

## The Imperial Instructrix

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# The Imperial Instructrix

by [squirtysadist](#)

## Summary

“That’s Mary Wardwell. The Emperor wants her to act as his instructrix at Madam Spellman’s. He’s concerned for the children there.”

In a universe where Sabrina Spellman no longer exists and Sabrina Morningstar is deep within the depths of Hell, Faustus Blackwood remains in power and extends authority to Mary Wardwell, unaware of the complexities that would follow by inserting her into Zelda Spellman's domain.

## Notes

While this fic will certainly involve things with regards to caning, I would not say that this is a *happy* fic, though the ending planned is happy for the women involved.

Be aware, this is a bumpy, twisted, sexual road.

## **In the Beginning, there was the empire**

“And make it, so I have always been Emperor.”

A curse drifted over the town, infecting its inhabitants quickly and efficiently that not even the witches could raise their hands to protect themselves.

It shifted across the town, washing over its history and doctrine, painting over the buildings and walls until the false memories were implanted and people awoke in the light of day, taking a momentary pause to wonder why they had entered a room and what they had been speaking about. But as soon as the pause occurred, it'd finalised, and they continued about their day, singing praise to their emperor as if it had always been so.

The Imp, clever in its ways, read through the context of Faustus Blackwood's words, knowing what he wanted. What he *truly* wanted. So where once, there'd been two Sabrina Spellman's, there now remained only one: deep in the circles of Hell, unaware that anything had occurred to Greendale.

The other Sabrina ceased to exist as if she'd never been. The balance was restored to the universe.

And Roz was left to herself, standing in a bathroom, uncertain as to where Sabrina had gone or what had occurred but knowing that she was by herself. Immunised, so it seemed, against the effects. And yet utterly alone.

She was not the only immunised person in Greendale. However, our story starts across the other side of town.

For Zelda Spellman, her memories maintained that she ran the Academy of Unseen Arts—now Madam Spellman's. She did not recall her four hundred and so years on Earth, nor her worship to Satan or raising an orphaned niece.

To her, she'd lost her brother in a plane crash and had taken over his position at the school, and everything before that was hazy but not a concern, ever a woman to exist in the present.

Witches existed, yes, but none were at her school—and if they were, it was her duty to notify the Black Guard to come and take the children from the Academy, where they would investigate and then executed as necessary. But as far as she knew, she was not a witch, and to her knowledge, no one in her school was, either.

“Madam Spellman,” Nicholas asked. “You were saying?”

Zelda paused, tasting the words on her tongue. She couldn't quite remember what she'd been saying, but given the blank look she was receiving from students, nor did they. She waved her hand. "Dismissed. To classes, please."

The students dispersed from the assembly, leaving Zelda with a strange wonderment of what she'd been speaking about—she was certain it had been important, something to do with... witches perhaps? A reminder that with the emperor's impending birthday, that they must all be on their best behaviour.

She moved her concerns away, her students knew better, and she trusted them to be smart. Though, as she followed their leave, she couldn't help but feel the class numbers were rather small. Should there be more students?

More teachers?

Brief, in the psyche of her mind, Zelda was aware that *something* had occurred to dwindle their enrolment numbers, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember what.

It'd been horrible, and somehow...the emperor had been involved.

*Mass execution of witches*, whispered the imp, soothing the need to scratch at those memories. It was why her school remained under scrutiny.

"Zelda?"

She turned to face Marie. Like her, there was a strange puzzlement to her surroundings and a sense of feeling that *something* had occurred. But whereas Zelda felt a sense of wrongness, for Marie, the puzzlement stood that she'd been certain that she'd previously been standing elsewhere in the school and now resided here, in the main hall.

"Marie," Zelda said, feeling grounded as she looked to the woman. "Are you able to take over this morning's class? I suspect the emperor will be visiting today for his...*birthday*." Zelda didn't hide her disgust, despite its treasonous commentary. "I will need to ensure the Academy is in order."

Although there was a certainty that *she* didn't have any forbidden iconography, there was an itch underneath her skin that something was wrong, and she wanted to root the issue out.

Marie agreed, taking over geography and mathematics as Zelda shifted through the Academy's rooms one-by-one. Paintings were removed, books taken from shelves, all of which she took and stacked in her office to be confiscated.

In the dormitory, she shifted through the beds and items, flicking through items and removing anything that even looked to be of the occult—including dolls and any flowers that were pressed between books. It seemed tough and crude, but she couldn't allow a fraction to be marked against the Academy.

She'd worked too hard for it to be taken away from her.

Though she couldn't remember why she'd worked so hard to build this school, she knew it was important.

As if lives depended on it.

Zelda trusted her instincts. It was imperative that she remained headmistress, that she remained the last line of defence for these children, and no matter what fears were crawling underneath her skin, an aching sense of *wrong*, she would stay the course.

Or die trying.

At the newly named Blackwood High, Mary Wardwell felt confident in who she was for the first time in her life, and yet it seemed like she'd always been this way. The fear and nervous disposition had transformed inside of her, leaving an absence inside of her that ached for something more.

Yet, despite the Imp Perversion's attempt to eradicate any incorrect memory of old, the trauma of Hell remained in the depths of her psyche. All of that torture and horror she witnessed stretched deep inside of her, creating its own vacuum of rage to fill—a need for violence.

Even magic had its limits.

Before her first sudden death at the First Woman's hands, Mary had always been occultist in some ways, fascinated by horror and death and gore. However, she'd been raised with good Christian values, and a sense of guilt had always overlaid her desire to witness anything cruel. At least in horror movies, she didn't feel so perverse, though there were more than a few books in her private collection, hidden away, that related to particular tastes.

But here, in the new world, there was no guilt or shame for witnessing such things. Only an *itch* that needed to be scratched, growing all the more prominent with her newfound confidence.

When the emperor had taken Theo Putnam for witchcraft, there'd been a stirring of something akin to *sorrow* before apathy had taken over—a witch wasn't worthy of her empathy. No matter how good a student, they may have been in their disguise.

Whatever kindness she'd felt for the boy was eradicated.

She'd considered pulling Cadet Kinkle aside and enquiring as to how he'd missed the witchcraft in the boy, but she ended up holding her tongue. Cadet Kinkle hadn't blinked when the emperor visited. He might have had been the one to tip off the emperor, and as such, there was no reason for her to inflict any punishment.

Pity. She wouldn't have minded reminding him that vigilance should remain paramount, even with friends and family.

There was, however, a noticeable absence of one Rosalind Walker, but there was little she could do until she saw the girl again and enquired further. Nonetheless, Mary opened up her notebook and marked the girl's name as suspicious, to be looked into.

Ms Walker had been blind once and then miraculously cured—she wasn't sure why that hadn't been investigated at the time. Still, her notable absence after Mr Putnam's capture pointed to suspicious behaviour. Nonetheless, the missing class was cause for caning, and at the very least, hitting the girl's palm might soothe the stirring frustration building inside of her.

Finishing her work for the day, Mary closed her books, preparing to leave for the emperor's residence. It was time to witness the execution of the witches. She'd purchased tickets earlier that day to bear witness to such an event and was looking forward to seeing how one as mighty as the emperor dealt with such heinous creatures on such a day.

She hoped to witness bloodshed.

Anyone was permitted to the execution, held in the once known Desecrated Church, now known as the Emperor's Hall. But tickets had to be bought from the general audience, with particular High Honoured guests permitted entrance.

The Black Guard, made-up of the Blackwood Children, were permitted to stand by the Emperor's side, with Anubis in grip, sitting by the pulpit as Faustus welcomed in his High Honoured Guests into the hall.

Most of them were of the town council, with a few significant members of the town. Although Faustus knew them generally from his time running as the Priest of the Church of Night, he feigned political interest, taking great pleasure to watch their sycophantic meandering as they took their seats in the front pews.

His eyes turned to Prudence, watching her stand tall, a soft smile on her face. Loyalty was easily influenced, more so when he presented Agatha's sanity to her, giving the girl back to Prudence as a gesture of good faith.

Agatha sat on the pew, her eyes looking to them curiously. He wondered if she was as aware as he was but dismissed it. Only the wish granter was immune; everyone else was influenced as he wished. There was a strangeness to how Agatha observed the world, but it was easy, incorrectly dismissed as after-effects from the sanity from the Pan creature.

"Welcome," he greeted as the last of the guests sat down. In the second row, he noted Mary Wardwell, a newfound strength in her he'd not presented but nonetheless was pleased to see. "We are here on this auspicious occasion to condemn these witches to death. They have taken our children for the last time, threatened our world-order, and although I take no pleasure in committing this act, I know that despite their familiar faces, we must be swift and strong if we wish to assure our safety."

He turned to the executioner, watching as they stepped forward.

Faustus had, of course, considered torturing for confession, knowing that if you hurt someone enough, they'll confess to anything so as long as you end their suffering—but that could take days, and he didn't have the patience for it.

Sabrina Spellman may no longer exist in the new world he'd crafted, but there was a sense that somewhere, somehow, she'd find a way to ruin his perfect world. So he nodded his head, ensuring the swiftness of two people he knew she cared about very deeply.

The blade cut fast through Nicholas Scratch's neck. There was a gasp that ran through the hall, and then cheers. The audience clapped, though, despite the impish influence telling them this was good and right, fear trembled through as their psyche didn't quite accept the witnessed horror. After all, the memories may tell them they were used to such events. The truth was rather more complex.

For many, this *was* the first time they'd witnessed death, let alone execution.

There was one notable exception—Mary Wardwell. Her eyes shone, mouth parted in a soft gasp as she craned her neck to see the gore and violence. The blood spluttered from Nicholas Scratch's longer than expected. Pumping with each heartbeat as it shot across the walls and sprayed down the floors.

Tension held until the last of the blood spilt, the heartbeat slowing until nothing remained but slow, steady drips that spilt down to the floor. Only then did the executioner moved to Theo.

Faustus nodded, signalling his approval.

The executioner's axe rose, and then there was a sudden gust of wind, a blur and the knowledge that the hobgoblin was afoot as Theo Putnam disappeared from his bindings.

Damn him.

A rage built and then ebbed inside of Faustus Blackwood. The hobgoblin could become a problem if he weren't careful, the very escape of Theo Putnam would sow dissonance if he weren't careful.

"Prudence?" He asked, his teeth grinding together.

"Yes, Emperor." She said with a bow before unsheathing her sword as she walked down the pews to track the hobgoblin to its hideout.

He turned back to the audience, swallowing the anger down until it sat like a stone in the pit of his stomach. "Disappointing," he advised, "but a reminder that we must remain vigilant—witches are amongst us. They work in packs, they work in secret, and they are working to ensure they destroy everything we've worked for: vigilance and force, people. Do not be afraid to turn in your neighbour. I assure you, we thoroughly investigate every claim and ensure we only capture those who have shown to bare witchcraft and ensure a confession is made before execution."

The audience was not unintelligent by any means. Those that attended did so out of curiosity or political advantage, not for a bloodthirst. The emperor's words were pretty enough, meant to engage fear into the audience—and to a lesser audience, it would. But they clapped and sung joyfully, knowing that any expression as to otherwise would only lead suspicion to them.

After all, how did one prove they were not a witch?

Mary was permitted to attend the birthday celebrations held in the Blackwood residence. Only those the Emperor had believed to be elite, along with those he permitted as *guests*, were allowed attendance to such an occasion.

She was the latter, of course. Having been tapped on the shoulder by Judith Blackwood with an invitation provided to her. She alleged to have been noted for her service at Blackwood High and was cordially invited to attend.

The truth was far more direct—Faustus didn't trust many people, and Zelda Spellman was quickly becoming a thorn in his side, even here. But Mary Wardwell may just be the perfect person to *fix* that otherwise nasty problem of rebellious attitude stirring in the Academy.

Even Faustus could see Mary's growing sadism. Her presence in the classroom and at the execution had shined a lovely spotlight on her, and his history working with her over the past few weeks had led him to find Mary amicable, despite her unfortunate mortal state.

A hunger lurked in Faustus to ensure he grip on power, and Mary would suit those needs as required—so he believed.

Luckily for him, their desires aligned quite nicely.

For Mary, the execution had filled her with a sense of contentment—it was as the aching emptiness inside of her had been filled momentarily at the sight of bloodshed. But at each moment passed, the emptiness crept back bit-by-bit, a rage growing inside her with every moment, itching underneath her skin.

For now, it was bearable, but there would not be an execution again so soon unless Theo Putnam were captured—even then, that was likely to be a private execution, given the powerful nature of him and his cohort. No, to fill such rage inside of her, she would need to alter her activities, become someone who was...*prominent* in the Emperor's circles. It would allow her a more consistent way to feed the growing sadism.

She would not waste this occasion.

Mary's eyes flickered over the attendees, noting Greendale's mayor and city council, as well as a few influential families.



However, it was up against the wall beside the Black Guard's eldest, where Mary's attention shifted. A woman stood with her hands clasped before her, her hair in twin plaits and a strange look to her face—as if pinched in concern. And when her eyes met Mary's, they lit up before becoming clouded once more as they looked away.

Mary dismissed her curiosity as she studied the rest of the room.

Unlike witches, mortals were not so lucky as to be immunised against the Imp Perversion—as such, there was only a faint inkling of familiarity that dulled as she turned her attention away from the woman she'd once known to be Agatha.

Her attention shifted to glancing around the hall, looking for the Emperor—hoping to have a chance to speak to him about her desires to help the cause in more...active ways.

Agatha was unaffected by the curse, and as such, when she saw Mary, there was a momentary hope that she, too, was unaffected, before she noticed that way Mary dressed, the way she stood, her eyes flicking over the room to observe. This was not *her* Mary Wardwell, and as such, her interest shifted away from whatever Mary had become.

Prudence was different, even from how she was before the Pagans came into town. Dorcas was missing, and no one could tell her why. It was a lonely experience, and although she kept her thoughts muted, showing eagerness to be at Prudence's side, there was a terrible ache at how things had been.

She didn't mind serving Father Blackwood, standing at his side and doing what was needed and necessary for the Eldritch Terrors, but it'd been lonely. She'd missed her sisters, and Judith and Judas were as fun as golems to play with.

Mary, at least, had been something. Mortal as she was, her hand had been warm, and there'd been warmth in how she looked at her despite the lurking curiosity underneath the so-called Christian image (shaken by witnessing the Devil himself).

*I know what it's like to be alone. If you ever need company, you can always pop round for some biscuits. I make a good shepherds pie, too. That is if...if your kind eat as we do.*

***We only drink the blood of the innocent on special occasions.***

*Oh. Oh! That's a joke. Very funny, dear. Well then, how about I bring some around tomorrow. I know he forgets about those sorts of things, and I worry that you're not getting enough nutrients. We need to be strong, after all. For what comes next.*

“Agatha?” Prudence summoned.

Her eyes looked to her sister. “Yes?”

“You looked far away. Was something wrong?”

“There are more people than I expected,” she said, feigning her disinterest in crowds. “No cute boys.”

Prudence nodded and looked away. Agatha recalled how, in a different world, Prudence would have laughed and pulled her close, pointing out all the mischief they could enact together instead. But this wasn’t her Prudence. It wasn’t her, Mary. And it certainly wasn’t her world any more.

A part of her wished she was still insane.

She watched as Father Blackwood made his way across the room, mingling with his guests. As Judas and Judith kept a close distance, Anubis in hand. And even observed Prudence as she leant against the wall, eyes wide open, watching out for any danger. But mostly, her eyes kept finding them drifting back to the dark hair of Mary Wardwell as she sipped at a single glass of champagne, polite in conversation, though it seemed even here she did not enjoy socialising.

“Who’s that woman?” She asked Prudence.

“Who?” Prudence asked before noting where Agatha’s eyes were looking. “That’s Mary Wardwell. The Emperor wants her to act as his instructrix at Madam Spellman’s. He’s concerned for the children there.”

“Witches?” Agatha asked.

Prudence nodded. “You don’t need to worry. I’ll keep you safe.”

Agatha sighed and wondered if Prudence could feel the magic in their blood, calling out to be used. It’d been only a day since she’d done a charm, and yet it seemed to build inside of her, reaching out to curse or charm the inhabitants.

Tapping against her skin, she cast a minor warming charm against herself—unnoticeable, undetectable, but the need to pulsate magic softened.

“Do you think the Emperor would allow me to become one of his guards?” She asked.

“No. But if you’re on your best behaviour, he may allow you to wander the grounds. Would you like that?” Prudence meant the words sincerely but laced them with condescension. It only left a bitter taste in her mouth.

No, but perhaps there were other things she could do, places she could be.

Faustus led Mary to his office. There, he poured them whiskey, taking the champagne glass from her hand to replace it with the crystal of his private collection.

“Forgive my candour,” he began, “but your work with your students is quite revered.” It was a small lie—after all, *this* Mary Wardwell had only existed for eleven hours. “I am in need of someone with your...tenacity to deal with a problem I have.”

“And what problem is that?” Mary inquired.

“Problems like Theo Putnam. There’s another school, smaller but a danger to the world-order we’ve set,” he advised. “It’s my desire that you could use your skills to weed out any concerns that might be lurking in the shrubbery, so to speak.”

“Of course,” Mary agreed. “I’m happy to serve the Empire.”

Faustus sensed the *but* and waited, his patience thinning as the woman gave a sharp smile. It was not unlike the demon he’d met with the same face, and for a moment, he wondered if perhaps the curse had confused the two (it hadn’t).

“I would need complete oversight and power within the school—nothing that oversteps your own, of course,” Mary advised quickly, blinking rapidly as she softened her expression. “But for complete obedience in such *troubling* times as this, I believe a firm hand is required. Often I think some of the children are...dabbling in these magics not because *they are* witches but because they’re moths drawn to the flame. They want to feel special and important because it gives them a sense of purpose. We need to eradicate that need by showing them what will occur.”

Faustus paused. He’d chosen Mary because beneath what he viewed as a drab exterior, there was a sharpness of wit he couldn’t help but exploit—and seeing the hunger in the woman’s eyes, seen only once before when mentioning her displeasure of Sabrina Spellman, showed that with a backbone, Ms Wardwell *could* be a force to be reckoned with.

Dangerous.

But right now, easy to manipulate and hold loyalty over—so he believed.

“I will need to be made aware of the finer details, but let it be known that I will hold you as the instructrix in this, and as such, it comes with power and authority over Madam Spellman’s. It is your duty to ensure the school is a model standard for us. I would like to repurpose it for some of our more elite students eventually, and as such, require the insurgence to be eradicated wherever it may be.”

“I believe we have an understanding,” Mary advised, sticking out her hand. There, Faustus grabbed it, shaking it once and then twice before letting go.

He may not trust the mortal, but he believed he knew her well enough to control her. To him, that was enough.

For Mary, a part of her was flattered at the attention provided, whilst the other part remained entirely focused on the need itching under her skin. She would eradicate the problem, showing off her skills, and hopefully be able to position herself closer to what she desired.

There was an inevitability with teenagers, after all. Their emotions were in flux, and there would always be a need to rebel against authority. It provided her with an everlasting position to inflict the much-needed punishment on those that required it.

Or so she thought.

The truth of the matter was that she would soon meet a much more delicious option that she hadn't considered, and as a result, everything Faustus build would be jeopardised by his own hand. And that was just the way the Imp desired it.

There was an inevitability of the end, of finalisation—it was the journey that mattered, and the Imp could count on this being a long, terrible journey.

Time to buckle in.

# In loco parentis

## Chapter Summary

Zelda rose to her feet, feeling a coldness wash over her body. “Wardwell did what?” She asked.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mary Wardwell began the day by taking on the position of Instructrix: she awoke early, showering and dressing in her new uniform, emulating that of the Blackguard, though she wore a skirt and was expected to wear nylons and heels with it.

She packed a bag, a simple one with a decent set of change of clothes, some notebooks, pens and, of course, her disciplinary items. She needed to expect the worst but hope for the best, and her tools were a fine representation of this.

Last night, she’d been up, caring for the leather and cane, ensuring that the items were well treated and cleaned since their supposed last use—though *Mary Wardwell* had not used these items. Not that it mattered. In her mind she had. In her mind, she was well versed in the use of them.

And a hunger consumed her to use it.

Zelda stood tall, hands at her side as Faustus entered the foyer. His eyes glanced around the room, moving from his iconography, to the approved artwork, to Marie LeFleur standing to her right, and then finally to her.

“Zelda,” he greeted with familiarity not owed to him.

“Emperor,” she greeted in turn, bowing her head with respect despite how it burned through her. She watched as his loyal children stepped to either side of him, leading the mutt. But it was the fourth person that caught her by surprise.

A woman stepped beside Faustus, hands at her side with a large, black bag at her side. She was dressed in similar regalia to Faustus, though muted to signify her lower status.

Not so low, since she stood beside him.

Zelda’s eyes drew over the woman before flicking to Faustus curiously, tilting her head as she held her tongue, but made it clear as to what she was enquiring towards.

“Ah, yes. Mary, this is Zelda. Zelda, allow me to introduce to you, Instructrix Wardwell.”

*Instructrix?* Zelda paled at the words but kept her expression neutral. The last thing she needed was Faustus to see the panic flushing through her.

Mary smiled tightly, keeping her hands at her side. “Pleasure,” she said tightly.

“Indeed,” Zelda echoed dryly before turning to glance to Faustus again. “And what have I owed such a blessing of your company so soon? Were you after tea...?”

“Best we get straight to business,” Faustus said. “After requisitioning the illicit materials it became obvious that your house is not in order, Zelda. Mary will be here to help usher in a new reformation to ensure these students are suitable for the coming days. These are dark times. Since Mr Putnam’s disappearance, I can’t help but think that he had some help with the matter.”

It was like a bucket of ice water had been thrown over her. She stood frozen, before swallowing as she glanced from Mary Wardwell to Faustus again. He stared at her as if waiting for her to argue and oh...she wanted to rage and scream at him, have some witch turn him a toad so she could step on him.

But she kept her composure, reminding herself that, not only were they outnumbered, but the children would be the ones who would be punished.

Holding her tongue, she smiled at Mary. “I’m sure that,” she paused to turn on her heel to glance to Marie beside her, “My deputy will be able to show you around?”

Mary’s eyes ran over the woman with interest before she nodded, stepping forward, bag in tow as Marie began leading them to the cafeteria.

Zelda paused, her eyes following them before she turned back to stare at Faustus. She considered the frankness she wished to discuss, before her eyes moved to the twin children, still but present on either side of him. “Tea?” she inquired.

“I’m afraid not. We have some pressing business to attend to. Treat Instructrix Wardwell with hospitality. Should she advise of any concerns or...be unable to meet her required check-in at my request, I will sanction the termination of this school you’ve built for yourself, Zelda.”

Zelda felt her jaw tighten before she gave a nod, knowing what a *sanctioned termination* meant for them. “I assure you that...*Instructrix* Wardwell will be treated with the utmost hospitality.”

Faustus watched her before his hand flicked, and then his children were leaving, taking his mutt as he departed from her foyer.

Perhaps it was for the best. Zelda walked forward, watching as Faustus and his children left the Academy, making their way to the road where a car was waiting for them all. She took a moment to feel the fury sitting like a pit in her chest, before closing the doors, stepping back in the muted light of the academy foyer.

It was done. She couldn't do anything about it; it was that hopelessness that caused her to square her shoulders back, lift her chin up and actually move forward.

She made her way back to where the classroom had been, before Marie had called her out, feeling her throat swell as she looked over the handful of students.

They all raised their heads, looking at her curiously. Since the execution of Nicholas Scratch, there'd been an aching emptiness left in the room. Mr Scratch had been a fine student, bright if...stubborn. And it was that stubbornness alone that Zelda knew had been the final nail in his coffin.

Though Faustus had seemed to be targeting him, specifically. Not that she could ever prove that.

"Directrix?" Came the small voice of Melvin. "Are you alright?"

No, she wasn't. "The Emperor has seen fit, due to recent occurrences, to grant us some oversight. Instructrix Mary Wardwell will be joining us soon. I ask you to provide her with the utmost respect as if the Emperor himself were in the room." She hoped it was enough, enough layered words and subtext to ensure they understood.

The students looked at her, glancing at one another as a sickness went through them. There seemed to be a strange shift in the atmosphere, where Zelda caught herself from viewing the students as children, which they were, to viewing them as one might view a niece or nephew in her proximity who was in their twenties—old enough to make their own decision.

It seemed to flicker for a moment (a memory that these students *were not* the age they were deceived to be) before it faded, the Imp's spell taking hold to remind her that these were students in her care. *Of course* she was likely to blur the feeling of familiarity with them. She'd seen their brothers and sisters through these halls.

As it was, Instructrix Wardwell did not intrude on the lesson, providing Zelda with enough time to self-reflect in anticipation as she provided the students' permission to quietly do their own work for whatever class was necessary.

When the bell rang, signalling recess, she left for her office, hoping to find comfort there, and was instead greeted with the woman sitting before her desk, legs crossed, showing far more of the dark nylons than Zelda expected.

"Your...deputy, was it?" Wardwell inquired with a sharp smile.

"Marie," she confirmed.

"Mm. She showed me to one of the spare rooms you have. I'll be here for some time. I was hoping you could provide me with a rundown of what's been occurring, as it seems you have quite small numbers here."

Zelda strode through the room, feeling a sudden desire to stop by the drink cart and pour herself a glass of whiskey. It was far too early for that, however, and instead, she made her

way behind her desk, mulling over the inquiry.

“Where would you like to begin?” She asked, setting down in her chair, clasping her hands before her.

Wardwell remained relaxed, her own hands sitting in her lap before she raised them in a soft shrug. “You tell me,” she said. “I’ve seen a school built to hold three times the number of students it currently does, but right now it seems of the three dorms...only one is filled...and it appears...*co-ed*.”

Zelda swallowed at that. It seemed strange to say it allowed, though a tickle ran down her back, wondering *why* it seemed it was strange. “I...well we trust our students.”

“And you’re not concerned about what happens when the lights turn off?”

“Am I to pretend that separating them in a room a door down the hall would cease this?”

The woman’s expression shifted, a tightness as she turned away. “I would have expected a certain decorum—“

“Perhaps you should adjust your expectations, then,” Zelda said, her tone lowering. “I understand you’re here to oversee the emperor’s concerns that witches are here, within these walls. But I assure you they’re not. You may peak around any corner as you so wish, but I will not have you coming in here, telling me how to run my school in areas that have no effect as to witches and warlocks.”

Mary smiled, and her head gave a small nod. “I see. I’m not the enemy here, Zelda. I can be a friend to you if you so wish. As you say, I’m here to ensure that there are no witches here, but I’m also here to prevent any of your students...*slipping* into these dark arts. If you were to view me as a *confidant*, I think we can root this issue head-on. But if you’re determined to see me as some...interloper in the way you run things, then it’s going to be very difficult to do my job, and I don’t think you or I want to make each other’s lives difficult, do we? It’d be a shame if that were to occur.”

Fury bubbled in Zelda’s belly like acid. She could feel insults sitting on her tongue, waiting to be spat before she held them back. Her heart was thudding in her ears, and there was a darkness to the room that hadn’t been present before.

It was time’s like this she missed Hilda to come and soothe her, reminding her of her blood pressure. But Hilda was *busy* and it was dangerous to see her now.

So she swallowed back her words, gripping her hands together tightly until she felt her nails dig into the skin. “You’re right,” she said, feeling nauseous at the words. “I think we can be friends.”

“I’m so glad you said that,” Mary replied, uncrossing her legs to sit up in the chair “Now, how about you and I start this little chat over. I noticed that your numbers are quite small. Perhaps it would be suitable to review...bringing in additional students?”



“Currently we have limited staff. Marie and I run everything here. Small numbers mean that we can provide more involved teaching.”

“Well, I am a teacher myself I will have you know. Perhaps I can help alleviate some of the strain on teaching for you both. I can take over English and History, and then you and your deputy divide the rest—certainly then we can review the opportunity to these terrible numbers?”

Zelda bit her tongue hard enough to taste iron. Drawing in a breath, her mind ticked over the possibilities. Mary Wardwell was dangerous, if she wanted this to go smoothly she would at least need to play nice for now. “As you wish,” she advised, the words coming out with exhale.

“Good. I’m so pleased to see that we can collaborate on this.”

Mary smiled again and Zelda felt a shiver run down her back. There was something cold and shark-like about the way Mary looked at her. It wasn’t glaring or condescending—but it felt wrong. She couldn’t place a finger as to *why* but she trusted the instinctive need to pull away.

“Now, recesses should be ending soon. What class follows?”

“Geography.”

“Perhaps I shall sit in,” Mary said, though it wasn’t a question.

“Of course. If you’ll follow me?”

Mary Wardwell made herself at home. There was an old, strange pull about the land she stepped on. It didn’t like her, didn’t want her there—had she been her old self, she may have considered this feeling as her own fear crawling up her spine, begging her to find safety in the comforts of her own home—but she wasn’t her old self.

She was something new, and this *new* Mary Wardwell recognised the feeling for what it was—old, protective magic that sensed she shouldn’t be here. It couldn’t push her out because *as a technicality* Faustus had never formally left his position (by death or retirement) he simply...absconded. As there was no formal transference of power from him to Zelda Spellman, the wards recognised him permitting entrance to Mary Wardwell, and therefore *bitterly* allowed her to remain.

The wards tried to make her frightened, tried to fill her nightmares, but whatever nightmares it tried to conjure were almost a relief compared to the usual dreams Mary was used to from Hell.

The magic sent her dreams of monsters great and terrible, threatening to pull her underneath the bed, slinking outside of her window.

But before that, she dreamt of Hell. The depths of it, the inescapability of it. The knowledge that she was there, not because she had sinned, but because she'd been kind to a girl she found on the road. The memory was foggy now, disconnected from the truth, but she recalled that, somehow, *kindness* had led to her demise, and as such, kindness would only lead to ruin..

Madam Spellman allowed her free reign of the school, though Mary wasn't naive enough to not suspect she had ears and eyes everywhere.

During class, Zelda had introduced her to the children and Mary had greeted each and everyone, noting the small numbers. There were abundances of girls, but only three boys remained—it became clear as to why Zelda was not concerned about them being in the same location. A small group of boys together were a far greater concern than in a shared dormitory—though the mix of them sat wrong with her.

Boys couldn't control themselves around girls. It'd been a lesson hard pressed into her since infancy.

Still, she watched them say their nightly praise to the Emperor, and then slip into their beds. And then, once the lights were off, the children asleep, Mary made a routine of visiting the directrix in her office.

First, to ensure the woman's discomfort—she wanted Zelda to know that she had the upper hand here, that even in her position of authority, Zelda answered to Mary first and foremost—and second, because there was an odd draw to the woman. Something, deep in her psyche knew Zelda Spellman, and she wanted to understand why.

So they discussed their day, going over classes where Mary would make comments and Zelda would hold her tongue, picking at her words, looking for holes in the statement. She wondered if Zelda could feel it too, the connection—but she didn't dare ask. That was something she'd keep for herself. But a strange desire grew in her, hungry to explore whatever connection that was. A need to *dissect* Zelda Spellman

The nights passed her, the days went by and Mary stood as an educator in English and History. And with that, slowly, the children grew relaxed.

*Too* relaxed with her. But Mary had always had that effect on children, an easily approachable demeanour that put them at ease.

It was Daphne's mistake—she questioned the Emperor, and Mary couldn't have that.

"I don't like her," Marie said referring to the absent teacher in the room. Mary had taken over the English and History classes, it gave time for them both to run over administration. To gossip. And at times, sit over a game of backgammon, discussing the future. There were moments where Zelda felt a hum of something familiar, a domestic bliss around Marie that soon faded as the Imp's memories told her firmly that Marie was *only* a friend and

colleague—whatever romance she'd concocted was her own loneliness reaching out for connection.

It wasn't true of course, and if Zelda looked beyond her own fears, she'd see the woman reaching back, but the Imp was wicked, sowing deceit with the fears it found deep within her.

"We should have her removed. Before she hurts one of the children," Marie informed her with the familiar Haitian lilt softening the anger but making no less impact on Zelda's pride.

"And what am I meant to do?" She asked, placing her tea down. Marie only stared at her, leaning back in the opposing chair with a quirked brow.

"There's something *wrong* with her. Broken. She will destroy these children and all you've worked to build here."

Zelda agreed. The past few evenings with Mary she couldn't shake a deep, ingrained discomfort with the woman—and yet, at the same time, there was a power and influence about her that was...annoyingly fascinating. Mary held herself with strange confidence that Zelda despised herself for admiring—she hated how it affected her, and loathed all the more her prickling awareness whenever the woman was nearby.

"We could always..." Marie paused, looking to the doorway.

Zelda shook her head. "The only way is to ruin her reputation with the Emperor. We don't have any influence with him to even *place* such a seed in his mind." She sighed, sitting back in her chair. What she wanted, what she needed was a cigarette, but as of late she'd been burning through them faster than she could roll them. Not even caffeine could soothe her.

Zelda glanced over the array of paperwork before her and felt a tightness in her chest. She was exhausted. She barely slept in the evenings, ever concerned that Mary was stalking through the halls, searching for secrets as an excuse to drag one of the children to the damned chopping block.

It terrified her to know she was utterly defenceless against her.

"Madam Spellman!" She looked up as her office doors were pushed open, and Melvin ran into the room, gasping for breath. "Wardwell—!" He said.

Zelda rose to her feet, feeling a coldness wash over her body. "Wardwell did *what*?" She asked.

Melvin looked up, panting as his face looked up at her terrified. "She's about to cane Daphne."

Zelda didn't wait for clarity on the situation. To her, there was nothing else to be said as she thundered down the halls of the Academy and pushed open the classroom door.

The classroom was quiet, but there, standing before the blackboard was Mary Wardwell, cane in grip as Daphne stood before her, hands outstretched, palms up as she shook.

Mary paused, though the cane was held firmly in her hand, it was hardly in a position to strike—likely the woman was terrorising her students by making a slow game of the threat.

“Ms Wardwell?”

“*Instructrix* Wardwell, dear,” she said back with a sickly sweet smile and a tilt of her head. “May I inquire as to the interruption?”

Zelda felt the fury pulse through her. Mary *knew*, she knew why she was there, why she was stopping this. “I believe the inquiry should be as to what *do you think you’re doing?*” Zelda said, her jaw gritted by the end of the sentence. Mary blinked at her, and there was some false confusion on her face as she shifted so her whole body faced her.

“I should think it’s plainly obvious. But if you insist, I am *teaching*.”

“I handle any insubordination in this school, as you well know.”

“I believe, per your school handbook which Marie kindly provided me, under sections: punishments, article 1 they are to be a) handled *in loco parentis* by the primary educator who bore witness, or b) handled by the director should an escalation be required if the primary educator is unavailable or bore no witness to the event. That is, unless...you’re advising that the handbook I was provided was outdated?”

Zelda swallowed, in truth, she hadn’t looked at the blasted thing in... (there her thoughts paused as the word *centuries* was whispered before she corrected it to *decades*). “I see, well we do *not* allow caning.”

“Mm, I believe you need to review your handbook, directrix. Corporal punishment is specifically designated as being acceptable. But perhaps this isn’t an appropriate place to discuss—why doesn’t Marie take over the class for me, and then you and I may discuss the appropriate solution with Ms Wormwood.”

Daphne blinked, her eyes looking to Zelda and Mary both and Zelda felt her heart thud in her chest.

“There’s no reason Daphne should be a part of this,” Zelda advised tightly, scrambling for her position of authority that Mary had so smoothly stolen from her. “Punishment isn’t decided by the child.”

Mary smiled and a chill slid down Zelda’s back. “As you wish,” Mary said.

Mary brought her cane. It felt warm and light in her hands as she carried it down the hall towards Zelda’s office.

Everything she’d done over the last week had been leading her to this moment, ever since that first meeting with the Directrix.

Zelda held the door open for her and as Mary stepped in, she felt the familiar crackle of energy pass between them. Zelda despised her. It was evident on the sharp, muted expression she wore, that a fury burned inside of her at Mary's *alleged* infraction—though Mary had been careful to read the handbook, and had it not be there, she would have reached out to Faustus who would have certainly granted her the power to conduct the preferred punishments at her desire.

She stepped into the room, standing in the centre of the room as she turned and waited for Zelda to stand before her. This wasn't a conversation to be had sitting.

"I will now allow you to cane students," Zelda said as the door clicked shut behind her. She stepped towards her, chin lifted up, gaze steady and Mary smiled as she watched the absolute need and desperation, rolling off Zelda to enforce her withering authority.

Zelda wanted to be powerful here. But Mary could sense the insecurity festering in her, a question to where her authority, and stood.

"You don't have any rights to change that," Mary reminded her. "All changes to school handbooks need to be approved by the Emperor. You could reach out through to the appropriate channels and see if you could petition a change, but that will take anywhere between three to six months, non-inclusive of revisions, of course."

"Of course," Zelda sneered. "And to what effect does *caneing* provide—there's substantial evidence to the fact that corporal punishment has a negative effect towards *actually*—"

"I know," Mary sighed. "I'm not doing it because it's an evidence-based form of punishment."

Zelda paused and Mary watched as her expression paled. "You're not...?"

"No," Mary confirmed and blinked watching at Zelda echoed a similar stance. She could see Zelda running through her fears, checking them off in her head one-by-one to see if she could come to some answer, some final response that would have her able to pull the argument in her favour of avoiding the inflicted corporal punishment on students, but she couldn't.

Mary knew she had everything exactly as she wanted.

"Please," Zelda said, her voice so small Mary almost didn't hear her. There was a look of defeat, her chin lowering in a subtle act of submission. "The children have been through so much, they've lost too much. I can't let this place become so corrupted and pain-filled for them."

"Then I suppose we're at an impasse, hmm?" Mary said.

"Mary—" and there it was, the choked plead in Zelda's voice. Desperation for anything to occur except what Mary had promised.

She almost made this too easy.

“Unless...” Mary said, letting the word hang in the air, watching as Zelda’s gaze held hers, a spark of hope in them. “It’s...unusual, and perhaps...not necessarily the correct reading of the handbook, but it did mention that for some students where corporal punishment was unlikely fair the appropriate response, then perhaps a whipping boy—or *girl*, in this case—is to be arranged. Someone who *could* take on the punishment.”

Zelda paused, before flatly responding, “You want to punish me, instead?”

Mary didn’t respond, but the excitement of knowing Zelda was baited, that she was there on the hook, waiting to be reeled in was enough to make Mary hold her breath, a grin threatening to spill over her face.

“And what do you say, Zelda?” She purred, stepping closer.

Zelda paused, a flush on her cheek as she looked away. “Do they have to know?”

“We can be discreet,” Mary assured. “And you can arrange appropriate punishments for them as you wish—but know that if this doesn’t work, if I feel the students are not acting appropriately, this falls on you and eventually...it may be taken to the Emperor.”

A pause held, and she watched as Zelda swallowed. “I understand,” she said, her voice hoarse in response. “I accept.”

## Chapter End Notes

Understandably, this isn't for everyone, but ah...yeah. We're gonna get a Zelda caning.

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