve's patients felt like during their post-trauma episodes, I owed her an apology for all those times I'd called her overprotective.

Whose memories were these? They surely weren't mine, but every image seemed like it was from a first-person perspective. Cold nights in an orphanage, empty stomachs, desperate prayers—memories of a harsh, impoverished childhood that stood in stark contrast to my own history of suburban comfort and family game nights.

“Mirror!”

I managed to gasp out between shallow breaths. “Please give me a mirror.”

My project manager instincts kicked in—always verify the situation before planning next steps.

The man and woman exchanged glances laden with worry before the maid hurried to fetch an ornate hand mirror. “Here, my lady,”

she said as she held it before my eyes. The mirror itself looked like something from an antique shop—the kind Grace would spend hours hunting for during her vintage shopping sprees.

I stared into the glass, my heart racing as I braced for what I might see. The reflection showed not my own familiar features but those of a child with a face pinched by suffering and framed by dark hair. Gone were the reading glasses Eve insisted made me look scholarly, the slight stress wrinkles Luke teased me about, and the coffee-fueled gleam Mom said I'd inherited from Dad.

Shock rooted me to the spot. This wasn't right. This couldn't be me. I'd spent twenty-five years seeing my face in mirrors—through awkward teenage phases, grad school all-nighters, and countless family photos. This face belonged to someone else entirely.

“My lady, everything is going to be alright,”

the maid reassured me gently, misinterpreting my horror as simple vanity.

The woman pulled me into an embrace that felt both comforting and foreign. “That’s right, the bruise will soon disappear, and you’ll be completely healed,”

she soothed as she stroked my hair. “You have no need to worry about anything. And don’t be afraid. We’re family now. The orphanage was harsh for little ones like you, but that will now change.”

Orphanage? Bruise? None of this made any sense. Yet her words carried an undeniable weight—the weight of truth within this bewildering reality. The warmth of her embrace felt real, even if nothing else did. It reminded me of Mom’s hugs, the ones that could fix anything from scraped knees to broken hearts.

“That’s right,”

the man agreed with conviction. “You’re a Lee now. Everything will be alright.”

Who were these people? Where was I? My mind spun faster than a carousel in full tilt as I tried to piece together this puzzle with missing edges and jumbled center. A Lee? But I was already a Lee—Wren Lee, daughter of Helen and James Lee, sister to Eve, Luke, and Grace. Not this child from an orphanage being adopted into what appeared to be nobility.

The woman cupped my face in her hands and locked eyes with mine—a gaze so full of hope it almost hurt to look at her. It was the kind of look Mom gave us when she was particularly proud, except this wasn’t Mom, and I wasn’t supposed to be here, wherever here was.

“Wren,”

she said softly but firmly, “I know it’ll take time but please call me Mama, alright?”

Mama? My mind reeled under the weight of that single word—a term so intimate yet so foreign in this context that it threatened to unravel what little grasp I had on reality. I hadn’t called anyone Mama since I was six and decided Mom sounded more grown-up. Eve had followed suit, and Luke had never quite managed to say it without making it sound like a question.

I remained silent—shocked—my thoughts crashing against one another like waves during a storm. Each attempt to make sense of this situation only led to more questions, more impossibilities.

Mama? Family? How could any of this be real when just moments ago—or was it days?—I had been Wren Lee: post-graduate student and junior project manager at a global consulting firm living in America? When I had a presentation to finish for next week’s stakeholder meeting, a family dinner to attend, and a perfectly normal life that involved deadlines and meetings and coffee runs, not mysterious adoptions or medieval-style nobility? The most royal thing about my life had been the “Project Queen”

mug my team had given me after I’d successfully managed three crisis projects simultaneously.

As if sensing my inner turmoil, the woman continued to hold me close, her warmth enveloping me in a cocoon that seemed designed to shield me from whatever lay beyond this room’s walls. Her perfume was different from Mom’s signature scent, but the maternal instinct felt eerily familiar.

My thoughts scattered like leaves caught in an autumn gust—they whirled around without direction or sense as I tried to comprehend this surreal situation. The project manager in me desperately wanted to organize these thoughts into neat little

categories: Things I Know, Things I Don't Know, and Things That Shouldn't Be Possible But Apparently Are.

“Mama?”

The word slipped out, a question rather than acknowledgment, a tiny sound amid the thunderous confusion within me. It felt foreign on my tongue, like trying to speak a language I'd only ever read in books.

The smile that bloomed across her face was radiant enough to rival the chandelier's glow. She pulled me closer, and I was enveloped in the soft folds of her dress, surrounded by that unfamiliar perfume that somehow still managed to smell like comfort and safety.

“Yes, my dear,”

she whispered against my hair. “I'm your mama now. And nothing will ever harm you again.”

The man—my new father?—placed a warm hand on my shoulder, creating a picture of family comfort that felt simultaneously right and utterly wrong. It reminded me of those moments when my whole family would gather in the living room after a crisis had passed, except everything about this was different. “You're safe now, little one. The Duke and Duchess of Argyll protect their own.”

Duke and Duchess of Argyll? The titles hit me like a physical blow, sending my thoughts spinning in new, terrifying directions. If they were the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, and this was their manor, and they were adopting a child named Wren...

A memory surfaced—Sara's voice from what felt like minutes ago: “Wren Lee? That spoiled brat who shows up just to cause trouble?”

No. No, no, no.

This couldn't be happening. I couldn't be that Wren Lee. The villainess. The antagonist. The character whose actions would eventually lead to her own destruction.

Could I?

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10 Years Later

The cold seeped into my bones, a relentless intruder I could neither fight nor flee. My breath turned to mist in the frigid air, dancing like wraiths before vanishing into the gloom of the dungeon. The stone walls, slick with the tears of condensation, seemed to weep for me—though I supposed even walls could show more sympathy than my current jailers. I drew my tattered cloak tighter around my slender frame, seeking a warmth that refused to come.

I sat on the floor, its rough surface a stark contrast to the silk sheets I'd grown accustomed to over the past decade. A single ray of light fought its way through the barred window high above, a mocking sliver of the world beyond my reach. Shadows clung to the corners of the cell like particularly persistent courtiers, whispering of despair.

In my heart, there was nothing but the wrenching pain—sharp and unyielding, the agony twisting and burning like a firestorm, torturing me endlessly. I was still shocked and dazed, the horrendous sight once again tormenting me, the image of my adoptive brother being executed, the sharp blade dropping down to his neck flashing before my eyes. Finn, kind and true, who'd done nothing to deserve such a fate. His laughter would never again brighten the halls of our home, his dreams snuffed out like a candle in a storm.

They were all gone. First it had been my adoptive father and then mother, and now, Elle and Finn, too. A family that had welcomed me with open arms, now nothing but memories in the ashes of betrayal. As of today, I was alone in this world that had become as familiar as breathing—a world I'd learned to navigate as Lady Wren Lee,

even knowing it was all originally just words on a page in *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames*. How bitterly ironic that title seemed now.

I had tried so hard, evading the death flags that followed me as Wren Lee, the supposed despicable villainess, like a particularly determined shadow. I'd avoided committing any sort of misdeeds toward the main characters as if they carried the plague—which, given how infectious drama seemed to be in this world, wasn't entirely inaccurate. No interaction meant no conflict, no fuel for the inevitable plot twists I knew lurked in every corner. I'd even gone above and beyond, helping characters whenever possible—main, supporting, side, and even villains. Like a noble lady running a charity, I'd handed out favors and assistance, desperately hoping they'd see me as something other than the antagonist I was meant to be.

But alas, it was all to no avail. All my efforts had not been enough to shield those I loved from harm or myself from this grim destiny. I was still condemned as a traitor, and now, the people I loved were all dead and I would be left to rot in this prison until my judgment day. So much for rewriting the script.

A quivering cry escaped my mouth as more tears welled in my eyes, flowing down my cheeks. Pulling my knees up against my chest, I hugged myself, my shoulders hunched, my face buried as I bawled my eyes out. Ten years of careful planning and cautious living, reduced to this moment of utter despair.

The sound of my sobs filled the cell—a lonely lament for dreams shattered and lives lost. The sorrow within my heart had never felt so heavy. How I missed them, my adoptive family—Mother and Father, Elle, and Finn. I was loved unconditionally, and I them in return. A decade of memories, of joy and laughter, now tainted by this bitter end.

I sobbed for how long, I did not know. I sobbed until my eyes felt raw and my body turned weak. Days and nights blurred and passed like a still, nightmarish reverie, and

often, I deluded myself into thinking what had happened to my family was all nothing but a bad dream.

This was all just a dream. Soon, I'd wake up and find myself back in the comfort of my bed at home in the real world, this dark fantasy fading away into the void. Except I'd had that same wishful thought ten years ago, and here I still was, living—and now possibly dying—in a world that had become as real as the tears on my cheeks.

As my sobs quieted to a whimper, a sound pricked at my senses—a snicker, callous and chilling, slicing through the silence of the dungeon. My sobs caught in my throat as I lifted my swollen eyes. The sight that greeted me was so starkly out of place it took my breath away.

There stood a young woman resplendent in her beauty, her hair the color of the burning sun cascading around her shoulders like a fiery waterfall. Her eyes were like twin sapphires plucked from the deepest ocean, and they held no warmth for me as they locked on mine. She wore a gown of rich green silk that clung to her form, proclaiming her status and wealth with its luxurious folds. Jewels glittered at her throat and on her delicate fingers, each one catching the meager light and throwing it back with disdain.

She was majestic, as she should be as the crown princess, as she should be as the most important character in this world. She was Marissa Mallory, the heroine of this novel—though “heroine”

seemed a rather generous term at the moment.

With a wave of her delicate hand, the prison guard scuffled to obey her silent command, unlocking the door of the cell. Marissa stepped into my dismal abode, the hem of her skirt brushing the dirt and dust about the filthy stone floor. Even the grime seemed to retreat from her presence, as if acknowledging its unworthiness.

She came to stand inches from me, looking down with a smug smile playing about her beautiful face, one that had brought many men to their knees.

I stared at her, wondering why she was here of all places, wondering why she was smiling when seeing the pathetic me—utterly frail and thin, in rags and covered in filth that would make a sewer rat wrinkle its nose. The Marissa Mallory I'd read about was supposed to be magnanimous and compassionate, with a heart of gold that shed tears at the mere sight of suffering. That was the character I'd spent ten years carefully navigating around, the saintly figure whose path I'd studiously avoided crossing.

This woman, with her conceited look and cruel smile, bore little resemblance to the paragon of virtue I'd seen her portray countless times during balls and tea parties or during her charitable visits to the streets of Whitfall City. The expression displayed on that stunning face was anything but one that belonged to a heroine with a pure soul, a saintess. Instead, she wore the look of someone who'd finally dropped a mask they'd grown tired of wearing.

Marissa leaned down until our faces were inches apart. A smirk about her lips, a mixture of triumph and contempt on her face, she said, "You've finally fallen."

I stared at her, confusion furrowing my brow at her words. Ten years of careful observation, and suddenly I felt like I was seeing her for the first time.

"I see you have no idea what I mean."

Her voice tinkled with mirth, the sound grating against my ears like shattered crystal. "But why would you? You're just a stock character."

Her words crashed over me like a tidal wave—unexpected and devastating, leaving me reeling in their wake. Though I did not show it, I knew what that meant. Indeed,

she confirmed it with her next words, each one falling like a hammer on my already fractured world.

“You’re just a despicable villainess. Why have you not acted the way you should have acted? The way you were designed to be. Your ugly role meant to shine a light on me, the heroine. You’re meant to abuse and bully me, your action meant to make everyone hate you and for them to pity and love me. So why have you not acted out your part?”

She lifted her chin proudly, then leaned forward slightly, her perfect lips curving into a predatory smile. “Though I suppose I should thank you for being such an... unconventional villain. Do you know how exhausting it was, watching you play at being good? All those saccharine smiles and helpful gestures. Honestly, it was like watching a snake try to convince everyone it was a harmless ribbon.”

She paused, her eyes glittering with malice. “But no matter. Things are finally going the way they should be now. It was tedious watching you being such a Goody Two-shoes around everyone, and especially my men.”

My throat tightened at her possessive words, at the way she claimed them like pieces on a chessboard.

She lowered her face again, her breath ghosting across my ear like poisoned honey. “Did you think you’d ever get those men’s attention and make them love you, Wren Lee? That they’d look past your designated role and see something worth wanting? No matter how hard you try, they will never pay you any heed nor turn their hearts to you. Why, you ask?”

She straightened, satisfaction dripping from every word. “That’s simply because that is just the way it is. It’s fate, written on papers in a book.”

A bitter laugh escaped her lips as she straightened herself up once more. “Oh my, I see you’re getting even more confused. That lovely little furrow between your brows—it almost makes you look human. But you needn’t know nor understand, since you’re just a dumb stock character. And unfortunately for me for a little while, one that doesn’t do or act what it was written to do.”

She smiled gleefully, spreading her arms as if embracing her victory. “Now that things are finally going my way and you’re where you’re supposed to be,”

she continued with an air of finality as if sealing my fate with her words alone, “the next chapter in my life will be no doubt romance filled with sweet moments—with men vying for my undivided attention. After all,”

her voice dropped to a stage whisper, “that’s how the story goes, isn’t it?”

She paused for dramatic effect before adding venomously, her voice dripping with false sweetness, “There’d be nothing I need to worry about now, don’t you agree? After all, I am now the crown princess of this wonderful kingdom. The leading lady in this delightful tale.”

Her smile turned sharp enough to cut. “And every good story needs its villain properly disposed of.”

With that, she turned on her heel, her skirts swishing like the tail of a satisfied cat. Before leaving, she said over her shoulder with feigned nonchalance that couldn’t hide the sharp edge of cruelty in her voice, “Oh, and I forgot to mention—though I’m sure you’ve been counting the hours—your execution is scheduled for tomorrow. With this, Wren Lee will be no more, just as it should be. Just as it was written.”

Her merry giggle rang loud in my ears as she strolled away, the prison door once again clicking shut, locking me within. Alone, I stared into the void, long and hard,

and then... I burst out chuckling—not merely laughed but let out an unhinged cascade of mirthless amusement laced with disbelief.

The hollow mirth died, and my expression was once again schooled into a cold, hard mask.

She called me a despicable villainess. It was a fact Marissa Mallory knew Wren Lee was a villainess inside a novel.

The realization settled on me like ashes from a pyre. Marissa wasn't just any heroine—she was like me, another soul who had been thrust into *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames* from another world entirely. Another player in this game, but one who'd embraced her role with disturbing enthusiasm.

I had been such a fool. I had been so blind.

The revelation bore down on me with crushing weight—Marissa Mallory wasn't simply playing her part; she had commandeered it with fervor unmatched by any original character. She'd turned the story's purehearted heroine into something far more calculated, far more dangerous.

I didn't know how she got transmigrated here or who she originally was, but one thing I knew for certain was that my second life could not end like this. I was innocent. My family was innocent. We had been framed by someone who understood exactly how stories worked—and had used that knowledge against us.

My mind raced, whirling with images and scenes of the years I had lived as Wren Lee. I worked on pinpointing when and where things had gone wrong and came to that time when Father had died at the battlefield. Everything had started to go downhill from then and our family suffered tremendous loss. The timing was too perfect, the cascade of tragedy too well orchestrated to be coincidence.

That night, I spent my time thinking and plotting as if I'd surely survive my execution. When exhaustion finally caught up with me, my thoughts drifted to what I could have done better or differently if given another chance. Would I still be a naive fool who, like Marissa had said, behaved like a Goody Two-shoes around everyone? Or would I take on the true Wren Lee's character—that spiteful, entitled, spoiled brat who ultimately brings everyone in her family to their doom through her thoughtless actions? Neither path seemed right anymore.

What scant light that eked through the fissures of that small window above the cell had gotten brighter, signaling the arrival of daybreak. The realization that in mere hours, my last breath would be taken from me paralyzed me in fright, my body quivering and my pulse thundering. Death had seemed so much more abstract when it was just words on a page.

When I did manage to calm down, it was to the sound of the prison door opening, and I tensed as I held my breath. There, presenting before me was the man of the hour, Crown Prince Jared Abaddon, the hero—though I was beginning to seriously question whoever had assigned that particular role.

The Abaddon bloodline had a unique appearance throughout history: strands of pale-golden hair and eyes of a deep, amethyst hue, a legacy purportedly inherited from an angelic ancestor of bygone age. Jared, a scion of this celestial heritage, was no exception. His striking beauty made him an easy object of women's affections, and his winsome nature magnetized others, elevating him, in the eyes of many, to an exalted status. Looking at him now, I wondered how I'd ever been fooled by such a perfect facade.

“Wren Lee,”

he said, his voice carrying all the warmth of a midwinter night. “Are you ready for your execution?”

The tone of his voice, the way he asked it, so casually and nonchalantly, it was as if he was asking me if I was ready to go out for a shopping expedition along Bond Street.

“No, Your Highness,”

I said, working on suppressing the shuddering in my voice and the shaking of my body. “I doubt anyone would ever be ready for their own death, don’t you agree?”

Even now, I couldn’t help but inject a bit of irony into my words.

His lips broadened into a sardonic smile that would have looked more at home on a predator than a prince. “You are always so amusing. Even now, you can’t help but show that sharp tongue of yours.”

Strange. His words made it sound like we were close acquaintances. I had clearly avoided him, interacting as little as possible when we happened to encounter each other under social settings, ones I had no choice but to attend. Yet here he was, acting as if we shared some intimate understanding.

He came down to one knee, his hand cupping my chin, the touch sending ice through my veins. I turned frigid, not from fear alone but from the sheer audacity of his familiar gesture. Even in my final hours, he was playing the role of the gallant prince.

“Your position has fallen, and you are as dirty as a gutter rat, yet...”

He shook his head as if confounded by some great mystery. “Your eyes, they show defiance, a spirit that is unwilling to yield. I loathe those eyes of yours. I abhor the way they look at me as if you knew all about me, seeing deep into my soul. The way you look at everyone, it’s as if you are a deity.”

He leaned closer, his perfect features twisting with something darker than mere dislike. “I must admit it makes me feel inferior, like I’m an insignificant insect in your eyes. I detest it.”

Just what the heck was he going on about? This man, the almighty hero of the novel, had been feeling inferior simply because I had looked at him a certain way? How ridiculous. Though I didn’t deny that whenever I saw him, or the other characters for that matter, I couldn’t help but know what they were going to say or act simply because the same scenes appeared in the novel. Perhaps I hadn’t hidden my foreknowledge as well as I’d thought.

“I’m sorry I made you feel small with my stares, Your Highness,”

I replied, unable to keep the edge from my voice. “It must be an awful feeling for you, considering you’re a crown prince and the future king of Estral. To think, all this time, you’ve been threatened by mere looks.”

He glared at me as if I had jabbed a particularly sensitive nerve. His hand tightened on my chin, and for a moment, I thought he would strike me. But then that perfect, princely mask slipped back into place. With a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, he said in a derisive manner, “Nice comeback, Lady Wren. But no matter about that disgusting, unwanted emotion. I’d be rid of it for good. I’ll be rid of you for good, Wren Lee.”

At that moment, so in tuned I was with his words that I let my guard down. The sharp pain in my side caught me completely by surprise. A blade was piercing through my skin and into my organs, with blood hemorrhaging out. The metallic scent filled my nostrils, mixing with the musty dungeon air in a nauseating combination.

Shocked, I lowered my gaze to see a dagger stuck in my side, and Jared thrusting it deeper, screwing it into me with a precision that spoke of practice. What? Jared just

stabbed me! But this did not appear in the novel. Wren Lee was meant to die under the guillotine, like Finn, her adoptive brother. This wasn't following the script at all.

Shifting my eyes back to his, I saw him grinning gleefully, all pretense of nobility gone. This was the true face of the novel's hero, and it was far uglier than any villain's mask.

"Unlike your brother, there will be no public execution for you, my dear."

His voice carried a hint of satisfaction that made my blood run cold—or perhaps that was just the blood loss. "Let me tell you one thing before your last breath. I planned all this. Allowing you to live is simply too dangerous."

He chuckled softly, the sound echoing off the stone walls like broken glass. "Oh, and since we're at it, let me tell you another. Your father, the late Duke Argyll, his death at the battlefield? Yes, I planned that, too. Why, you ask? Because a man with too much wealth and power makes him too dangerous. He was a hard man to make yield, your father, and our king had fear, so his death was inevitable."

I glared at him, the pain tearing at my side nothing compared to the emotional agony at hearing the truth behind Father's death. I had always had my suspicion, but hearing it confirmed with such casual cruelty made something snap inside me. Yet I had never imagined it'd be the hero of the novel himself who plotted the demise of not only Father, but our whole family. We had been betrayed, backstabbed, and murdered by none other than the men we had pledged loyalty to. The perfect prince was nothing more than a perfectly crafted lie.

Blinded with sheer rage, I staggered as I reached out my blood-soaked hands toward the bastard's neck. "You monster!"

I screamed as tears filled my eyes. "You! I will kill you here and now!"

The words tore from my throat, raw and primal, carrying years of suppressed anger.

A disgusted look crossed his face, as if I were something unpleasant he'd found on his boot. He grabbed the hair at the back of my head and thrust me away from him. I went tumbling to the floor, the dagger still stuck in my side and blood gushing out. My head was spinning, and I felt like life was starting to leave me, but I didn't let that deter me from showing my wrath. Even dying, I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me broken.

My eyes locked on his, burning with all the hatred I could muster. "I swear vengeance on you, Jared Abaddon. Mark my words. I will annihilate the Abaddon."

Each word was a promise written in blood—my blood, my family's blood.

He snorted as he tidied himself up, a distorted face marked with disdain when he saw the stain of my blood sully his fine royal outfit. "Pray tell, how will you accomplish that when you're dying? Even in your final moments, you still think you can change the story?"

I ignored him and looked to the heavens. "I want a redo!"

I shouted, my voice hoarse with emotions. "Do you hear me? I want a redo!"

I screamed into the air, staring at whatever gods were up there. "You brought me here without my consent. The least you can do is give me a redo. This time, I want a cheat. I deserve that much, don't I?"

Jared burst out laughing, the sound echoing off the walls like poisoned bells. "You are indeed one mad woman. Perhaps death will be a mercy for you."

He turned on his heel and headed toward the door, his boots clicking against the stone

floor.

I wanted to return the favor by sending his own dagger into his stomach, the same way he had done me. I wanted to crawl to him, to stop him from leaving, but getting up was an impossible feat. My body, once trained in the finest dance halls of Whitfall, now refused to obey even the simplest commands.

I was reduced to lying there, watching his figure disappear into the darkness, and it wasn't long before my eyes closed against my will. The last thing I saw was his silhouette, straight and proud, walking away from yet another murder.

[Requesting for a CHEAT has been accepted.]

[Initializing system parameters...]

A voice echoed in my head, sounding like a bored customer service representative who'd been working the cosmic help desk for far too long.

What was this? I was so near death's door that I was hearing voices now? Though honestly, as far as death hallucinations went, this one was oddly specific. I tried opening my eyes, but I felt too weak, and my consciousness was starting to fade.

[A maximum of five skills are permissible for a CHEAT. Would you like to browse our current selection? Premium skills may require additional karma points.]

The voice had the artificial cheerfulness of someone trying to upsell you at a cosmic convenience store.

As my consciousness wavered, memories of home—my first home—flooded back. Mom, Dad, Luke, Eve... ten years in this world, and still their absence ached like a fresh wound. Mom's kitchen had always been the heart of our home, filled with

warmth and the mouthwatering aromas of her cooking. Her beef stew... I could almost taste it now, rich and hearty, the meat so tender it melted on your tongue. And Dad... I could almost hear him now, stroking his beard while explaining how the best meals began long before the kitchen, with properly nurtured crops and well-raised livestock. He'd always said cooking was just the final step in a journey that began in the soil itself. What a pitiful last meal this was in comparison—nothing but the metallic taste of my own blood.

[SPECIAL OFFER DETECTED!]

[Food Mastery and Chef Excellence Package has been added.]

[Two-for-one special activated!]

[DOWNLOADING comprehensive food production knowledge...]

[Agricultural Expertise:

Advanced farming techniques

Crop optimization and breeding

Soil management and enhancement

Magical plant cultivation

Sustainable farming practices

Livestock management

Weather pattern prediction

Agricultural innovation]

[Culinary Mastery:

Global cuisine expertise

Advanced cooking techniques

Recipe creation and innovation

Traditional and modern methods

Magical food enhancement

Preservation techniques]

[Bonus Features:

Perfect taste memory

Ingredient quality detection

Instinctive growing cycles

Crop disease resistance

Natural pest control

Emergency food production]

[Congratulations! You can now create farm-to-table miracles that would make master

chefs weep with joy while quoting Sun Tzu's "The Art of War"

about proper crop rotation.]

[Note: System not responsible for spontaneous dinner party organization, stress-baking incidents, or philosophical farming debates. Agricultural wisdom may spontaneously manifest as cryptic proverbs.]

My heart clenched as different faces flashed through my mind—Father's stern but loving expression, Mother's gentle smile, Elle's bright laughter, Finn's solemn dignity. The Argyll family, who had taken in a stranger and given her not just a home, but a place to belong. Now they were all gone, scattered like ashes in the wind, their warmth replaced by the cold embrace of death.

"Please,"

I whispered, the word carrying all the weight of my grief. "I want them back. I need them back."

The plea escaped my lips like a desperate prayer to whatever gods or systems might be listening. In that moment, I would have traded anything—my noble title, my wealth, my very soul—just to see them one more time.

[Error 404: Reviving the dead is not possible, forbidden, and against the law of the universe.]

[PROCESSING request...]

[Status: DENIED]

[Reason: Violation of Universal Constants]

[Note: Management sympathizes with your loss but must maintain cosmic balance. Please select a different option from our available features. May we suggest grief counseling?]

A bitter laugh escaped my bloodstained lips. Not possible? Then perhaps... My thoughts raced despite the growing darkness at the edges of my vision. If I couldn't bring them back, maybe I could prevent their deaths altogether. "Time,"

I croaked out. "Send me back. Back to the beginning, before everything went wrong."

It was an outrageous request, I knew. Asking to rewrite time itself—who did I think I was? But with death's cold fingers already reaching for me, what more did I have to lose? The worst they could say was no, and I was already intimately acquainted with that particular answer.

[In accordance with time and space policy, five years is the maximum allowed for a time reversion. Time manipulation is typically forbidden, however...]

[CRITICAL SITUATION DETECTED]

[Current timeline analysis shows catastrophic outcomes if subject's death remains permanent:

Immediate Consequences:

Estimated casualties: 47% of mortal population

Dragon rage incidents: projected 312

Demon realm instability: critical

Magical advancement halted: 147 crucial inventions will never manifest

Last pure-blooded Alpha wolf bloodline: terminated

Wolf-shifter population decline: 89% within one generation

Kingdom technological regression: estimated 300 years

Universe stability: critically endangered]

[Additional Notes: Subject's death triggers chain reaction of events including but not limited to:

Ancient dragon destroying three kingdoms (Projected civilian casualties: unacceptable)

Demon Prince destabilizing realm barriers (Risk Level: Catastrophic)

Mage Knight abandoning all magical research (Technology Stagnation: Critical)

Alpha wolf's complete psychological breakdown (Species Extinction Risk: High)

Multiple extinction-level events]

[MANAGEMENT OVERRIDE ACTIVATED]

[Reason: Preserving universal stability takes precedence.]

[Note: This is not favoritism. We simply prefer our worlds intact and populations alive.]

[Time reversion authorized. Would you like to add this to your cart? Warning: This will consume all accumulated karma points.]

Only five years? I didn't care if it was only five years. I'd take whatever I could as long as I got to see my family again, as long as I got to be with my loved ones again. At this point, even a five-minute rewind would be better than bleeding out in this cell.

But what was all this nonsense about karma points and extinction events? Dragons? Demons? Wolves? The voice in my head was certainly creative, I'd give it that. Maybe my dying brain was mashing together all those fantasy novels I'd read back on Earth. Though I had to admit, for a hallucination, it was remarkably specific about its catastrophic predictions.

[Confirmed!]

[A time reversion of five years will commence after skills selection is completed and the system is ready.]

[Please note that a skill to put a spell on the subject of interest to fall in love is not allowed and against the law of the universe. We're not running a dating service here.]

[As a bonus, the system has taken previous relationships with loved ones into consideration. You're welcome.]

Love? I almost laughed at the absurdity. After everything that had happened, romance was the last thing on my mind. I'd spent my previous life carefully avoiding any entanglements with the male leads, knowing they were destined for Marissa. The thought of chasing after men who'd never look my way left a bitter taste in my mouth. Besides, I'd seen enough court romances end in betrayal to last several lifetimes. If by some miracle I did get another chance, I refused to waste it pining after men who'd only break my heart. This time around, I'd only open my heart to

those who truly saw me—not as a villain, not as a stepping stone in their story, but as myself.

[Granting a bonus confirmed! Initiating Romantic Compatibility Scan... Processing candidates with genuine romantic attachment to subject Wren Lee...]

[ALERT: Multiple high-ranking entities detected]

[Status: Deeply Infatuated]

[Emotional Investment Level: Critical]

[Love Authenticity Rating: ?????]

[Loading emotional resonance data...]

[Loading...]

[Complete!]

[Bonus Feature Unlocked: Heart's Eye]

[Ability to glimpse true feelings]

[Built-in lie detection for romantic intentions]

[Automatic red flag identification]

[Genuine love verification system]

[Consider this your premium matchmaking service. Now with 100% less heartbreak!]

[Note: System cannot prevent emotional drama. User discretion advised. Management not responsible for excessive displays of affection or possessive behavior.]

The voice's attempt at humor did nothing to lighten the darkness consuming my heart. As my blood pooled beneath me, all I could think about was justice—no, revenge. The betrayal burned hotter than my wound, searing through my soul. Jared, King John, and their conspirators had systematically destroyed everything I held dear. They'd murdered my family, tarnished our legacy, and buried the truth beneath an avalanche of lies. If only I'd seen through their facade sooner, if only I'd recognized the vipers hiding behind those courtly smiles.

“I want to see them,”

I whispered through bloodstained lips. “I want to see the truth behind every smile, every bow, every honeyed word. I want to know their hearts before they can plunge their daggers into mine.”

[Eye of Truth has been added.]

[CAUTION: Advanced Truth Detection Protocol Engaged]

[Enables viewing of true intentions]

[Reveals hidden motivations]

[Exposes lies and deception]

[WARNING: This ability comes with significant mental burden. Side effects may include:

Existential crisis

Severe trust issues

Occasional bouts of cynicism

Disturbing revelations about human nature

Management strongly advises maintaining emotional distance when using this feature. What is seen cannot be unseen.]

A bitter laugh escaped my cracked lips as I took stock of my current state. Three months in this cell had reduced me from the pinnacle of nobility to something less than a beggar. My once-pristine skin was caked with grime and blood, my hair a matted mess that would make rats nest in shame. God, what I wouldn't give for a proper bath—not just these medieval excuses for cleaning, but a real, modern bathroom with actual plumbing. Even as one of the wealthiest nobles in the kingdom, I'd been forced to adapt to a world where chamber pots were considered the height of sanitation. The indignity of it all...

[Craftsman has been added.]

[UPGRADING Medieval Infrastructure...]

[Modern plumbing concepts unlocked]

[Sanitation revolution initialized]

[Hygiene standards recalibrating]

[Note: Prepare for dramatic increase in quality of life. Chamber pot industry may

experience significant market disruption.]

My thoughts drifted to an even more morbid direction. Here I was, about to die in rags soaked with my own blood, when I'd always imagined my final outfit would be a masterpiece of silk and lace, crafted by Estral's finest artisans. Even in death, it seemed, I couldn't maintain the dignity I'd fought so hard to preserve.

[Couturier has been added.]

[FASHION PROTOCOLS ENGAGED]

[Haute couture mastery unlocked]

[Advanced design techniques downloaded]

[Fabric manipulation expertise integrated]

[Because darling, if you're going to overthrow a kingdom, you simply must look fabulous doing it.]

"Couturier?"

I muttered. "What kind of twisted joke is this?"

None of these skills aligned with what I truly needed. Where was the earth-shattering magical power I'd seen wielded in *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames*? How was I supposed to face Jared and his conspirators with nothing but fashion sense and indoor plumbing? I needed raw power, the kind that could level castles and topple kingdoms, not... whatever this was.

The voice in my head seemed determined to grant me everything except what I

actually wanted. Though perhaps that was fitting—even my dying hallucinations were determined to be contrary.

[SYSTEM NOTIFICATION]

[Maximum skill capacity reached: 5/5]

[Current loadout:

Medical Mastery

Culinary Excellence (Food + Chef combo)

Eye of Truth

Master Craftsman

Haute Couturier]

[We regret to inform you that world-breaking powers are currently out of stock. May we suggest reviewing our complimentary guide: “So You Wanted Godlike Powers But Got Life Skills Instead: A Survivor’s Guide”?]

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in my throat, tasting of copper and irony. Even on my deathbed, the universe seemed determined to make a joke of my life. Here I was, bargaining with a voice in my head, and what did I get? Not the earth-shattering magic I’d hoped for, but a collection of skills that sounded more suited to running a high-end resort than achieving vengeance.

“Fine,”

I spat, the word carrying all the bitterness of my situation. “Medical, food, chef, eye of truth, craftsman, and couturier—I’ll take them all.”

What choice did I have? A cheat was a cheat, even if it wasn’t the one I’d wanted. At least this way, I could ensure my enemies looked their absolute best at their own funerals. Perhaps I’d even cater the events—nothing said revenge quite like serving exquisitely prepared last meals.

The absurdity of it all made me want to laugh and cry simultaneously. Here I was, bleeding out in a dungeon, planning hypothetical funeral fashions with skills I might never get to use.

[Confirmation successful!]

[Extracting information for medical, food, chef, craftsman, and couturier from the soul’s memory and world data from previous life is in progress...]

[Loading...]

[Loading...]

[Complete!]

[System creating the skills medical, food, chef, craftsman, and couturier is in progress...]

[Loading...]

[Loading...]

[Complete!]

[Extracting Eye of Truth from the Goddess Thea is in progress...]

[Warning: Goddess Thea seems mildly annoyed at being disturbed...]

[Complete!]

[Downloading skills into CHEAT is in progress...]

[Please do not turn off your consciousness during this update...]

[Complete!]

[System has been prepared. Time and space manipulation magic activating. Please stand by for time reversion. Note: Side effects may include slight disorientation, temporary memory overlap, and an inexplicable craving for chocolate.]

I felt this strange warmth enveloping me despite the coldness of my body. I felt myself grow lighter as if I was elevating, like a feather caught in an updraft. My breathing was shallow and short as my heartbeat grew ever feebler, my consciousness fainter, and then... darkness claimed me.

Just before everything faded completely, I could have sworn I heard one last message.

[Time reversion initiated.]

[Good luck, and try not to die this time. Our customer satisfaction ratings can't handle another tragedy.]

And then... I knew no more.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:02 am

I jolted awake with a scream trapped in my throat, my hand instinctively flying to where Jared's dagger had made its unwelcome home at my side. My heart slammed against my rib cage like it was trying to escape, and my body trembled with cold sweat.

There was nothing there. No dagger. No wound. No blood.

I stared at the spot, confusion clouding my mind. This wasn't possible. I knew I had been stabbed. I could still feel the cold steel sliding in, still see Jared's perfect smile as he twisted the blade. Wait... My eyes widened as reality shifted around me.

I was breathing. I was conscious. I wasn't dead. The realization hit me like a bucket of ice water, shocking me fully awake and alert.

I frowned, my confusion deepening with each passing moment.

Was it all just a dream? But no dream could feel that real. The pain, the betrayal, the light fading from my eyes as Jared walked away...

No. I knew with bone-deep certainty what I had experienced—the betrayal, the blade in my flesh, Finn's execution, Elle's broken body after her bastard husband finished with her, Mother succumbing to the epidemic, and Father, murdered on the battlefield by Jared and King John's machinations. Those deaths were real. Each one carved into my soul like scars that would never heal. Had my desperate plea for a second chance actually worked?

My mind racing and heart pounding, I scanned the room, trying to orient myself in

this impossible moment. Each detail felt like a blow to my senses after months in that dark cell.

A dizzying mix of relief and disbelief washed over me as I drank in the sight of the four-poster bed with its heavy velvet drapes, the scent of lavender and rosemary wafting from sachets. The familiar scents brought tears to my eyes—so different from the dank mold of the prison, from the metallic tang of blood that had been my last sensation.

My room. My sanctuary. Each detail exactly as I remembered it before everything went wrong. Shelves lined with leather-bound books, their gold-leaf titles catching the morning light like old friends welcoming me home. The mahogany armoire stood guard, its polished surface reflecting a world I thought I'd lost forever. Above, the ornate ceiling with its chandelier sparkled, while blue and gold wallpaper caught the light streaming through the double doors that led to the terrace overlooking our vast gardens.

Emotion crashed over me in waves, tears spilling freely down my cheeks. I had to be sure—had to know if this miracle was real. My legs shook as I scrambled off the bed, nearly stumbling in my haste to reach the dressing room. The plush carpet beneath my feet felt foreign after months of cold stone.

The dressing room stood exactly as I remembered—luxurious sofas and armchairs, elegant dresses hanging in perfect rows. Each piece a reminder of the life I'd lived before Jared's betrayal tore everything apart.

With trembling steps, I approached the dressing table. The face that greeted me in the mirror stole my breath—not the gaunt, hollow-eyed prisoner I'd become, but a young woman of eighteen. Raven hair fell in perfect waves, citrine eyes bright with youth, and that distinctive beauty mark under my eye. This was the face of Wren Lee, the supposed villainess of *A Kingdom of Infernal Flames*, before tragedy had rewritten her story.

This was my face. Before the prison. Before the betrayal. Before Jared's dagger.

"I've come back,"

I whispered, the words tasting of both miracle and terror. Had that bizarre cosmic customer service actually granted my dying wish?

But there was no time for wonder, no matter how impossible this all seemed. Urgency drove me forward, my feet barely touching the ground as I flew from the room. If I truly was eighteen again, then maybe...

I paced along the hallway, each step echoing with desperate hope. My heart thundered in my chest, memories of their deaths warring with the possibility of seeing them alive again.

Mother, Father, Elle, and Finn. The names burned in my throat like a prayer.

Tears blurred my vision as I hurried down the grand stairs, barely registering the maids and footmen who bowed and curtsied with their usual "Good morning, my lady."

Their familiar greetings, once routine, now felt like gifts I didn't deserve.

The manor wrapped around me like an embrace as I descended into its heart. Portraits of ancestors watched my desperate flight, their painted eyes witnessing this second chance I'd been granted. The scent of beeswax and polished wood filled my lungs—so different from the dank air of that prison cell where I'd died.

My hand trembled as I pushed open the door to the boudoir, Mother's favorite room with its floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the garden. I froze in the doorway, my heart nearly stopping at the sight before me.

There sat Lady Elanor Lee, Duchess of Argyll—my adoptive mother, alive and breathing. She was dressed all in black, her elegant form seeming lost as she stared into the distance with an expression that made my heart crack anew. When she turned to me, her eyes red-rimmed from crying, reality crashed over me like a wave.

I knew this day. God help me, I knew exactly when I'd returned to.

She beckoned me to her, and my legs nearly gave out as I crossed the room. I collapsed to my knees before her, the same way I had five years ago—and yet for me, it felt like only hours had passed since I'd last seen her alive. When she pulled me into her arms, I broke. Every emotion I'd bottled up in that cell, every ounce of grief and terror and relief poured out in racking sobs.

**

Please continue following [lokepub](#); the other chapters will be updated soon.