# Heroine? Saint? NO, I'M AN All-Work's Maid (And Proud of It)!

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NOVEL 2



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# Heroine? Saint? NO, I'M AN All-Works Maid (And Proud of It)!

NOVEL 2


WRITTEN BY
Atekichi

ILLUSTRATED BY
Yukiko



Airship

*Seven Seas Entertainment*

Heroine? Saint? No, I'm an All-Works Maid (And Proud of It)!
(Light Novel) Vol. 2
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Illustrations by Yukiko
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# CHARACTERS



## Melody (Celesty)

A former Japanese girl who became a maid working in the employ of House Rudleberg, utterly oblivious to her saintly role as the heroine of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths.*



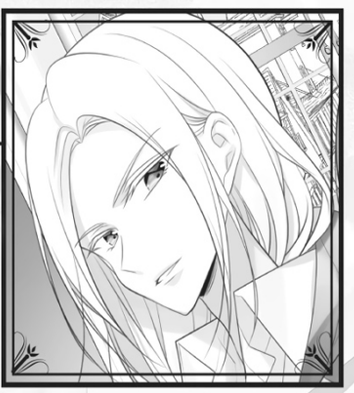
## Luciana

Firstborn of House Rudleberg. Once an Ignoble could-have-been, now a spritely Fae Princess thanks to Melody's magic touch. Wields the mighty harisen.



## Lectias

The third love interest within the otome game Melody now inhabits. The unfortunate proprietor of feelings for (and knowledge of) his lord's long-lost daughter.



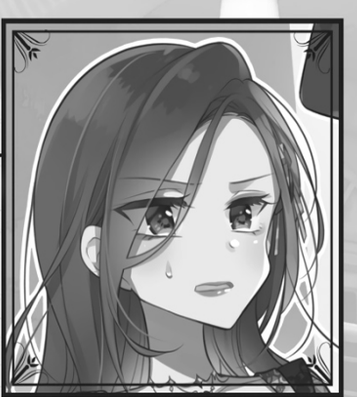
## Maxwell

The second love interest of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths.* Friend of Melody's, heir to Marquess Reclentos, and potential future lord chancellor.



## Christopher

Otome cover boy and main route. Crown prince of Theolas and reincarnated soul with knowledge of future events.



## Anna-Marie

The foil to the heroine—villainess of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*—also reincarnated and doing her damnedest to steer the world toward a happy ending.



## Bjork

Love interest number four. Once a puppet for the Dark One, now...an anomaly.

# Prologue

"HI, GRANDMA! I CAME TO SEE YOU!"

A young girl bounced into a hospital room where an elderly woman sat up in bed.

"Thank you very much, Yurika."

For her sixtieth birthday, Kurita Maika had received a most unwelcome gift—a lengthy hospital stay due to a chronic condition. After several days here, her sincerest hope was that the next round of tests would clear her to return home. Even so, her granddaughter had made time to visit. Such a sweet girl.

Maika smiled. "You're a sight for sore eyes, dear."

Yurika smiled back shyly. "I was actually just in the neighborhood. Thought I'd stop by."

"Running errands? Is that what you've got in your hand there?"

Yurika held a bag up.

"Ah. A new game, is it?" Maika asked.

"I already have this game, actually. This is the fanbook," Yurika said as she presented her prize.

Maika's eyes widened as she accepted the book. "*The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*? Where in the world did you…"

Maika remembered that game from her own childhood. It had been a favorite of hers. But today the sight of that particular game twisted her stomach, for that title had cost her her own brother, Kurita Hideki, and his closest friend, Asakura Anna.

The makers of the game once ran a sweepstakes and sent the winners, including Hideki and Anna, to England, but their plane never landed. It was still missing, in fact.

"There's a remake out," Yurika said.

"A remake?"

"Yeah, apparently a bunch of old fans got their hands on the license and revived it. They're sprucing it up to be more

modern, but the direction's very respectful to the original vision. It's got good reviews online."

"The artwork *is* very reminiscent," Maika mused.

"I heard they have the daughter of the original artist working on it. And there was this one interview where she talks about how much she loved it as a kid, so she was on board pretty much as soon as they pitched the idea to her."

Maika hummed in acknowledgment as she thumbed through the fanbook. The property must have been over four decades old now; she'd been in junior high school when she played it. It was surreal to watch her granddaughter follow in her footsteps. For an instant, Maika wanted to brag about precedence and other such vapid points of pride.

"How the time flies," she chuckled. "Oh?" Maika stopped flipping through the book, pausing on a two-page spread. "Isn't this the heroine? But… No, it must be."

Cecilia Leginbarth. A silver-haired, lapis lazuli-eyed maiden born a commoner, then uplifted to ladyhood when her father, Count Leginbarth, adopted her following her mother's passing. A romantic love story would follow, set in a sprawling academy.

But that was not the girl Maika saw in the illustration. What she saw was a black-haired, dark-eyed girl in a *maid outfit*. And who was the blonde girl she was serving tea to?

Whoever they were, they looked quite close.

"Apparently that's old concept art that the first artist never released," Yurika said.

"The artist from *my* day?" Maika asked.

"They found it recently, and the devs argued about it for a while. In the end, they figured it was just some scrapped idea hatched during the preproduction stage and not super relevant to the final game."

"I see…"

Maika found herself stroking the hair of the girl in the picture. The image brought her a strange sense of relief. A happy ending awaited the heroine, of course, but not without an entire narrative's worth of loneliness and hardship. Before attaining

happiness, she would lose a mother, struggle to connect with her father, and nearly drown in high society, only to be thrust into a legendary battle between good and evil. Hers was not an easy life.

And yet, there was something about the girl in the picture. Something that did not speak to despair or strife, but joy and love. How, Maika wondered, might her story have gone?

"I'll go buy us some drinks," Yurika said. "Want anything, Grandma?"

"Tea would be perfect, sweetie. Black or green, either's fine."

As Yurika scurried out of the room, Maika sank back in the bed, hugging the book to her chest. She let out a quiet breath and shut her eyes.

*A remake, huh?* She giggled to herself. *Maybe I'll check it out once I'm finally out of this room.*

Her mind flashed back to simpler days in another lifetime—a lifetime in which the three of them would sit together and argue about which dialogue options to pick. Hideki would always choose the most ridiculous one, and Maika would roll her eyes every time. Then she'd share a glance with Anna. Without fail, they would all break out into smiles.

"I miss you guys," she muttered. "So much."

Sleep came without warning.

Something was wrong.

*When did the bed get so…cold? And hard?*

Had she rolled over and fallen onto the floor? Maika blinked her eyes open, groaning. "Wha…?"

She blinked again. And again. The world around her did not change.

There was no hospital bed. No bed at all. No *room*. And she wasn't on the floor. She was sprawled on the ground, dirt and all.

"What? Where… What is this? What's—whose voice is this?"

Stranger and stranger. The voice that emerged from Maika in her bewilderment was not her own. Hers had been low and gravely, worn from sixty long years of use. This one, however, had the timbre of child—shrill and youthful.

She tested it again. “That’s definitely me talking. I think. Where on earth am I, anyway?”

Maika stood and surveyed her surroundings. People were here, or at least they used to be. Stone towered around her, all of it in a crumbling state of disrepair. It was like a stone slum, the sort she’d only seen in movies. There was certainly nothing so desolate in Japan.

The abandoned stone edifices reared up around her. The windows and doors lay far out of reach for even the tallest adults. Who could possibly have lived in such a place?

*I just don’t get it,* she agonized. *Where is this? Why am I here? I must be dreaming.* She pinched her cheek to be sure. *Okay. Not dreaming.*

Maika rubbed her cheek, mind racing from one possibility to the next, each more frightening than the last. The unknown could poison the human psyche, and Maika was beginning to succumb.

Secrets lurked in the shadows of every empty dwelling. Maika held her breath and remained silent for fear of who—or what—might be listening.

In the midst of her cowering, she remembered her granddaughter, her dear granddaughter who’d come to visit her.

*Oh no, please don’t tell me she’s here too. If anything happened to my sweet… My sweet…*

Maika could not remember. She could not remember her name. She could not remember her face. Nothing. With each passing second, she seemed to remember less.

“What? No, but I…I am Kurita Maika. I just turned sixty, and I…I…”

The memories slipped away like sand between her fingers. First her sixtieth birthday, then her wedding, the birth of her daughter, her granddaughter’s enrollment in junior high school… She could perceive their absence, knew such memories existed,

but the details evaded her. All the things that defined her and the latter half of her life vanished behind a veil of fog.

"I remember junior high. Everything up to then. I have all of that. But why? What's happening?" Once-hazy childhood memories sharpened like photos coming into focus, while her adulthood faded into obscurity. "I-I'm confused. What is this? Mom... Oniisan? Anna-oneechan?!"

Unbeknownst to her, Maika's speech devolved as her panic increased. As her adulthood disappeared, so too did her maturity and poise.

Tears welled in her eyes. In an attempt to stymie them, she hung her head—and was met with a new shock: her feet. Before, she'd been wearing hospital socks, but now her feet were bare. Moreover, these...were not her feet.

"Wh-what? These are a child's feet." Maika frantically felt her body. With each touch, her eyes grew wider, and the certainty grew. She was, in fact, a child. "What? How?"

Words failed her. She stared down at a pair of small, dainty hands attached to stumpy, frail arms, neither of which belonged to a grown adult. Her clothes, too, were tiny. Ragged. They belonged on a street urchin.

The pieces clicked into place all at once. The buildings were not large; she was small.

*What is happening, what is happening,* someone *tell me what is happening!* Maika started to flail. *So I have the body of a child and the mind of an adult now?! What manga is this?!*

One series in particular came to mind. It was particularly vivid among her fresh junior high school memories, a popular and long-running franchise. The only question was who had drugged her and forced her into this body—as if!

She tried to get her thoughts back on track. *I wasn't just de-aged, though. I mean, what is this hair?! Why is it pink?!*

Every time it swayed into her periphery, she did a double take. Her long black locks—once her pride and joy—had been replaced by a ragged, rosy bob.

*Seriously, what am I?! The super fighting leader of a team of magical girls?!*

This time, a Sunday morning anime popped into her mind. In the world of one of those shows, even Japan boasted a whole crayon box worth of hair colors. Children and adult men alike flocked to such shows.

Maika knew what she was doing. She was taking detours through recollections to delay the inevitable.

But reality soon caught up.

She wept when it did. “Wh-where… Where am I?! What’s happening?!”

Thick tears trickled down her cheeks and fell to the dirty alley below. As if inspired by the display, the sky opened up as well. The downpour did little to settle the girl. Nothing calmed her until she ran out of tears and regained some sense of composure.

She glanced down into a newly formed puddle. A pink-haired girl stared back. Even in the rippling puddle, the girl looked young, younger than Maika might have guessed. About ten or so.

Maika did not recognize her. She saw through her eyes, but this girl was *not* Kurita Maika.

Just as fresh wails bubbled up in her throat, she felt a tug on her arm.

“Wh-who’s there?!”

“Follow,” said the stranger.

A young boy with a messy mop of purple hair guided her. He, too, wore filthy rags. He kept one hand firmly around Maika’s arm, while the other clenched a broken sword.

Fear seized Maika’s chest. Broken or not, a blade was a weapon, and this boy was not a kind-looking fellow. This was not the sort of place where kind fellows loitered in the first place. Every ounce of common sense she retained from her former life in Japan screamed at her to run.

“L-let me go,” Maika stammered.

“This is no place for a child,” the boy responded.

“What?” she said.

The boy only tugged again, harder this time. Maika had no choice but to walk.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked.

“Somewhere safe,” he assured. “Not here.”

Where was “here,” anyway? Perhaps Maika had been right in her initial assumption that this was a slum.

“They were watching you cry,” the boy said.

Maika croaked. Who were “they?” Where were they hiding?

“Once you started up again, they would have taken you,” the boy explained.

“So…you rescued me, then,” Maika said.

The boy did not answer, but neither did he loosen his grip on her.

The fear retreated. “Th-thank you, sir, but why are you helping me?”

Again, he did not answer. He didn’t seem like the talkative type. When at last he spoke, his voice was low. “A child in tears is a child in need. Or so my mother and father taught me.”

He quickly returned to his reticence.

“They sound like good people,” Maika said.

“They were.”

Maika winced at his use of past tense. At once, she guessed his story, why he was dressed as he was, why he stalked such dark streets.

“We’re here,” he announced.

“Huh?”

The boy pushed her forward. They had left the slums and returned to the world of the living. Here, the sun climbed just above the horizon to shine on a medieval European townscape where citizens strolled up and down busy streets. The sight of life eased Maika’s heart. There was still so much she didn’t understand, but this at least allowed her a moment to breathe.

Even the rain had stopped.

“Um, thank you again… Huh?” Maika turned, but the boy was already gone, vanished into thin air. “He didn’t go back, did he?” No sooner had they left those slums than he turned right back toward them. The unease threatened to creep up Maika’s spine again. “At least I won’t be kidnapped, but he could have stuck around a little longer.”

Maika stared down the road stretching into the slums. Here was far better than there, but it was no less foreign. The boy couldn’t have known that. He couldn’t have known that she was, in fact, an old woman who had been in a hospital bed only moments prior. To him, Maika was just a little girl in need of rescuing, and he’d done exactly that.

She leaned against a nearby wall and grunted. “Sure, I get it, but would it have killed him to ask who I was or what I was doing here?”

Maika was quick to turn gratitude into grievance, at least in this particular case. Thankfully, there were more generous souls in the world.

“My, are you all right, little one?” a woman asked.

Maika made for a dramatic sight, propped up against a wall as she was.

“Do you need help?” the woman asked.

Maika met the woman’s worried gaze. She dressed like a nun, unmistakable and striking, like something out of an anime. And she was gorgeous.

The girl could have sworn she knew this woman. *Have I seen her before?*

“Are you in pain, child?” the woman asked.

“Oh, um, n-no…” Her mouth flapped like she couldn’t decide what to say.

The sister examined Maika, looking her up and down. She seemed to glean something. “You’ve nowhere to go.”

Maika stuttered something. The woman was sharp, or perhaps Maika was slow. She remembered her attire and considered the fact that children with somewhere to go didn’t often give off the impression of a rat.

The woman smiled softly. “I’ll give you a home, if you’d like. I have an orphanage. You will have food and a place to rest there.” She offered her hand.

After much hesitation, Maika decided she would do well not to look a gift horse in the mouth. “Th-thank you.”

“You’re most welcome. Call me Annabelle. Sister Annabelle.”

“Thank you, Sister Annabelle.”

Her savior’s magnanimous smile filled Maika with intense relief. She was safe at last.

But something kept nagging at the back of her mind.

*I swear I’ve seen her before.* She dug and dug through her memories, but none produced that woman’s face. *I would have remembered a pale blonde beauty like her.*

Perhaps the memory lay among the many forgotten from her adulthood. Try as she might to recover it, however, Maika would find no answers that day. She would continue to fail so long as she kept searching in the wrong places, for Maika had not seen the nun’s face on a living person. But the truth of Maika’s circumstances—the truth of this world she found herself in—would not reveal itself for some time yet.

Once it did, it would not be long before her fateful meeting with a certain maid.

# Chapter 1:
# A New Face in House Rudleberg

**S**PRING—THE SEASON OF GENTLE WEATHER and refreshing breezes. Already, the pleasant, mild temperatures burned away as June encroached, only a sunrise away.

"Do you have everything, dear? Not forgetting anything, are you?"

"No, Mother, I have not misplaced anything in the five minutes since you last asked me that."

Luciana rolled her eyes, a gesture Marianna did not appreciate. The Rudleberg capital estate foyer hosted their altercation that morning.

"I'll not soon forget the incident during the opening ceremony. You told me you had everything then too, young lady," Marianna said with a teasing grin.

Her daughter let out an entirely unladylike grunt of embarrassment. "I-I thought maids were supposed to respect their family's privacy, Melody!" she blurted in a flustered frenzy.

The maid at her side simply smiled. "That they are, my lady. Unfortunately, I am similarly obligated to report household happenings to Her Ladyship, as she is lady of the house."

"Great, throw the lady of the house's daughter under the carriage then!"

Melody Wave—House Rudleberg's maid of all work, fifteen years old, once a Japanese girl and now the unwitting heroine of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*. Her name *should* have been Cecilia Leginbarth; however, having no knowledge of the otome game her new world was based on, Melody had instead chosen to pursue her previous life's dream and become a maid.

This seemingly minor divergence would have sweeping—and, frankly, absurdly convenient—consequences for the game's original plot.

Luciana herself was the perfect example of the scale of Melody's unintentional tampering. Normally, her role would

have been to succumb to the circumstances of her birth and be consumed by jealousy for the heroine, thus serving as a mid-boss in the game. Thanks to Melody and her preposterously fantastical maid magic, however, Luciana avoided that gruesome fate. She now lived a comfortable life, was best friends with the heroine she was meant to hate, and would be fighting by her side in no time soon.

Whoever orchestrated this world, if such a person existed, had done a masterfully poor job at casting its characters. A dark-haired, fanatical maid junkie currently occupied the place intended for a lead heroine.

“No one’s throwing you under any carriage.” Marianna’s husband, Hughes, count and patriarch of House Rudleberg, spectated the debate from a safe distance.

The foyer buzzed with activity this morning as Luciana prepared to move into Royal Academy’s new dormitories.

Two months ago, tragedy struck during the annual Spring Ball on the night of the opening ceremony for the incoming class. An unknown attacker made an attempt on His Highness the Crown Prince’s life, and although the incident miraculously ended without bloodshed, it shook the realm. In the name of safety and peace of mind, the new term had been delayed. Tomorrow would be the academy’s long-awaited reopening, complete with newly constructed dorms for students. What once had been a voluntary system for commoners seeking room and board was now compulsory for all students, commoner or otherwise, including Luciana.

It was an experiment in security. With all relevant parties consolidated on campus, the academy hoped they could more easily deal with trespassers.

As it happened, the dormitories were free for commoners, but nobility enjoyed no such leniency. While Hughes’s position at the Royal Chancery had afforded his house a measure of financial stability, the Ignobles’ ignobility left a lasting stench. These were unforeseen expenses, ones that would hurt the count’s coffers.

But appearances were everything for nobility. Should the need arise to scrape the bottom of the proverbial barrel, Hughes

was prepared to scrape. Thankfully, the Rudlebergs remained stable, even after boarding fees.

“You’d best make full use of your time in those dormitories, Luciana,” he said. Which was to say, of course, she had better make the most of his investment.

“I-I’m not sure what you mean, Father, but I will. Do my best, that is.” Luciana flinched at the fire burning in her father’s eyes.

“Don’t be uncouth, darling,” his wife admonished him. “Melody, our daughter is in your hands.”

“I will see to it that she’s cared for, Your Ladyship.” The maid, who would attend Royal Academy alongside Luciana, offered her mistress a most perfect curtsy. “I’ve checked and double-checked Lady Luciana’s luggage myself. All should be in order...so long as she doesn’t empty it all out again.”

Her lady huffed. “Can we *please* drop it?! It was two months ago!”

Luciana would never live down the incident where she removed her things from her bag to verify the contents for herself, only to leave behind her letter of acceptance prior to the opening ceremony. Luciana wished everyone would forget. The reminder turned her a fierce shade of red. But no one in that room was likely to forget; they loved to see her flustered.

Marianna nodded, satisfied with Melody’s thoroughness, then rested her cheek against her hand and sighed. “It’s a shame we never managed to find new help.”

“Who could have predicted hiring even a single servant would prove so arduous?” Hughes replied.

The Rudlebergs’ estate in the capital employed but one maid: Melody. With her attending Royal Academy with Luciana, the estate would need new maids to see to the manor’s upkeep. Alas, not a single soul had answered the Rudlebergs’ request at the guild.

Unfortunately, this came as no surprise. Two generations prior, the blunders of an old Count Rudleberg had saddled his house with the title “Ignoble.” Melody had done what she could to mitigate the consequences of past mistakes, but much of the

nobility continued looking down their noses at the “Ignoble” Rudlebergs.

Far be it from Melody, however, to leave her house in chaos.

“Your carriage awaits, my lady,” said the maid.

“Thank you, Melody,” Luciana said. “Well, I guess this is it. Mother, Father. Keep an eye on them, would you, Serena?”

“Yes, my lady,” replied a young woman standing a respectful distance off to the side.

Serena had a slightly more mature countenance than Melody but wore the same uniform save for the headpiece. Melody kept her hair pinned up and concealed it beneath a cap, while Serena wore a lacy headdress. Long chestnut hair cascaded past her shoulders, a heart-shaped silver ornament shimmering on her neck.

Hers was a much more fashionable style, like a parlormaid, in contrast to Melody’s modest appearance. All the better for entertaining guests.

Lord and Lady Rudleberg’s comments might have sounded mad in light of the presence of this additional maid. What need had they of extra help when clearly they had it right here?

“She really is beautiful,” Marianna said. “It’s difficult to believe she’s a doll.”

“You flatter me.”

Serena smiled. To anyone else’s eyes, she was nothing but a beautiful maiden, but those present knew better. After all, they had witnessed her creation firsthand. They knew her architect well.



“The estate is in your hands while I’m away, Serena,” Melody said. “Treat it as I would.”

“Yes, Gentlesister. I shan’t sully my creator’s name.”

That architect being Melody, of course.

Melody created the arcane doll known as Serena in the latter half of May.

It happened on a day when Luciana ordered Melody to rest and would hear no arguments to the contrary. The maid had been working nonstop since her employment began, and as the estate’s sole servant at that. Her lady would not have it. She refused to be taken for a slave driver. And so she kicked Melody out.

Melody proceeded to have quite a splendid time strolling about the capital with a young girl she happened to meet, but that’s neither here nor there.

The crux of this story lay with the doll Melody found at a market. It was a cute little fabric thing with chestnut hair and azure eyes. Inspiration struck like a bolt of lightning.

If help would not come to the Rudlebergs, why not make their own?

Melody had been quick to accept magic’s place in her new world. She was, perhaps, spoiled on it. It was only a matter of time before she started stirring cauldrons, really.

The day following her respite, she set to work bringing the inanimate doll to life.

“We have a vessel,” she murmured. “But a brain… Yes, I can make that work.”

Melody scrutinized the doll on her desk closely, her mind racing. She theorized that the process would be much like designing a robot, only with magic rather than circuitry. In that line of thinking, hardware was worthless without the software to make it run. Thankfully, she had a solution.

She already had a spell that could create autonomous individuals out of magic—Alter Ego. Though each clone carried only a fraction of her power, they were perfect copies and could

act, think, and move just as Melody would. It was not a huge leap to utilize that technique in the synthesis of an entirely new being.

But why go to such trouble? Why not settle for a clone? The reason was simple: Clones could only function so long as Melody was conscious. As soon as she laid her head down to sleep at the academy, the estate would be Melodyless. Every morning, she would have to create new clones and then send them on their way, and that simply wasn't practical. Not impossible; simply impractical.

A maid automaton was the obvious answer.

"Life unto nothing—*Nouveau Cuore*!"

With a wave of her hands, the doll began to glow. Melody erased her memories and scrambled the personality of her clone so that not even she would know its nature. She did not want a slave but a creature with free will who could exercise its own judgment. A colleague. It felt wrong to dictate another's heart.

Granted, Melody was sure to place maidliness at the forefront of the creation's priorities, together with typical social and moral standards. She was not out to unleash a violent freeloader on the world, after all. And without maidliness, well, this entire endeavor would have been decidedly pointless.

But then the light went out. Melody frowned. Back to the drawing board.

"Maybe a doll isn't enough to retain mana. I need something to hold it. A core of some kind."

As with the rethreading spell, Melody could manipulate fabric with mana, but only to a limited extent. A single toy doll simply wasn't a receptive enough vessel to maintain enough magic to replicate the thoughts and feelings of a living human person.

Luciana and her parents never went without defensive charms on their clothing, and such spells were certainly potent, but defense was the mana's only charge. Simple materials lent themselves to simple tasks. Gemstones and metals conducted magical energy far better and thus could conduct more complex

spells. Melody had hoped the stones in the doll's eyes would suffice for her purposes, but no such luck.

"I'll have to find something else to act as a catalyst. If I can find the time... Goodness, I should be in the forest gathering ingredients! Gateway—*Ovunque Porta*!"

A humble door appeared before her, and Melody entered what she considered her own personal grocery store, but what most knew as the largest and most dangerous blightland in the world: the Great Vanargand Wood.

There, she was quick to resolve her conundrum.

"Now what's this?"

As Melody scavenged for herbs and mushrooms, she stumbled upon something out of place: an old, old silver pedestal.

"Some kind of relic, maybe? It looks decades—maybe *hundreds* of years old."

The thing desperately needed a polishing; it was horribly deteriorated, so blackened that only vestiges of the actual silver remained. What intricate embellishments had once adorned it lay beneath a layer of grime. It had a small opening at its head, a slit that looked like the perfect place to sheathe a sword. But the sword was nowhere to be found.

"These blemishes must be rust. Or silver sulfide, rather."

Silver did not actually rust, but it could tarnish. Silver sulfide was the chemical substance that resulted from the process. It stained the surfaces of jewelry, silverware, and the like due to sulfur compounds in the air (typically from car exhaust or even hot springs). This downside was a blessing in disguise for many nobles—aristocratic families often preferred silver tableware because it could easily detect poisonous substances, which were frequently sulfuric or arsenic in nature.

The Rudlebergs, of course, being one such family of nobles.

"I've never seen anyone else come through here. Maybe this used to be some sort of religious site?"

Melody studied the pedestal, unable to contain her curiosity.

“I know. I should give this a good cleaning. It’s the least I can do for how much use I’ve gotten out of these woods. Elements obey—*Ele-Dominio*.”

The blackened pedestal drew in light, and the light divided itself into tiny sections like a glowing tortoise shell. Moments later, a piece clicked out of place, floated into the air, and scattered together with the blemishes on the pedestal. This repeated for every section of the shell of light until the pedestal shimmered once more. When the process was done, the pedestal stood mighty and regal, glowing not by magic but by virtue of its own luster.

Melody’s Ele-Dominio spell was a powerful one, even compared to the rest of her arsenal of maid magic. It could disassemble, reform, and reorganize bonds at the atomic level, turning water into steam without heat and forming ice without cold, or even separating each individual molecule into oxygen and hydrogen.

In this case, she simply altered the chemical makeup of the outer layer of the pedestal, broke down the sulfide tarnishing it, and returned the silver to its former luster. In many, many other cases, such magic had far more dangerous applications. Needless to say, any modern human would have been horrified by the implications, as nothing prevented someone with such a power from, for example, causing oxidative stress or deterioration within the human body. This power could rapidly age someone or shut down entire organs.

Any sane person would have seen the danger inherent in such magic and perhaps even spurned it.

“There! Perfect. I would have liked to take a toothbrush to it and use some good old-fashioned elbow grease, but I really should be getting back to the estate.”

Melody, however, was not any sane person. Thankfully for the denizens of her world, maids interested her far more than body horror. Ironic that the obsession which gave birth to such horrifying magic was in itself the limit on its full potential.

Hypothetical weapons of mass destruction aside, Melody observed the pedestal with renewed interest. “Wait. There’s magic circulating in here. It’s faint, but I can feel it. Why is it…?”

Perhaps the site *had* been a religious one. There was something arcane about it. Vaguely so. It possessed an aimless, but nonetheless apparent, energy. What struck Melody most starkly, though, was how the mana seemed to harmonize with her own.

“Yeah. This is the most receptive material I’ve *ever* cast a spell on. I wonder...”

Melody pressed her hands against the pedestal, drawing the mana within it to one corner, then breaking that piece off. Only when she went to gather it did she realize what she’d done.

“Oh my gosh, wait, what if this was here for a reason?!”

What if it had been sealing something or was the source of a greater magic that suffused the entire forest? Melody whipped her head around, tentatively waiting for something bad to happen.

“Th-there wasn’t *that* much mana in it, so it can’t have been *that* important. Whatever it was here for, it’s probably not even doing it anymore. Right?” she asked no one in particular.

She didn’t like taking from what was likely a historical or cultural site, but she *did* need that piece of silver quite badly.

Melody gave the pedestal another glance. With all of its energy concentrated in her fragment, it almost appeared duller, like its light had gone out. After a few seconds of reverential silence, she bowed and offered the monument an apology, then returned to the estate.

That night, after dinner, she prepared to unveil her plan before the family.

“What is this announcement, then?” Hughes asked.

His wife and their daughter watched Melody with bemusement.

“In regards to the current shortage of servants,” Melody began, “I believe I have a solution, my lord.”

“Is this what you were talking about before?” Luciana asked.

The maid replied, “Indeed, my lady.”

“Are you going to introduce us to a new acquaintance?” asked Hughes.

“In a manner of speaking, my lord. Here she is.”

“Where?” the Rudlebergs harmonized.

Melody placed a small doll with a human-sized choker hanging from its neck on the table. On the choker, front and center, sat a lovely little heart made of silver—the very fragment Melody had collected earlier that day.

“I don’t follow,” said Marianna. “What does this doll have to do with our lack of retinue?”

“That will be made clear very shortly, my lady,” Melody replied as she held her hands over the doll. “Life unto nothing—*Nouveau Cuore*!”

The silver heart glowed, bright and refulgent. As the powerful and elaborate magic wove itself into the metal, it seeped also into the doll itself. Nouveau Cuore was based on Alter Ego, so the spell could materialize a body just as well as a mind. The doll began to change—into a fully grown human.

“Back, Father! *Back!*” Luciana wailed.

“Don’t even think about it, darling!” Marianna snapped.

“Th-think about what?!” Hughes cried. “I can hardly see a thing!”

What the spell could *not* create for this newborn person, however, was a set of clothes. As such, the Rudlebergs found themselves with a naked girl on their dining table. Odd, given that the doll had been clothed.

At any rate, the women of the household were quick to protect the doll’s dignity and swiftly blocked Hughes’s view.

Melody, meanwhile, was as shocked as the rest of them. “M…Mother?”

The girl was the spitting image of a younger Selena. She looked about Melody’s age. Perhaps Melody’s memories of her mother had imposed themselves upon the spell, thus altering the creation’s appearance. She had brunette hair and lapis lazuli eyes, just like Selena.

Melody recalled her mother being a maid before her birth. The memory sent a pang of loss stabbing into her chest. Had the magic manifested her subconscious wishes?

The maid stared at the doll, and the doll stared back.

The doll smiled. “Greetings, gentle creator. Might I trouble you for a name?”

And so, Serena was born.

“Melody? You look distracted.” Luciana studied the maid with worry as the carriage jostled along.

Melody shook herself from her reveries. “Apologies, my lady. It’s nothing.”

“Really? It didn’t seem like nothing. Oh, hey, I almost forgot! Look!”

“Hm? Ah, I see.”

Luciana pulled out a small chain hanging around her neck and down the front of her dress and proudly displayed it. A rather cheap-looking ring set with an azure stone dangled from the chain, a souvenir Melody had bought for her during her obligatory vacation.

The lady giggled. “I turned it into a necklace. Cute, huh?”

Luciana never removed this necklace at home, but the quality did not meet noble standards. By placing the ring on a necklace, however, Luciana could wear it at the academy while hiding it under her uniform.

“Oh, my lady…” Melody’s heart swelled. She clapped her hands. “Ah! I should cast Arte Sensitivo on it if you intend to keep it on your person. Your clothing’s been charmed, of course, but one can never be too careful.”

Arte Sensitivo fell along the maidmancy branch of spellcraft. It was best applied to gemstones. The wearer of a stone so imbued would feel a warning if they became the target of malicious intent. Indeed, this very spell had saved the crown prince’s life at the Spring Ball.

“No,” Luciana said. “I’ll do without.”

“My lady?”

“As wonderful as your magic is, I’m going to Royal Academy to learn, and that includes about relationships. A lady should know how to judge character with her own two eyes.”

“My lady…” Once more, Melody’s heart swelled. Any governess would swoon upon hearing her pupil speak such words. “I think that’s an admirable idea. As you wish, then. I will not, however, be dissuaded from the spells on your clothing.”

Luciana giggled. “I didn’t think you would, and those are for safety anyway, which I won’t say no to. On that note, I had something I wanted to discuss with you.”

“Yes?”

“When we get to the academy, I’d like you to refrain from casting any spells at all. To the best of your ability, I mean.”

“Any at all? Oh, but of course. In the spirit of learning.”

“Y-yeah. Learning. You’re okay with that?”

“Perfectly. Actually, the prospect of trying my hand at work without magical handicaps has me rather excited!”

Melody beamed. In truth, Luciana found it quite endearing, even if she couldn’t quite comprehend the thrill of turning a game from very easy to hard mode.

She smiled softly at Melody and let out a quiet sigh of relief. *Well, that went well. I did not want to wait and find out what might happen if she went wild with her magic while we were on campus.* That was one potential nightmare averted, and just in time too. *This wouldn’t be such an issue if I told her the truth about how strong she really is, but…something tells me I shouldn’t.*

# Chapter 2:
# Encounters at the Academy

**A**T THE CENTER OF THE THEOLAN CAPITAL stood a towering monument to the realm and its dominion—the royal palace. Nestled in its bosom: the Paltescian Royal Academy for Higher Learning, the setting for *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*.

Some might criticize the logistics of such positioning. “It is not at all realistic for a hub of activity with so many people coming and going to sit so near the seat of government,” they might say. “It is simply not sound from a security standpoint.” And for them we mourn a lack of suspension of disbelief. This was the world of an otome game, a work of fiction. To nitpick such minutiae is to poison the soul. Historical accuracy and geopolitical concerns were perhaps not quite at the forefront of the minds of those merely seeking to entertain.

Ahem. At any rate, Luciana and her attendant were well on their way to the dorms where they would begin their new lives. After only two months of construction and the removal of the courtyard, grand, sprawling hallways stood ready to serve as the home of every student at Royal Academy. Truly, a magnificent feat, and one that certainly owed something to the wonders of magic. In more mundane lands, like that of real-world Japan, two months might have been barely enough time to begin *planning* such an endeavor. Or perhaps the speedy build had more to do with His Majesty gathering all the realm’s mages and architects and setting them to work around the clock. Their efforts were evident in this marvel of architecture.

They’d constructed six dormitories in total, split between men and women, and then further still by status. Although Royal Academy touted equal treatment of all regardless of peerage, the fact remained that some students expected certain standards of living.

The Common Hall sat lowest and would house those without title at no charge. They would receive free breakfast and dinner, and they could use the modest kitchen included in each room. All told, it was a very comfortable arrangement. First-years

would live on the first floor, second-years on the second, and third-years on the third.

Next in rank was the Lower Hall, where knights, baronets, barons, and viscounts resided. The petty nobility and the least significant of the landed aristocracy. Like the Common Hall, this dorm had three stories, but floors coincided with rank rather than seniority.

The Upper Hall was reserved for families of counts, marquesses, dukes, and royalty. Easily the most resplendent of the three buildings, this dormitory stood five stories tall with the entire top floor set aside for the exclusive use of the royal family.

Both noble halls housed cafeterias more akin to restaurants, though sustainability was not much of a concern. Each residence came equipped with kitchens, and ones of much higher quality than in the Common Hall, which facilitated dining in as desired.

Luciana Rudleberg, being of respectable birth, found herself on the second floor of the Upper Hall. Financial considerations notwithstanding, Rudleberg *was* a landed house and ruled over a countship, and a fairly well regarded one at that. Their standing was not in question in that respect.

“Wow. It’s even bigger than my room back home.” The lady’s mouth hung agape, her head swiveling as she took in the luxurious accommodations.

“Mind your bearing, my lady,” her maid chastised her.

Melody could not fault Luciana entirely, however. Luciana’s room at the estate was a modest thing, her study area occupying the same space as her bed, while her new dorm was comparatively gargantuan, *and* it came with generous areas for cooking and dining. She had not just a bedroom and study, but also a parlor for entertaining guests and a full bathroom.

Lest this become an apartment tour, we shall move on to the dorm’s attached living space for servants. Though smaller than the main area, it too did not want for amenities and came with its own private bathroom and…

Ahem. Moving on, the residence was not actually all that lavish by the standards of a typical count’s daughter. The

Ignobles had merely grown accustomed to humble furnishings.

“Surely your home estate in your demesne is larger than this, though, my lady,” said Melody.

Ignoble or not, House Rudleberg’s countship was generational and old. Save for the blundering patriarch two lords past, theirs was an honest line of counts, so it stood to reason that they’d passed down a manor truly befitting nobility in better times.

“Oh.” Luciana faltered and hesitated. “Well, about that…”

Melody cocked her head. “My lady?”

“I’m sure you remember the story about my great-grandfather. How he sent us into crippling debt and we had to sell a lot of our territory to recover the cost?”

“I do. You told me the day we met. Do you mean to say…?”

“Y-yeah. Our actual estate? It was on land we had to sell.” Luciana laughed awkwardly.

A lord typically chose the largest and most prosperous—that is, the most *valuable*—town in his demesne in which to build his residence. Should that lord fall into debt, and should he fail to deliver on his monetary responsibilities, well, he would have few options to procure the funds. Such had been the fate of House Rudleberg.

“So we had to build something smaller on what land remained,” Luciana continued. “It’s really not much bigger than our place in the capital.”

“I-I see.”

Melody failed to find words that weren’t scathing and directed at her lady’s great-grandfather, so she held her tongue instead.

Overcoming the sudden pall hanging over their conversation, the two quickly set to organizing their belongings in their new space. Rather, *Melody* set to organizing after she gave Luciana a cup of tea and told her to sit still.

“I can help, you know.”

“You’ll do no such thing, my lady. Stay where you are and rest your travel-weary self.”

The maid beamed. Luciana had lost this battle. With an amused sigh, Luciana returned to sipping her tea.

Just as Melody was finishing up, the doorbell chimed. She answered it, only to discover a girl in a maid uniform. Melody stood straight as a board and bowed politely.

“Who do I have the pleasure of speaking with?” Melody asked.

“House Invidia extends its most humble greetings from next door. My lady requests the honor of doing so in person at your earliest convenience.”

“I will speak with my mistress. One moment please.”

Melody gently shut the door and returned to Luciana.

“Someone from House Invidia has come asking if you’d meet her mistress,” she said. “It seems they’re our neighbors. Will you see her?”

“Neighbors? Sure, I’m free.”

“It is generally customary to maintain a facade of poise and schedule such meetings two or three days out, my lady.”

“Well, we’re not going to have time to schedule much of anything after tomorrow, what with lessons complicating things.”

“As you wish, my lady. I will speak with her attendant.”

“Sure thing. Thanks!”

Melody relayed the message, and soon the maid returned with her lady in tow.

“Well met, Lady Luciana of House Rudleberg,” she said. “I am Luna, eldest daughter of Count Invidia. It is my great pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The girl offered a gentle smile. Her hair was blonde like Luciana’s with a touch more brown in it, and a single pigtail framed the left side of her ethereally beautiful face.

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Invidia.”

Luciana guided Luna into the parlor, where they awaited refreshments. Melody arrived with the tea set at once, prepared

the ladies' cups, then respectfully retreated with the Invidia maid.

"Thank you ever so much for seeing me on such short notice, Lady Rudleberg," Luna said.

"I was relieved, really. I was racked with nerves while moving here, you see, so your having come to say hello was a great kindness. And please, call me Luciana."

"You're too kind, Lady Ru… Lady Luciana. Likewise, please call me Luna."

"Well, I can tell you it's a great relief to know my neighbor is someone as lovely as you, Lady Luna."

"The feeling is mutual, I assure you. Here's to a beautiful relationship."

The girls chuckled together. Fancy Luciana had come out in full force and was putting on a good show.

The mood carried throughout the tea party, which concluded without incident. Luna returned to her room, leaving Melody alone with her lady, who wasted no time collapsing onto the living room sofa with a hefty sigh. Melody normally would have chastised such a display, but just this once she pretended she was too busy cleaning to notice.

"Lord, I'm ready to explode," Luciana groaned.

Melody giggled. "If the governess side of me may speak for a moment, I'd just like to say you handled yourself quite well, my lady."

"Did I? Good. Now how am I going to manage talking and acting like that for an entire school day? *That* terrifies me more than the inevitable exams."

"I'm certain you'll do fine. This was your first time meeting, so it's only natural that the conversation was stilted. You'll find a comfortable rapport with your fellow students as you spend more time with them."

Luciana thought of the gentle smile Luna carried on her lips and smiled herself. "I sure hope so."

The setting sun cast a soothing glow through the window, just as warmth filled Luciana's chest—and Melody's, in her own

way.

*That was such a lovely maid attending Luna,* Melody thought wistfully. *Oh, I hope we'll get to know each other better. How I'd love to talk shop with her.*

Luciana savored the sunset-limned profile of her forlorn maid and pretended she wasn't abundantly aware of what ran through Melody's mind.

## Chapter 3:
## Thumbs-Up on the First Day

THE NEXT MORNING, LUCIANA DRESSED AND prepared to set out bright and early. Silver embroidery shimmered on her forest-green blazer, and a pleated skirt stretched tastefully past her knees. Per school rules, she concealed any flashes of bare leg with a pair of black tights. A dark-red ribbon adorned her collar, the mark of a first-year.

It was a striking ensemble, the sort one only sees in the 2D world, complete with anachronisms. Medieval Europe had no blazers, of course, but why bother with historical accuracy when you could look this cute? The designers of this otome game knew what they were doing.

“How do I look, Melody?” Luciana asked.

“Stunning, my lady. Not forgetting anything, are you?”

“Nope, and I made *extra* sure this time!” She tapped her leather schoolbag with a smirk.

Melody furrowed her brow. “You remembered to replace everything you took out, I hope.”

Trust. Difficult to earn, nearly impossible to regain once lost.

“M-maybe I’ll give it one more look. Just in case,” Luciana said.

So she *had* emptied it again.

Luciana opened her bag. A shriek swiftly followed. “I forgot my pencil case!”

A fittingly hectic beginning to what was sure to be a day worthy of a sitcom.

“Oh gosh, I’d never live it down if I was late on my *first day*.”

It had taken far more time than Luciana had hoped to find her elusive pencil case. The dastardly thing had somehow

concealed itself in the nook between her desk and the wall. Thankfully, her early start spared her a most humiliating fate.

The dormitories occupied a corner of campus that used to be the southeastern courtyard. It took only ten minutes to walk from there to the halls of learning to the north where Luciana and her peers would study for the next three years.

The academic building struck quite an imposing figure. A far cry from traditional Japanese architecture, Royal Academy's main hall was a monument of brick and stone bordered by pleasant green shrubbery, like an old, storied British university.

Luciana gaped in amazement, unaware of and unfazed by such comparisons. "It's huge."

Students of all years crowded the road from the dorms. The path was bound to endure heavy traffic now that the academy's entire population resided on campus.

More noticeable was the distinct lack of attendants. Here, nobles would not have their servants to attend to their every need; enjoyment of such luxuries was limited to the dormitories. Only students and instructors could enter the school buildings, with very few exceptions, and it was up to each individual, noble or common-born, to look after themselves during their academic career. Such was the way it had always been, even before the expanded dormitory system.

Practically speaking, it made sense. If one student were allowed a footman to carry their bag, then every student would be allowed their servants, and the halls of learning would quickly become halls of servitude, packed with personal attendants.

Eventually, Luciana recovered from her nerves enough to realize she had been standing stock-still in the middle of the path for far too long. She shook herself and continued on her way, only to be stopped in her tracks again. A throng gathered around the far wall, fighting to get a look at the posting of the class divisions for all three years. Every student funneled into one huge mass, trying to see the lists.

Luciana searched over their heads. "First-years, first-years…"

"Luciana!" came a familiar voice.

“There you are!” came another.

Luciana whipped around, her eyes going wide. “Beatrice! Milliaria! Morning!”

“Morning,” Beatrice replied. The daughter of Viscount Lillertcruz, Beatrice sported a long, chestnut braid.

“Good morning,” said Milliaria, daughter of Baron Faronkalt. Her hair was a serene shade of blue with touches of violet, fine and bouncy, and she had a refined, practiced smile.

They were new nobility, their fathers being the current rulers of territories that had once belonged to the Rudlebergs. But more than that, they were Luciana’s closest friends. Life had forced them apart ever since the Spring Ball, essentially making this their two-month reunion.

“It feels like it’s been forever,” said Luciana.

“Circumstances have certainly conspired to make meeting rather difficult these past months,” Beatrice
said.

“It’s no wonder after what happened at the Spring Ball,” Milliaria said. “I wasn’t allowed out of the estate for an eternity.”

The attack on the academy’s annual tradition had made unsettling waves throughout the kingdom. Following the academy’s lead after the term was delayed, many families forbade their children from leaving home to keep them safe.

“Well, for a month,” she corrected herself. “But still.”

“And then they foisted reviews onto us. If I didn’t know better, I would say it was some kind of conspiracy to keep us from having any fun,” Beatrice griped.

When May rolled around, the academy had sent families textbooks in preparation for term that would resume in June. Though they had to delay the term, they would not let their students’ education fall behind. They instructed every student to review the material they would have missed during the interim. Even those lucky few whose paranoid parents had not yet imprisoned them found themselves ensnared by greater forces yet.

“You can say that again…” Luciana groaned.

“Are you okay?” Beatrice asked.

“I think she’s left us,” Milliaria said.

Luciana stared off into space. Into a now-distant past. Into hell. Flashes of a maid. Spartan lessons. Nightmares. *Some people* made for terrifying tutors.

“Come back, Luciana,” Beatrice called out to her. “We need to check the class listings.”

At last, she snapped awake. “Huh? O-oh. Right. Looks like it’s cleared out a little.”

Milliaria giggled. “I hope we’ll get to be together.” They approached the bulletin board. “Looks like I’m in Class C. Beatrice is B. Luciana is A.”

“Well, that’s that, I suppose. Of course we wouldn’t be so lucky,” said Beatrice.

“You’re kidding me,” Luciana said in response.

Reluctantly, the girls trudged to their respective classrooms.

“Here’s A,” Luciana announced.

“I’m right next door, and Milliaria is just over there,” Beatrice explained. “We’re not very far from each other. We can certainly do lunch together at the very least.”

Luciana let out a relieved sigh. These were her only two friends in the capital. Whatever else happened, she would have lunch as her respite.

She bade them farewell and entered the classroom. Every pair of eyes instantly darted to her. Luciana froze, barely catching a yelp before it leapt from her throat. She glanced at the seating chart on the blackboard and hurried to her desk.

“That’s the Fae Princess,” someone whispered. “From the Spring Ball.”

“I thought she was the Hero Princess,” someone else muttered.

“She’s an Ignoble is what she is,” another hissed.

Luciana earned the title “Fae Princess” at the ball two months prior in reverence to her beauty. “Hero Princess,” on the

other hand, was in honor of her bravery in taking a blow meant for the prince when the unknown assailant attacked.

Since the ball, imaginations had run wild and rumors had swelled, especially because many folks were cooped up at home with nothing better to do. Luciana's classmates could scarcely contain their curiosity, and it showed in the not-so-hushed whispers bubbling up around her. Her reputation as an Ignoble added a twinge of venom to the murmurings. Melody's Arte Sensitivo spell would have proved quite redundant here.

Luciana wished she could turn invisible. It was everything she could do to keep from sighing in public.

Finally, she arrived at her seat, somewhere near the middle of the room next to the window. Women sat to her front and right, a man to her back. All fortunately refrained from gossiping in her presence, and she enjoyed a moment of quiet.

The girl sitting to her right shut the textbook she had been reading and turned. "Greetings. It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Luna, daughter of...Lady Luciana?"

"Lady Luna?"

Who should it be but Count Invidia's daughter herself.

"Well, isn't this a coincidence?" Luna said. "I suppose this makes us neighbors twice over. What a lovely surprise."

"Agreed. I've been a mess of nerves this morning. I can't tell you how glad I am to see a familiar face."

They grinned at each other, and Luciana's tension melted away. *Gosh, her smile. I could stare at it for hours. I'm almost jealous.*

Luna knew how to smile. She wasn't especially pretty, not breathtakingly so anyway, but there was something about her, something charming that Luciana couldn't imitate, even studied as she was under Melody's tutelage. Her smile was tender and bright in the most natural way.

Luciana lowered her guard.

"Once again, it is truly a pleasure, Lady Luciana, and I hope our acquaintance is a pleasant one."

“Yeah! Me too!” Luciana flashed a thumbs-up. Fancy Luciana perished in that single gesture.

Silence filled the air between them.

Luna blinked. “I, um…”

“I-I’m so sorry!” Luciana blurted. “Er, I humbly apologize. I, um, spoke without… Old habits, and, well…” Her face burned. She’d thought her mask was more secure. She couldn’t bear to look the girl in the eye, humiliated by that slip of the tongue. And thumb.

Her neighbor chuckled. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to laugh.”

Pink brushed Luna’s cheeks as she cracked up. Luciana’s heart pattered around her chest, but she could not afford to be beguiled right now.

“I-I-I sincerely apologize for my rudeness,” Luciana said. “On my honor, I will ensure that it never happens…”

“Oh, please, I take no offense. I welcome it, in fact.”

“…again. Pardon?”

“I should not have laughed earlier, but you were so adorable I couldn’t help myself. I felt that I’d gotten a glimpse at the real Lady Luciana.”

Luciana somehow blushed harder and hung her head.

“Now that we’ve broken the ice, so to speak, I was actually wondering if…if I might speak frankly with you as well?” Lady Luna said.

“Speak…frankly?”

“Our first meeting was one thing,” Lady Luna continued. “Formalities and all that. But seeing as it seems we’ll be in each other’s company quite a lot for the time being, I think a more casual relationship would be to our benefit. If you’re okay with that, of course.”

Luciana peered up at Luna. She was smiling, a nervous twinge of red in her cheeks. Once her words had fully sunk in, Luciana smiled too. “Absolutely! Call me Luciana from now on. No titles.” Up went another thumb.

“Oh, thank you. The same goes for me. Call me Luna.” She timidly held up her fist and made a thumbs-up of her own, albeit a little crooked. Luciana nearly melted.

And so, Luciana made her very first friend. Her career at Royal Academy could not be off to a more perfect start.

But then the classroom stirred again.

“Your Highness! How do you fare this morning?”

“Lady Anna-Marie, the best of mornings to you.”

“Well met, everyone,” said the prince. “It’s an honor to call you my classmates. Let’s make it a rousing year, shall we?”

“Good day, all,” his companion said. “As much as I’d love to visit with each and every one of you, our instructor will be here shortly. Let us return to our seats.”

As fate would have it, Prince Christopher and Marquess Victillium’s daughter, Anna-Marie, shared the same class. A posse had formed around the celebrities from the moment they entered, though the royals swiftly and skillfully dispersed the nosy students.

“I didn’t even realize they were in our class,” Luciana whispered.

Luna giggled. “I didn’t either until just now. Tunnel vision, hm?”

Luciana had gotten to know them at the Spring Ball and wanted to greet them, but now seemed an inconvenient time. Just then, however, her eyes met Anna-Marie’s, who acknowledged her with a grin. Luciana smiled back.

Being separated from her friends was unfortunate, but having both Luna and Anna-Marie was a comfort. Her spirits lifted.

“You’re acquainted with Lady Anna-Marie, aren’t you?” Luna asked.

“Yeah! Wait, how did you know that?”

Anna-Marie drifted toward her seat in the back middle of the room. Luciana followed her with her eyes the whole way, trying not to make her sudden discomfort apparent.

“I was at the Spring Ball too, you know,” Lady Luna said. “And you were the star of it. Everyone knows that. His Highness even escorted you about during the latter half.”

“E-everyone?” Luciana nearly hid her face against her desk in a physical demonstration of the nosedive her spirits had just taken. Unused as she was to the ways of the big city, the scale at which information spread shocked her. “I think I might drop out.”

“Don’t be silly,” Luna laughed. “You’ll be fine, especially with His Highness and Lady Anna-Marie here. They’ll take most of the attention off of you.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. That’s good at—*least*?!”

“Luciana?”

Before she could become *too* at ease, a new problem arose. Luciana could feel it, cold and dreadful, creeping up her spine. Luna cocked her head and followed Luciana’s gaze as she slowly turned around.

“I suppose she’s in our class too,” Luna said, looking back.

“Y-yeah,” Luciana stammered. “I suppose she is.”

In the same column as Luciana, all the way in the back, sat Olivia, daughter of Duke Rincot’dor. With eyes like golden daggers, long flaxen hair elegantly piled atop her head, and a womanly figure, Olivia was a lady of presence and dignity. She stole the show whenever she entered a room—any room that Anna-Marie was not in, that was.

Olivia was ever a step behind, a cheap imitation in all respects save rank. That alone should have granted her precedence over the marquess’s daughter, but politics had relegated her to second place. Anna-Marie was the crown prince’s preferred suitress, not her.

The duke’s daughter sat quietly. Serenely. A dainty smile on her face.

*There’s nothing dainty about that look in her eyes,* Luciana observed, taking care that they did not meet hers. Not that she would have started a quarrel in public, but one could never be too careful.

Luciana had made an enemy out of her at the Spring Ball. Of that, she could be certain. Olivia was one of the many whom Melody's Arte Sensitivo spell had marked for caution.

Olivia was undoubtedly second place to Anna-Marie, but at the Spring Ball, she had not been allowed even that. Luciana had, however unintentionally, stolen that spotlight, thereby earning Olivia's ire.

"Are you all right?" Luna asked.

"It's not like I've done any purposeful harm to her," Luciana muttered. "I suppose I should let sleeping dogs lie for now."

A small sigh escaped her lips. She couldn't be friends with everyone. Better she made her peace with that sooner rather than later.

*I just wish it wasn't a* duke's daughter *I had to be on thin ice with,* she lamented.

The classroom door swung open, and a man with short, spiky, graying hair, stark features, and a large, muscular build entered. A robe that lay draped over his suit trailed behind him as he walked. He looked to be in his thirties, and the moment he entered he commanded the entire room.

"I am Regus Bauenveil, and you will be my charges for the duration of this term. His Majesty has blessed my house with a viscountship, and I am well aware many of you will precede me in the peerage. But know that so long as you are in my class, you are my student, and I will treat you as such. In return, I expect respect. Is that clear?" The man fixed the class with his gaze. Not a soul dared to so much as twitch. "I said, *is that clear*?"

"Y-yes, instructor!" the class roared.

*And now our teacher looks bloodthirsty,* Luciana bemoaned. *This isn't helping my confidence.*

"Good," the man said. "Now, seeing as many of us are strangers to one another, we'll forgo lessons for the sake of introductions. But first…" Regus thwapped a stack of papers onto his podium. "Normally, the academy would be entering its second month by now, and you would have taken midterms at the end of May. Seeing as June is already upon us…I hope this doesn't beg explanation."

A chill ran through the classroom. All at once, everyone remembered the instructions left to them one month prior with their Royal Academy-issued textbooks.

Instructor Regus grinned snidely. “I hope you’ve studied. Writing utensils at the ready.”

School was now in session.

## Chapter 4:
## Ups and Downs

ELSEWHERE, WHILE LUCIANA AND HER schoolmates faced the first exam of their piteously young careers…

"Phew. That's that."

Melody wiped the metaphorical sweat from her brow—there was no actual sweat in need of wiping. Compared to the estate, cleaning her lady's dorm room proved a decidedly effortless task, even without the use of magic. Truthfully, she hardly ever needed magical assistance even back at the estate.

But Melody wiped the sweat from her brow anyway because Melody was a woman of appearances.

"Next, laundry!"

She set off for the communal laundry room housed in every dormitory. Washing clothing was perhaps one of a maid's most demanding duties; frankly, there was a reason the modern world invented washing machines. Hand-washing was a herculean endeavor. No one would aid the position of the humble laundry maid.

So it was strange that humming filled the hallway. There could be no question as to the source, but *why* that source was so chipper remained a mystery.

*I finally get to make more maid friends other than Paula!*

Having come under the Rudlebergs' employ mere moments after arriving in the royal capital, Melody's network was terribly limited. She spent the majority of her time working at the estate, shopping at the market, visiting with Paula at Lect's residence, or gathering food in the forest (that is, the blightland known as the Great Vanargand Wood).

Perhaps the latter destination put the true extent of her limited point of view into question, but the fact remained that Melody's social circle was considerably small.

*I wish I could have spoken more with Lady Invidia's attendant, but today I'm going to meet people! I'll have a hundred friends by*

*tonight, I just know it!*

Melody skipped along, as excited as a grade-schooler. She opened the door to the laundry wearing a huge smile.

“Good morning and he…llo?” But the room was deserted. “Wh-what? But why?”

Laundering clothing was, again, a particularly demanding chore. The tedious task included cleaning, sterilizing, bleaching, de-staining, drying, and starching. It was the kind of work best finished early in the day due to its time-consuming nature. So why was every basin in the washhouse utterly maidless?

Laundry at the school dormitories was actually handled in three different ways: the first being Melody’s current method. Each building came with its own public wash area, complete with free access to basins and boards and other such tools, though detergent cost extra.

Secondly, students could take their dirty clothing to a launderer sponsored by the academy. This was the most costly option but came with professional care and peace of mind.

The third thing students did, and the source of the current phenomenon Melody was witnessing, was simply bringing their laundry home.

It really wasn’t so strange. This was the Upper Hall, the residence of counts and marquesses and beyond. The wardrobes of upper-crust aristocracy were abundant and required a cleaning procedure as exacting as their owners. Would such individuals ever deign to risk their garments at a *communal* laundry? Not likely.

The Common and Lower Halls laundries likely saw more traffic, their residents being of lower status. But the students of the Upper Hall wanted for nothing, least of all funds. Time was a far more precious commodity. The more costly options meant their clothing would be away for longer, but wealth again solved this problem, as most had simply brought large enough wardrobes to compensate.

So once again the Ignoble Rudlebergs found themselves the exception, and Melody found herself alone.

“Well, this ruins everything,” she moaned.

The maid, together with her clothing hamper, sullenly trudged through the empty laundry. She sighed and forced herself to set about her work. It did not take her long at all to finish, as she worked entirely unobstructed.

Melody hung her head when she finished her work and grumbled, “Having everything to myself is all well and good, but it’s awfully quiet in here.”

She needed to dry the damp clothing back in her room. The servants’ quarters each included space for the task so that residents would not need to hang their clothing out for public viewing or pilfering. Given its inherent lack of use in the Upper Hall, however, many servants turned the space into a multipurpose work room.

But not Melody, of course.

Lunchtime came, and Melody was back to humming.

“This time! This time for sure! I’m shooting for a thousand!”

She would likely miss her target of one thousand friends, but the maid’s ambitions knew no bounds.

She headed to the servants’ dining hall, which Royal Academy very generously provided. At cost, of course. The concept was, in fact, Prince Christopher’s handiwork, born in the image of a staff cafeteria from the modern world.

Tunnels crisscrossed beneath the dormitories, connecting each building and serving as a sort of emergency exit in the unlikely case of a crisis or accident. Naturally, the academy strictly monitored and restricted access to them, swiftly ending the dreams of any brave men who hoped to utilize them for a late-night rendezvous.

The servants’ dining hall lay along an offshoot of those tunnels and was open to maids and manservants from all the dormitories. Melody could not help but thrum with excitement as she approached the hall. At last, she would make friends, meet comrades.

She entered the hall…and indeed, it was thronged with servants.

*Yeeeees!* she cheered beneath a composed smile. Men and women in uniform meandered about and ate together in merriment. Melody continued inside, deeply grateful to her lord for scrounging together the funds for her to make use of such a paradise.

The hall was massive in all three dimensions, being meant to accommodate the servants of six entire dormitories. On the first floor was a traditional cafeteria, while on the open second floor Melody found what seemed to be a rather highbrow restaurant. Even among servants a sort of hierarchy existed, and depending on the master or mistress they served, some could be nobility themselves. Some of Melody's fellow Upper Hall residents would likely go to the second floor for a more aristocratic dining experience.

A sort of tacit social stratum had developed in the hall, with common servants humbly keeping to the first floor and blue bloods taking the second. On closer inspection, some on the latter even seemed to be in plain dress. Ladies-in-waiting perhaps.

Melody considered the social stratification. *I'd like to make friends with everyone, really.* The fanatic side of her wanted to break bread with maids of all statuses, but the rational side knew that to brazenly ascend to the second floor as a commoner would be to invite trouble. *I suppose it's only the first day. I can settle for the ground floor. Oh, I'm itching to meet people! Maid talk, maid talk, maid talk!*

Time would tell if any of her colleagues deigned to discuss work during their breaks. Regardless, Melody took her place in line and ordered her food. Tray in hand, she approached a group of maids.

"Excuse me, would I trouble you terribly if I sat here?" she asked with a polite smile.

The ostensible leader of the group smiled back. "Oh, which house do you serve?"

"Rudleberg."

"O-oh. Oh, um, I'm sorry, but we're waiting on someone."

"Oh. Okay."

“I’m very sorry.”

“I-it’s okay. I apologize for intruding.”

Melody retreated gracefully, though the rejection stung her heart. Head high and smile bright, she tried another table. Then another…

“Dead ends. Every one…”

She tried eight tables, and every time she was met with a polite rejection. Defeated, she sat alone, claiming an entire table for herself.

*Was it my manners? Did I offend? But all I did was introduce myself and the house I serve. Maybe today just isn’t my day… Oh, the potato salad is good.*

Melody ate in silence. All things considered, she was handling the situation quite well. Being utterly maid-addled to the point of being blind to the world around her certainly had its upsides. The cook’s potato salad recipe quickly took priority in her mind.

That was when salvation came as a voice rang out behind her like bells from heaven. “Excuse me, are any of these seats taken?”

Melody whipped around, beaming, and answered at once, “No, please sit!”

“It’s appreciated. You don’t mind if a couple of men join me, do you?”

“Not at all. Wait, I know you, don’t I?” Only then did Melody truly process whom she was speaking with. She cocked her head, searching her memory. The girl did the same. “You’re…with the Invidias.”

“And you’re that Rudleberg maid.”

Who should it be but Lady Invidia’s attendant herself?

“I’m Sasha Belton, by the way. It’s a pleasure.”

“Melody Wave. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sasha.”

The maids smiled at each other.

Sasha Belton was a girl of seventeen in a plain uniform. A lacy headdress sat atop her shoulder-length, dark-blue hair. Yesterday, she had carried herself with the stoic dignity of an independent woman, but today she reminded Melody quite a lot of Paula.

“Something on my face?” Sasha asked.

“Oh, no. You’re just not at all what you were like yesterday.”

Sasha laughed. “I was working yesterday. I’m a parlormaid at my lady’s estate, you see. I’d turn into a statue if I were that stiff all day every day. Unless I’m making you uncomfortable?”

“Not at all. I quite like both versions of you.” Melody regarded her colleague with gentle admiration. Mastering the separation of work and pleasure as she had was an incredible feat.

“You know, you’re awfully cute,” Sasha said.

Melody, ever oblivious, simply tilted her head in confusion.

“I’ll say,” muttered one of the men with Sasha, a tall boy with messy hair the same blue shade as hers. There was certainly a resemblance.

“Right, I never introduced you,” Sasha said. “The man who just proposed to you is my cousin, Blish.”

“I-I did no such thing!” The man cleared his throat. “Blish Belton, at your service.”

“Pleased to meet you, Blish,” replied Melody cheerfully.

His face flushed. “Heaven save me…”

The other boy at the table snorted. “Well, aren’t you cute as a button?”

“I’ll show you cute, Warren! Mind your business!” Blish said.

The boy next to Blish cackled. He had fluffy, medium-length blond hair and looked a tad smaller and younger than Blish.



“Oh, I’m Warren,” he said. “Warren Zeto. Good to meet you, Melody.”

“You as well. It’s a pleasure,” the maid replied.

“Wow, nothing gets past her,” Warren said. “Someone knows her manners. Cute *and* kind, this little lady!”

Melody looked confused again.

“A little thick too, eh?” Warren said. “She just gets cuter!”

“Will you can it already?!” Blish snapped.

“You both ought to quiet down,” Sasha reprimanded them. “People are trying to eat.”

A measure of calm at last came over the table. Melody took the opportunity to ask, “So, Sasha, I take it you and Blish serve House Invidia. Do you work elsewhere, Warren?”

“Yup. We’re all old friends, but I work at a commoner household. A merchant’s.”

“You serve a merchant family?”

“Mm-hmm. Aristocracy is a little too stuffy for me, which is why I wanted to steer clear. But then my master’s son went and enrolled and, well, here I am.” Warren shook his head with genuine fatigue.

“Is he a friend of yours as well?” Melody asked.

“Of Warren’s,” Sasha chimed in. “We only met him after already finding work as live-in servants-in-training with House Invidia.”

“I hope our masters and mistresses get to study together!” Warren said.

Melody smiled and nodded. “What is his name, by chance?”

“Lucif Gelman. He’s fifteen. For comparison, Blish is sixteen, and I’m eighteen.”

“So *you’re* the oldest. I see,” Melody said.

“Oh, my aching bones!” Warren cried.

“Rub it in, why don’t you?” Blish sighed.

Sasha looked ready to resort to corporal punishment. Meanwhile, Warren kept on smiling. Melody couldn’t help but

giggle.

“I’m sorry if they’re ruining your lunch,” Sasha said.

“No, no, I’m quite glad for the company. I lost count of how many tables I tried to sit with, and every single one turned me away. It was beginning to get to me.”

“They turned *you* down? But you’re so cute!” Warren said as if he’d been personally insulted.

“Absurd,” muttered Blish.

Sasha cringed like she’d just bitten her tongue.

“Something the matter?” Melody asked.

“You, um… I take it you haven’t spoken very much with the other maids, have you?”

“N-no. Only one other than you, as a matter of fact.”

“That explains it. You must be aware that your lady, Lady Luciana, has been the talk of high society lately? They’ve been calling her the Fae Princess, Hero Princess, that sort of thing, right?”

“Yes, I did hear she had earned herself a few monikers at the Spring Ball. What about them?”

“Well then, and forgive me for saying so,” Sasha grimaced, “but surely you’re aware that the Rudlebergs have been called… worse?”

Melody nodded. She had heard an “Ignoble” here and there.

“That is to say,” Sasha continued, “House Rudleberg has been a focus of scorn for some time now. And now their daughter is suddenly being lauded to heaven and back after a single ball.”

Melody lowered her voice to match Sasha’s. “You mean to say I’m not very well liked right now.”

“It’s not everyone. My lady, for one, couldn’t care less, but there is no shortage of families who would prefer to have little to do with yours. I’m afraid you’re guilty by association. No servant can rightly cozy up with the attendant of the lady their master or mistress hates.”

“It all makes sense now.”

“Which tables turned you down specifically?”

Melody glanced at the first group she’d tried.

“Ah. Bad luck,” Sasha said. “House Rincot’dor’s retinue might just be at the top of the list of people who would want nothing to do with you.”

“House Rincot’dor?”

“The duke has a daughter who’s just enrolled. She expected to be showered with attention at the Spring Ball—attention that went straight to your lady. Between Luciana and Count Victillium’s daughter, Olivia practically disappeared despite being the highest-ranking lady making her debut.”

Melody cringed. She couldn’t argue with that.

“Not that you or your lady did anything to directly offend House Rincot’dor, of course, but Lady Luciana’s certainly not in their good graces,” Sasha continued. “That’s most likely why they turned you down. It’s probably something similar for the others.”

Melody sighed a weighty sigh. She had been so absorbed in the dream, so infatuated with actually being a maid, that she had neglected one of her duties: intelligence work. Networking was an important aspect of domestic servitude. She had to keep her mistress appraised of happenings among the other noble houses.

*I’ve left my lady entirely in the dark this whole time!*

Perfect curtsies and morning tea wasn’t the end-all, be-all of maidliness. How could Melody have forgotten?

“Thank you for telling me this, Sasha. I understand now. It will not happen again!” she declared.

“Wh-what won’t? Um, good luck, I guess.”

“Thank you! I’ll need to practice my footwork so I don’t make so much noise. And other aspects of stealth, of course.”

“That’s…not what I was wishing you luck with.”

Warren laughed. “She’s a whirlwind, isn’t she? I like you, Melody.”

“I’ll say,” murmured Blish.

With Sasha's help, the trajectory of Melody's efforts straightened out. Just in time too.

"*Ahhh*, I thought the first day was supposed to be easy!" Luciana cried.

"Your bearing, my lady."

Luciana's first order of business upon returning to the dorm that night was to dive into bed. Melody's admonishment fell on deaf ears.

"Why, oh, why did we have to start with *exams*?" Luciana moaned.

The tests had run from morning to evening, a grueling gauntlet encompassing every academic subject.

"Exams?" Melody said. "I thought today would have been introductions, but I suppose it's a good thing you studied, isn't it? You had no issues, I presume?" The maid smiled. Just smiled.

That placid expression struck fear into Luciana's heart. "O-of course! Not a whiff of trouble! Now please stop looking at me like that!"

Hell hath no fury like a tutor disappointed.

Melody giggled. "I only tease, my lady. I look forward to the results."

"They're being released tomorrow. Not that I'm eager to see them."

"You did well, I'm sure. Will you get on well with your classmates, do you suppose?"

"Yeah! It turns out Luna sits right next to me, if you can believe it. We're already friends."

"That's wonderful. As it happens, I befriended her maid. Quite the coincidence."

"Really? Oh, that's perfect! Mistresses and maids, hand in hand. This is the beginning of an incredible term. I can feel it."

Melody was relieved to see her lady smile and to hear that the academy had been kind to her thus far.

Just then, a faint growl interrupted the conversation. Luciana's face flushed crimson. Evidently, someone was hung—

"Hush! That wasn't me! It wasn't me, okay?!" she shrieked.

"My lady, I didn't say anything."

"Huh? O-oh. You didn't?" Luciana glanced around the room, searching for someone to blame. A disembodied voice perhaps.

"I'll see to dinner," Melody laughed.

"R-right. A lady must be nourished!"

"That she must. You'll be quite pleased with tonight's meal, I think."

"Oh, I can't wait!" Luciana declared a tad too loudly.

It had not been a perfect day. Rather, this day called for some measure of caution and concern. But all told, it had been a much better day than either maid or lady could have hoped.

# Chapter 5:
# Exams and Examinations

"OH MY GOODNESS, LUCIANA! YOU'RE THIRD in the whole school!"

"Look at you, Luna. You made it to the top ten."

The next morning, their instructor posted the results of the previous day's midterms at the front of the classroom. The list included all three first-year classes, the one hundred or so students ranked according to their marks.

Naturally, the students knew nothing of the harsh reality of grading a hundred tests for each subject and then aggregating said scores for ranking in a single night. Pedagogy was indeed a thankless profession.

Someone approached from behind. "Well, well, well. Third place. Impressive."

"Lady Anna-Marie. Good morning to you," Luciana said, turning to greet her. She and Luna bent slightly at the knee—a simple curtsy.

Anna-Marie beamed. "A good morning it is. I see you've made it to tenth, Luna. It's heartening to see you take your studies seriously."

"Not half as seriously as you or His Highness, my lady." Luna blushed and looked back to the rankings to escape Anna-Marie's gaze. Christopher occupied the very top spot, with Anna-Marie directly below him in second.

"Perish the thought. I'm very good at cramming, you see."

The girls laughed. Anna-Marie was a noblewoman's noblewoman at the tender age of fifteen. Some called her the perfect lady, and none could banter as she could. Doubtless her marks resulted from calculated preparation, a far cry from the clawing and clamoring of lesser ladies like Luciana or Luna.

Or so society thought.

Anna-Marie herself thought differently. *Good god. Good god, I so earned that spot!*

Perfect lady Anna-Marie Victillium was, in truth, otome gamer and ex-Japanese high schooler Asakura Anna. Emphasis on the former. She did not like to speak of her grades in her past life. Needless to say, she'd fought for her grades in this life tooth and nail.

*Anna-Marie's grades were never this good in the game. I deserve a friggin' gold star,* she thought. But there was one fly in the ointment of her self-adulation. She eyed the number one spot. *Him... I can't believe I lost to* him*. Maybe the game world's forcing it to happen. Or maybe it's a difference in stats.*

Hers was not the only duplicitous soul. Crown Prince Christopher von Theolas was yet another former Japanese high school student, previously known as Kurita Hideki. In that life, he had been as average as they come, with grades as depressing as Anna's.

The Prince Christopher who existed within the narrative of the original *Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* had also placed first in midterms. He was a smart man, and now Hideki was that man. Irate as it made Anna(-Marie), the gulf between them very well might have been inherent.

"First place. Your efforts are an inspiration, Your Highness," came a voice from behind the girls.

Christopher guffawed for all to hear. "Perish the thought. I'm very good at cramming, you see."

"Oh, Highness!" a girl tittered.

Anna-Marie did an excellent job of maintaining her composure, but she could very much feel her blood pressure skyrocketing. *That little! I know you were snoring up a storm while I was burning the midnight oil, you brat!*

"Lady Anna-Marie? Are you all right?" Luciana asked.

She held strong and smiled. "Why, whatever makes you think otherwise?" It pained her to keep so many secrets, though she was touched that someone had noticed her inner anguish.

Calmed thanks to Luciana, Anna-Marie returned to the rankings. *Christopher in first. Me in second. Luciana in third. We're still sans a heroine, but that would make our stand-in...Luciana.*

The heroine's midterm ranking in *The Silver Saint* was set in stone. No matter what choices she made or actions she took in April or May, she would always occupy third place come June. Granted, had the *actual* heroine taken the exams, she would have placed first. Melody, once the greatest prodigy the world had ever known, could have easily bested the prince.

The game's narrative officially began in April, and Anna-Marie had been tracking the plot leading up to the academy's opening. Indeed, several sub-events had been triggered, minor things largely unrelated to the larger plot, but important enough to lead her to a new theory: the presence of a substitute heroine.

The broad strokes of the story would fall into place without fail—that much was certain. But in the absence of a protagonist, someone would have to act in the heroine's place. *Someone*, presumably the most suitable candidate at any given moment, would unconsciously become the temporary heroine until such time as the necessary events had come to pass.

It was in the latter half of May that Anna-Marie became confident of her hypothesis.

*If Luciana's our substitute, then that means her new school life's going to get a lot more hectic. Everything's going to center around her—the very first boss…*

Luciana Rudleberg—a.k.a. the Jealous Witch—was in fact the first foe the heroine faced in the original game. She became the puppet of the ultimate antagonist, the Dark One, after succumbing to her despair and insecurity, and attempted to end the heroine's life. Thankfully, a certain meddling maid maniac rendered this fate rather unlikely.

Incidentally, that same maid maniac had effectively neutered the aforementioned antagonist. She had inadvertently purified the ancient evil of corrupting darkness, and right about now it was likely enjoying an early morning nap at the Rudleberg estate. He was a very good boy now, yes he was.

Anna-Marie could not possibly have known this, however, and so had spent many sleepless nights considering the plot implications. How would things proceed without a first boss, much less the true heroine?

She shuddered. Someone was watching her. Unlike Luciana, Anna-Marie was quite practiced in recognizing and navigating petty contempt. The prince's de facto fiancée had to be by necessity.

She shot a furtive glance behind her. *Somehow I knew it'd be you.*

Lady Olivia Rincot'dor.

"You astound me, Your Highness. For all my efforts, I haven't even begun to approach your intellect," Olivia said.

"My good lady, fourth place is more than respectable," Christopher said. "You ought to be proud."

"You flatter me, Your Highness, but my people deserve better. A duke's daughter must be better. I could learn a lot from Lady Victillium and Lady Rudleberg's examples."

"It's good that you yearn to improve. I commend your spirit."

Olivia beamed at the prince, sending occasional glances Anna-Marie's way. Her eyes betrayed her, the warmth only surface deep. An icy ocean of scorn churned under the facade. But the chill void did not fixate on Anna-Marie, to her surprise—it was directed at Luciana, who was too busy chatting with Luna to notice.

*Is she holding on to that grudge from the Spring Ball?* Anna-Marie wondered. *Don't tell me. The substitute heroine isn't going to have a substitute* boss*, is she?*

Olivia should have ranked second, according to the original scenario, but Luciana and Anna-Marie's efforts had knocked her down. The original ranking was meant to be Christopher, followed by Olivia, followed by the heroine. Anna-Marie would have been nowhere close to contesting them but nonetheless vocal about her discontent. She would rage and fume and fling accusations that the heroine had somehow cheated, all out of jealousy because the prince had complimented her on a job well done. Olivia would then come to the rescue on the side of the heroine.

Olivia did not seem in a cooperative mood just now.

*This is kind of my fault, isn't it?*

Anna-Marie was never meant to be a perfect lady. She was meant to be the heroine's incompetent foil, a punching bag, an utter ignoramus by every measure. Something had to give when Anna-Marie refused such a role, and that something happened to be Olivia. Yet Luciana was taking the fall for it. Ranking below an Ignoble was surely a bigger blow to Olivia's pride than falling short of the perfect lady.

*From her perspective, it must seem like this girl appeared out of nowhere just to steal the world from her. I can't say she's wrong to be frustrated, but still…*

She'd chosen the correct target for her ire. Having the knowledge she did, Anna-Marie could understand both sides, but she had earned second place fair and square just as Luciana had earned third. At the end of the day, circumstance was to blame, not any single person.

*It's not just the story that's changed but the dynamics too. This is complicated. I guess the most we can do is proceed with caution.*

"Good morning," Regus Bauenveil, Class A's head instructor, greeted as he stomped into the room. "Seats, everyone."

The students scurried to their desks. No one dared test the man or whether his eyes really could kill.

"Has everyone noted their grades? Good. I will distribute answer sheets later for your reference. Now, let's begin your orientation. Listen well, and do not make me repeat myself."

## Chapter 6:
## Orientation and a Surprise Visitor

FIRST-YEARS AT ROYAL ACADEMY FOLLOWED a strict curriculum: core courses in the morning and electives in the afternoon. There were seven core courses: Contemporary Literature, Mathematics, Geographical Studies, Historical Studies, Foreign Languages, Matters of Etiquette, and Arcane Studies.

Electives were numerous and varied. Chivalry was a popular subject among noblemen, as was Applied Etiquette among women. Other examples included Applied Arcane Studies, Fundamentals of Medical Science, Medicinal Chemistry, and Architectural Pursuits. Students were required to take at least one such course.

School ran six days a week, the seventh day serving as a respite. Many went home for the brief break every week and returned on the morning of the next school day.

Core course lectures comprised the first three hours of every day. Afternoons were for electives, which could run anywhere from one to multiple hours, depending on if class took place that day. If there wasn't a class, students could use the period for free time, though for nobles it would be anything but "free." Conversing and making connections with peers was a cornerstone of academy life, and when not busy with lessons, many would share tea and forge long-lasting friendships.

Commoners, on the other hand, valued practical experience for the sake of taking up trades in the future. Most would fill their schedules with as many electives as possible—those who did not anticipate dealings with nobility in their future, that is. To attend Royal Academy was a great privilege that few dared waste.

"Applied Arcane Studies sounds interesting. Shame I can't use magic," Luciana said.

"At least the core course seems to be theory-based," Luna said, "but not being able to cast spells would certainly rule out

the course where you *cast spells*. We're in the same boat there."

Orientation had come to an end. They got an overview of the course structure as well as a tour of campus, which had taken all morning. Even with the new dormitories leaving certain areas somewhat more cramped than before, the academy grounds were vast.

Luciana and Luna discussed electives over lunch. The school dining hall was quite similar to that of the servants', with the first floor akin to a food court and the second housing a restaurant complete with servers, so as to better accommodate the more exacting students. Commoners were more than welcome to enjoy the fine dining so long as they minded their conduct. Matters of Etiquette served as somewhat of a de facto prerequisite.

The two ladies had chosen the first floor, partly on account of Luciana's looming financial situation and partly on account of their company.

"Th-th-thank you for t-t-t-tolerating my p-presence, m-m-my ladies…"

Perriand Poldol sat before Luciana, nearly biting her tongue off as her teeth chattered with nerves. Common and plain, she had long, ordinary brown hair. Her bangs concealed much of her face, and her clothing obscured her buxom figure. Luciana's eye was sharp though. No bust could escape her scrutiny.

"We're happy to have you," Luciana said. "Thank you for joining us, Perriand."

"Y-yes, my lady." Through the demure curtain of her hair, Luciana spied flashes of red.

"I invited the people to my front and back as well. It's a shame they weren't interested in joining us," said Luna. She smiled at Perriand. "I'm very glad you were, however. I hope we'll be good friends."

"Yes, m-my lady." The girl visibly shrank, blushing harder.

"Personally, I wish they would have reconsidered," the boy next to her complained, though he wore a toothy grin. "It's a lot of work being the only man at the table, I must say."

“Oh, is our company not fair enough for you, good sir?” Luciana said. “I should think you would be honored to have monopolized such beauty.”

Luna tittered. “Quite.”

“M-mind your…manners,” Perriand chastised him. Her sincerity was painfully endearing, especially the way she seemed to lose confidence halfway through her reprimand.

The boy grinned wider but more wearily. “Fair points all around. Lucif Gelman admits defeat. Please forgive my impertinence, Your Ladyships.”

“Just this once, I suppose,” Luciana laughed.

Lucif Gelman was a young man with a lean figure and short, lustrous green hair that would have been quite eye-catching had it been longer. He was a handsome boy, and a commoner like Perriand. He too had gotten caught up in the seat-neighbor lunch invitations. Luna’s front and back neighbors had, unfortunately, declined the offer.

“By the way, Lucif, feel free to forgo formalities,” Luciana said. “We’re classmates after all.”

“You’ll have to forgive me if I can’t comply with that particular request,” he said. “It’s a habit of the trade, I’m afraid, and it’s well and truly taken root. I couldn’t be rid of it if I tried.”

“Whatever suits you,” Luna replied. “You’re a merchant, you said? That sounds like a complicated craft.”

“It is a craft I find suits me well. Returning to the topic at hand, I believe they offer trial courses for Applied Arcane Studies. At least during the first semester.”

“Really?”

“You remember what they said during orientation, don’t you? First-years won’t decide on electives until the *second* semester, after the summer recess. We’re free to visit and test the waters as we like until then.”

The plethora of options made deciding difficult. First-years could attend electives at their leisure before making a final selection.

“Maybe you can take a look after all, Luciana,” Luna said.

“Perhaps,” Luciana replied. “I think I’ll start with the core Arcane Studies and see how that goes.”

“There’s no rush, after all. Perriand,” said Lucif, “you were going to take Medicinal Chemistry, is that right?”

Perriand’s lips flapped as she struggled to speak. “Y-yes. My father is an apothecary. I intend to follow in his footsteps.”

“Oh, is your father an alumnus of the academy? He must be so proud!” Luna said.

Perriand blushed and hung her head yet again. “M-my lady…” Quite the easy nut to crack, this one.

“Have you decided on your electives, Lucif?” Luciana asked.

“Not quite,” he answered. “I expect to deal with the aristocracy frequently in my career as a merchant, so I actually intend to make full use of the free period to solidify connections. I’ll likely weigh my decision against what others choose.”

Luciana nodded thoughtfully. “Everyone has their priorities. Is that why you accepted our lunch invitation? To ‘solidify connections’?”

“In part, though I can’t deny you and Lady Luna have intrigued me. And you, of course, Perriand.”

“We did?” the noblewomen harmonized.

“It seems my attendant has met yours. Or so I was informed last night.”

“They have?” said Luciana. “Melody—my attendant told me she’d made friends with Luna’s maid, but that’s all I heard.”

“Lady Luna’s servants happen to be old friends of his.”

“Sasha and Blish? Ah, so *you’re* the master their childhood friend serves,” Luna said. “Small world, isn’t it?”

“You know him?” Luciana asked.

“Vaguely. My attendants—a maid and one manservant, both in training—have mentioned having a dear friend in service to a commoner household. If my hunch is right, that would be you, wouldn’t it?”

Lucif met Luna’s eyes and nodded. “Well deduced. Skilled as he is at domestic work, I wish he would not cause me so many

headaches. When he told me a woman had caught his eye, I had to see for myse—" The boy jolted, sitting up straighter as he caught himself.

A chilling smile overtook Luciana's mouth. Luna and Perriand sat petrified. "He's fond of my maid, is he? Not in any *untoward* way, I hope. Or will he be causing me headaches?"

"O-of course not!" Lucif sputtered. "His interest is platonic! Purely platonic! He spoke of her as a friend, honest!" His lips moved on their own. Urgency left him shaky. A moment's hesitation, and...he gulped.

"Ah. I see." Warmth returned to Luciana's dead eyes.

The others sighed in relief, but the seeds of a newfound phobia planted themselves in their hearts.

"Y-you care about this maid, I see," said Lucif, his eye twitching. The poor boy's merchant tongue would be the end of him one day.

"Yes, I do, and I solemnly swear to personally dismember each and every man who propositions my Melody. Knight or not. You can count on that."

*M-my condolences for Sir Knight,* Lucif silently prayed. He had learned much of the Fae Princess this day.

After lunch, midterms resumed and with them the scramble to compare answers to figure out who had gotten what right. Typically, an instructor for each subject would field questions, but only Regus was present at the moment, so he instead explained the most commonly missed problems for the sake of time.

Regus grunted. "Seems our class scored the highest out of the three."

An excited murmur swept through the room. It felt good to be first. But Regus quickly squashed the enthusiasm with a sharp glance.

"However, bear in mind that much of that is owed to the top four among you. Excepting them, our results were decidedly average. You would do well not to let your heads swell."

He narrowed his eyes, and at once the class replied in militaristic unison, “Yes, instructor!”

By the time the review ended and Regus left the classroom, the sun balanced precariously on the horizon. Students gradually trickled out of class, Lucif and Perriand among them.

“Shall we?” Luna said to her neighbor.

“Sure. I ought to get home and go over the problems I missed.” Luciana sighed. “Not looking forward to that.”

Luna laughed. “I’m sure my night will be busier than yours. I placed tenth, in case you forgot, Madam Third.”

Barely perceptibly, Luciana muttered, “Yeah, but *you* don’t have a tutor from hell waiting for you.”

As she stood to leave, she noticed Anna-Marie, Christopher, and the duke’s daughter, Olivia, among the remaining students. They seemed to be talking together.

“Let’s pay our respects first, shall we?” Luna said.

“S-sure.”

Royal Academy claimed to be blind to peerage, but its students certainly couldn’t act that way. Regardless, nothing was keeping them from greeting those above their station, no faux pas, so long as they did it in the appropriate situation and not somewhere *too* terribly public. Nothing at all—save for Olivia and her barely concealed grudge.

“Your Highness, Lady Olivia, Lady Anna-Marie,” Luna greeted. “We’ll be taking our leave.”

Luciana bade them farewell in turn, addressing them in order of rank as Luna had.

“You needn’t have stopped on our account. Take care while the sun sets,” the prince replied with a gallant smile. One would never guess his was the mind of an indolent high school boy. “Ah, but we’re classmates, aren’t we? Please, address me by my name.”

“Why, I could never,” Luna insisted.

“I was afraid you’d say that. I can’t seem to get through to anyone. Oh, how they wound me.”

“We have great respect for you, Your Highness,” Olivia said. “It’s only natural that we should express it.”

Luciana was taken aback by the expression on her face. Directed at the prince, her countenance was bright and gentle, the polar opposite of what she subjected Luciana to. She did not know the duke’s daughter had the capacity for such tenderness.

“What keeps you all here?” Luna asked. “It is an admittedly short walk to the dormitories, but night isn’t far off.”

“His Highness and I have plans to meet a friend,” Anna-Marie answered. “Lady Olivia here was kind enough to entertain us with conversation in the meanwhile.”

“And we’re terribly sorry for the trouble,” Christopher added.

“It’s no trouble,” Olivia insisted. A twinge of red spread over her cheeks. “I so enjoy these chats we have, Your Highness.”

It hit Luciana like lightning—Olivia had feelings for the crown prince.

*But the prince already has…*

She shot a look toward Anna-Marie, who watched all this with a placid smile. She did not look even the slightest bit perturbed.

Because she wasn’t. Frankly, she could not *wait* to be supplanted as the prince’s “preferred” suitress and was more than willing to cede the title to Olivia. But Luciana could not have known that.

Suddenly, the door opened.

“Lord Maxwell?” Luciana said.

“Greetings, Lady Luciana. I’ve missed you since the Spring Ball. Have you been well?”

A long, swaying, honey-blond ponytail trailed behind the beautiful man. Maxwell, son and heir to Lord Chancellor Marquess Reclentos, had been Luciana’s escort at the Spring Ball, and, at sixteen, was a year older than her. He was, in fact, a second-year.

“Ah, yes, greet the fair maiden before the crown prince,” chided Christopher. “How very subtle of you, Max.”

“I simply noticed her first.”

“And us last, it would seem,” Olivia interjected, her humor somewhat stilted.

Maxwell noted her grumbling and regarded her for a split second before grinning tactfully and bowing. “My apologies, my lady. I extend my welcome to Lady Anna-Marie as well. Humble greetings to you both.” He turned to Luna and paused. She was a stranger to him.

“This is a friend of mine,” Luciana said. “Lord Maxwell, Luna Invidia.”

“D-daughter to Count Invidia, my lord.” Luna offered a slightly clumsy curtsy, her cheeks flushing. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

Her behavior toward the prince had been decidedly ordinary, but it seemed that Maxwell awakened the innocence inside her.

Christopher cursed his old friend and the practiced composure with which he returned Luna’s greeting. *Yeah, yeah, nice guys finish last. Screw you.* This was prejudice. He was just as handsome as Maxwell.

*Cry about it, loser,* Anna-Marie replied in her head. She could read Christopher like a book.

Business as usual for the royal couple.

“What brings you here, Lord Maxwell?” Luciana asked.

“I don’t believe that concerns us, Lady Rudleberg,” spat Olivia. Were her eyes daggers, they would have speared through Luciana’s chest.

“O-of course. My apologies.” Luciana burned with embarrassment.

Maxwell offered a consolatory smile. “It’s quite all right, Lady Olivia. I’m here to discuss the student council.”

Royal Academy boasted a kind of autonomous government run solely by students. Either the world’s otome origins lent themselves to anachronism or this was simply the fate of all fictional school settings. Either way, Theolas had evolved in parallel with modern Japanese society.

It seemed Christopher and Anna-Marie intended on joining the student council. Also like Japan, members of the Royal Academy Student Council were not elected but put forward via recommendation by either instructors or the council itself. Naturally, this would prove no issue for His Highness. Theolan society placed greater responsibility on those of higher social status, so it was unthinkable that the crown prince of all people would have no place in his own academy's governance.

"Will His Highness become president?" Luciana asked.

"Not likely as a first-year. More likely, he'll serve as a sort of secondary vice-president," Maxwell replied. "The primary being me. We traditionally select the president from our third-year members."

Luna and Luciana nodded in understanding. Even the crown prince needed time to settle into bureaucracy, learn the idiosyncrasies of the system. No one expected him to take the presidency until his second year at the earliest, surely.

Maxwell's eyes suddenly lit up. "You know, Lady Luciana, we do have a single opening remaining on the council. Would you be at all interested in filling it?"

"Pardon?" Luciana uttered dumbly.

"Pardon?!" the others echoed in shock. Chief among them, Anna-Marie.

This was all new. At no point in the game did the heroine join the student council. What was the meaning of this?

*What in the world is going on?!* Anna-Marie agonized. *This is totally something that'd happen to the heroine, but it's not even supposed to happen to the* real *heroine!*

"What do you say?" Maxwell pressed. "I hear you scored third among the first-years on the midterms. You've the qualifications, which I would be glad to attest to. We could use someone like you."

He patiently waited for Luciana's thoughts to untangle themselves. When they finally did, she shook her head. "I-I'm honored, my lord, but I must decline."

"May I ask why?"

“It’s paltry, I’m afraid. I’m simply not confident in my ability to fulfill the responsibilities of the office. Oh, but I’d gladly nominate Luna in my place. She placed tenth, so she’s more than qualified. What do you say?” She looked to her friend.

Luna flinched. “What?! M-m-me?!” Her eyes darted back and forth between Luciana and Maxwell, then she shook her head like she was trying to stir up a tornado. “I-I-I-I could never! Never ever! I couldn’t!”

“I think you could,” Luciana asserted with renewed confidence now that the spotlight had left her.

Maxwell smiled his umpteenth weary smile. “I’ll not force anyone. Reluctantly, I will respect your wishes.”

Olivia let her eyes fall in a dramatic show of displeasure. “I lack the qualifications, I presume.”

Luciana and Luna gasped. Maxwell *had* neglected to extend the offer to Olivia. A great insult, considering her status and grades.

“It is not a matter of qualifications in your case, my lady,” Maxwell said. “I merely thought you aware that House Rincot’dor is already represented in the council through your elder brother. In the name of fairness, we allow only one member per family.”

“I *am* aware but nonetheless vexed that it could not have been me.” Olivia shot a contemptuous glance at Luciana. It could be her. It was seemingly *always* her.

Luciana remained blissfully unaware of the hatred behind that glare. Anna-Marie, however, was not so ignorant to the flames of jealousy flaring to life in Olivia’s gaze.



# Chapter 7:
# Chivalry and Maidliness

"HAVE A WONDERFUL DAY, MY LADY."

"Thanks! Bye!"

Melody's lady cheerfully departed for her fifth day of school. Only when she was long out of sight did the maid return to the room and let out a small sigh.

"To work, then."

With exams and orientation out of the way, the term could begin in earnest. Luciana's mornings consisted of core courses, and her afternoons of visiting electives, which was exactly what they'd warned her schedule would be like. Things would only truly settle down in the second semester, when electives were officially open for first-year enrollment, but Luciana would experiment until then.

Over the last two school days, Luciana had been to four classes: Applied Arcane Studies with Luna, Medicinal Chemistry with Perriand, Chivalry with Lucif, and Applied Etiquette with all three of them. She had participated very little in the Chivalry course, but every elective managed to pique her interest at least a little. Melody heard all about it later.

Olivia's ever-present scrutiny aside, Luciana's life at the academy was proceeding smoothly. Better than smoothly, in fact. Thanks to her friends in other classes, her social circle was gradually expanding as well.

"Nothing makes me happier than to see my lady enjoy herself. Would that I…"

Melody inspected her handiwork in Luciana's bedroom. Not a speck of dust. The furnishings were brand new and in good condition, but Melody cleaned until it seemed like Luciana had only moved in yesterday. Any other maid would have looked upon such work and rejoiced.

Melody, however, sighed and glanced at the clock. It was just past eleven in the morning.

“Done already…”

Dorm life proved tortuously boring for this particular maid.

“You’re *complaining* about that?” Sasha shook her head from across the dining hall table.

Blish only blinked.

“So you’re saying you can clean an entire living space, do laundry, take care of maintenance and repairs, start dinner, and do lord knows what else all before noon, and that’s a *problem*?” Warren wore a crooked, bemused smile. “What *are* you, Melody?”

“I’m serious, you guys.” Melody pouted.

“Cute,” Blish muttered. His mind ever returned to the same place. Perhaps the boy was in love. Hopefully not, for his sake. Otherwise he had best keep a tight lip around a certain lady.

“Based on what you’ve told us,” Sasha said, “it sounds like you’ve got quite the knack for what you do, to put it lightly. I’m honestly a little jealous.”

“I wish my work was more, I don’t know, stimulating,” Melody elaborated. “I will gladly see to my lady’s each and every need without complaint, of course, but the estate was so much bigger. There was so much more to do, especially with Lady Luciana’s mother to serve. It was so much more *fun*.”

“You’re probably the only person in the kingdom to find work fun,” Warren snidely remarked.

Melody tilted her head, genuinely confused. “But being a maid *is* fun.”

Warren waffled over whether to be impressed or concerned. Ultimately he decided it was none of his business.

Going from a count’s manor to a dorm room meant for a single young lady was disorienting. Everything took so little time now. There were fewer things to clean, fewer articles of clothing to wash, fewer dishes to prepare at meal times. Frankly, to Melody (and surely only to Melody), the change felt like a demotion.

At this point, she was glad that her lady had forbade her to use magic. If she thought she was bored now, she couldn’t

imagine how much worse it would be if she could snap her fingers and complete her work.

“Why not focus on getting to know the other servants better?” Warren suggested. “Er, I suppose that takes time.”

“Unfortunately, I’ve been rather unlucky in that regard.”

The dorms had made it more difficult to encounter new acquaintances than Melody had anticipated. It did not help that the Upper Hall laundry—the holy land of spontaneous conversation—was tragically underused.

The harsh truth was that most servants were too busy seeing to their master’s or mistress’s needs to network. Without the laundry, this dining hall was Melody’s only hope for interaction. And yet Melody was evidently not part of any of it. Sasha and her friends remained her only points of contact at the academy. Of course, Luciana’s childhood friends had servants who used the dining hall, but Melody had never met them and had no way to know who they were in this world, so they would meet only by chance.

“What about you three?” Melody asked. “Have you met anyone?”

“Honestly, that’s not a very big priority for me right now,” Sasha said. “I’m a parlormaid, but now I’m doing housemaid duties on top of that. I’ve got my hands full.”

“I’m so jealous.”

Sasha sighed. Housework was not at all her specialty.

Blish’s responsibilities were primarily maintenance or miscellaneous heavy labor.

“I’m my master’s only attendant, like you,” said Warren. “But the commoner rooms are pretty small, so it’s honestly not much work taking care of everything.”

“I am less jealous,” Melody said.

“Think you’ve got that reversed,” Warren said.

Although most in the Common Hall attended the academy alone, there was always the rare exception, so a few rooms came with adjoining servant quarters.

“I’m ashamed to feel such discontent toward my service to my lady,” Melody confessed, “but I can’t shake this feeling.” She sighed heavily.

While Blish contemplated newfound beauty in ennui, Sasha had an idea. “Say, have you seen the bulletin board?”

“Bulletin board? There’s a bulletin board?” Melody said.

“Right here in the dining hall. Just over there.”

A large board with several notices and, well, bulletins stood by the entrance.

“I have to say, I never noticed,” Melody admitted.

“We’ve got to work on a few of your non-maid-related skills, Melody,” Sasha noted. “Please be careful out there.”

“N-noted,” Melody stammered. “Anyway, the bulletin board.”

“Right,” Sasha said. “I saw a listing there seeking servants for a temporary position. Seems an untenured elective instructor is looking for an assistant. No age or gender restrictions either, so if you’re really dying for something to do, why not try that?”

“Are students’ attendants allowed to accept such work?” Melody asked.

“I would assume so, seeing as it’s been posted in the students’ attendants’ dining hall. I’m sure there are plenty of houses with one too many servants. I heard the position would last one semester, and it said it was urgent, I think.”

Melody finished her lunch and dashed off to inspect the bulletin board. She found the aforementioned listing with little effort, complete with the word “URGENT” in big bold letters, just as Sasha had said. The position requested an assistant for a contracted instructor for the Chivalry elective, to last only a single semester. Duties would include lesson prep and assistance both before and during class. No restrictions on gender or age. Master or mistress’s permission required. The listing went on, enumerating various details, including compensation.

*Well, Sasha was right. The lack of age or gender restriction leads me to believe the work should be fairly light. I suppose this*

would *solve the problem of my abundance of free time in the afternoons.*

Still, Melody hesitated. Curiosity battled with a nameless reluctance that she couldn't place. As an instructor's assistant, she could visit the grand school buildings, which could only be good for her as an experience. It was a very tempting prospect, and yet…she paused.

That night, she brought the idea to her lady.

"An elective assistant?" Luciana said. "Sure, I wouldn't mind that at all. You should take it."

"You're certain?" Melody asked.

"You've been awfully bored lately, I know. I plan to spend the semester visiting as many classes as I can, so you won't be neglecting me in the afternoons. Not like I couldn't fend for myself if you were a little late getting back anyway."

"I-I see. Thank you, my lady."

Her plight had not been quite as well hidden as she had thought. Luciana was quick to give her blessing, and yet Melody remained of two minds.

Melody completed the necessary paperwork the next morning, and she had an interview lined up that same afternoon. Evidently, she was the only one who had responded to the posting. Most servants were content to serve only their house, and most houses (save for the Fae Princess's, it would seem) were unwilling to spare their help.

And so Melody received special permission to enter the academy proper—she would need it in order to attend her interview.

Chivalry was, in essence, a swordplay class. It included lectures on the finer points of the code, of course, and instruction on how to march in formation, but at its core the elective was martial in nature. As such, the instructors often held lessons at the campus arena. Instructors were either knights themselves or had been in the past, and handpicked at that. Only the best suited and most distinguished of their order were selected to teach the course.

One such esteemed individual would conduct Melody's interview. But when Melody opened the door and saw the man's short fiery hair and golden eyes, his status was the last thing on her mind.

"Lect?"

There in the office stood none other than Sir Lectias Froude, third love interest of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, knight of only twenty-one serving Count Cloud Leginbarth, cursed bearer of knowledge, for not only did he know that Melody was his lord's long-lost daughter, but he was madly in love with her as well.

They sat. Luciana's enrollment had kept Melody busy, so she had not seen Lect in at least two weeks. Neither knew what to say. Of all the ways to finally meet again, this certainly felt the least likely.

"Y-you're the last person I expected," the knight finally said.

"L-likewise. Although I'm willing to wager I'm more surprised to see you than you are to see me, Lect. Oh, but pardon me. We're on academy grounds. I suppose I should mind how I address you, shouldn't I?"

"Please, there's no need when we're alone." Quieter, he repeated, "A-alone…"

"I see. Then I'll happily oblige. So what *does* bring you here? I thought you served Lord Leginbarth."

"Y-yes, well, let's just say I'm here on His Lordship's orders."

"Is that so?"

Lect briefly explained.

It all began with the attack on the Spring Ball. During the assault, the unknown intruder held several nobles, Luciana included, hostage inside an impenetrable barrier. Crown Prince Christopher had also been among those trapped. The realm came treacherously close to losing its next king—which would've sparked a crisis of succession—and although the prince's leadership ultimately foiled the fiend's schemes, it became abundantly clear that Theolas's nobility was woefully underprepared for crisis.

“So the course was drastically expanded,” Lect continued. “But the academy struggled to find extra instructors on such short notice.”

“And that’s why you stepped in.”

“For the time being, until they can find a long-term replacement. My contract lasts only for the semester. When His Lordship bade me go, I had little say in the matter.”

“An abundance of free time, was it?”

Lect winced. Ever since returning from his quest for Selena—his lord’s lost lover and Melody’s mother—he’d been idling his days away, decidedly duty-less. He could only do so much assisting and guarding of his lord when the count already had people for such tasks.

In a different world, he would have been busy serving as Cecilia Leginbarth’s personal bodyguard, had Melody actually become her. Seeing as she had not, though, Count Leginbarth was yet to find a new role for his aimless knight.

Which was to say that, in a roundabout way, this was all Melody’s fault.

“I-I’m willing to play at school instructor,” Lect said, “but an assistant would go a long way in easing my mind. I suppose I could have supplied one myself, but, well…”

“Paula isn’t quite suited for academy life, is she?”

Lect’s maid of all work was a willful girl, which indeed was why Lect had hired her, but her brazenness would not have paired well with an aristocratic environment. Plus, her coming would have left his manor vacant.

“My lack of retinue means I suffer from a lack of choice. My lord certainly doesn’t, but then I would have to ask someone to commute from His Lordship’s estate every afternoon. To say nothing of how…unbecoming it would be to avail myself of a maid so frequently.”

“That’s why you sought students’ servants already living on campus.”

“Exactly.”

“Is that not unbecoming in its own way?”

“Your arrival has enlightened me to that fact, yes.” Lect frowned. In his mind, a pair of aquamarine eyes glared at him, wary of any stray thought.

*If she finds out, I very well may not live to regret it,* he thought. Wisely. A knight’s battle instincts were second to none.

“If I may, Lect, what exactly does the job entail?” Melody asked.

“Largely helping with preparing lessons and various miscellany during class. You needn’t worry about heavy labor. The academy will provide assistance in that regard, so your duties will be primarily clerical. Gathering materials from the library, et cetera.”

“The library?” The maid’s eyes sparkled. “You have my interest.”

It occurred to Melody that she’d had very little opportunity to peruse her new world’s literature. Books were highly valuable in this society, just as they had been in medieval Europe, and Melody had been born a commoner in a small village. She didn’t have easy access to reading material, to say the least, nor did the Rudlebergs boast of a well-stocked study.

In short, Melody was horribly underread. Her mind’s library consisted only of books from her past life and the textbooks she’d swiftly perused in the name of her lady’s education, so access to a *physical* library was a seductive benefit.

“Perfect,” Lect said. “When can you start?”

“I-I passed? But I…”

Lect did not have to think about it. He would get to spend time with the girl he fancied, and even as the omnipresent eyes in his mind narrowed, that prospect proved an irresistible—



Suddenly, Melody peered at him with shimmering eyes. “Are you certain I’ll be of use to you?”

Lect’s heart nearly burst. For a moment he wondered if she’d guessed his feelings and was toying with him on purpose. Ultimately, he was not sure he cared. For he was a man in love.

“How… How does next week sound?”

“Perfect!” Melody cheered. “Thank you, Lect! Or I suppose I should call you master now that I’m your assistant.”

“M-master…”

How different a ring it had when spoken by someone so oblivious. Lect’s mind plunged into the gutter.

And so interim instructor Lect found his interim assistant. He and Melody hashed out the details, keeping in mind Melody’s preexisting maidly obligations. Chivalry class took place during two periods, and Lect’s was the second, leaving Melody plenty of time to have lunch before arriving.

“That covers everything,” Lect said. “We’ll adjust and adapt as we go.”

Melody nodded, beaming. “Sounds perfect.”

“You’re, er, very enthusiastic about this. Is being my assistant really so exciting?” Lect could not help but nurse a small flicker of hope in his heart. Was she happy? Happy to be with him?

Even he knew he was grasping at straws.

“I get to visit a library!” Melody rejoiced.

“Ah. Right. The library.”

Indeed he grasped naught but a fistful of air. His immature side wished she would have at least let him down easier. Twenty-one proved a tender age when adolescence struck late. Still, he made a mental note to send her to the library before too long.

“I’m truly grateful, though,” Melody added. “I’ve been beside myself with boredom these past afternoons, and now I have something to look forward to!”

“Well, it’s good that this arrangement will benefit the both of us. Er, you’ve been bored?”

“Terribly. The dorms are so much smaller than the estate, so I’ve been starved of things to do. Why do you ask?”

Lect blinked at her, and Melody tilted her head in response. Words that would strike deep into the maid’s soul churned in the knight’s mind.

“You told me once that you had sworn to your mother that you would become the perfect maid. I suppose I just assumed your ambition would keep you perpetually occupied.” He nodded. “But, true, being idle for too long would drive anyone mad.”

Melody’s eyes flew wide. Lect continued to speak, but she heard none of it as his words echoed in his ears.

*What…*is *the perfect maid?* Certainly not one who spent half her day idle.

Something inside the maid started to give.

# Chapter 8:
# Something Gives

"I'VE RETURNED, MOTHER, FATHER."

Luciana curtsied before her parents, who awaited her in the foyer. They greeted her warmly.

After Melody's interview and Luciana's lessons, the lady and her maid returned to the Rudleberg estate. It was the sixth day of school, meaning tomorrow was a day off. They would return to the academy the following day, when classes resumed.

"How was it, Luciana?" Hughes asked. "Have you made any friends? Your lessons aren't too difficult, are they? Have you—"

"Dear," Marianna interrupted her husband. "Later. You must be hungry, sweetie. Let's talk all about your time at school while we eat, shall we? Serena, is dinner ready?"

"Yes, my lady," replied the doll. "I apologize for imposing so soon after your arrival, Gentlesister, but would you be so kind as to assist me?"

Melody beamed. "Of course."

Serena secretly sighed in relief. Her creator had seemed in poor spirits ever since she walked through the door. *Perhaps I was imagining things. She seems back to normal now, though.*

"Grail! I'm home, boy!" Luciana threw her arms open. The pup yipped and came running, leaping into her embrace. She caught him, twirling around with a playful squeal. "You nearly knocked me over, Grail!"

He had become a real lap dog lately. It was difficult to believe that such cheerful woofs and boofs came from what was once the Dark One, the mastermind behind the attack on the Spring Ball. Melody had unwittingly cleansed its essence, and its consciousness now slumbered within a playful puppy, the dog's single soot-black ear, tail, and feet the only remnants of the Dark One. It wasn't likely to awaken again anytime soon.

It was a lovely night. Luciana savored every minute of her time back with her family.

Melody woke the next morning at five on the dot.

“Let’s get started!”

“Yes, Gentlesister.”

Melody stood tall in the foyer, garbed in her plain cleaning dress, utensils in hand. Serena joined her, dressed the same. It was vital to wear housemaid uniforms for housemaid duties, so they could keep their attending uniforms presentable. They had much to achieve before the lord and ladies awoke.

“I’m going to clean the stove if you don’t mind seeing to the foyer, Serena.”

“Certainly. But, Gentlesister, is it not your day off?”

Seeing as she was working at the academy six days a week while Luciana was studying, today was just as much Melody’s day off as it was her lady’s. All the more so now that Serena was around to pick up the slack.

“I’m a maid for fun today,” Melody said, a most saintly smile adorning her lips.

Just yesterday, she had been on the verge of a crisis, but today she dove into her work without hesitation—not even a sliver. It was as if taking up her broom and dustpan had swept away all those pesky emotions.

Serena did not know what to say for a good while. What sophistry was this? What utterly twisted logic? A word came to mind from the intellect she had inherited from Melody: workaholic.

And yet she was but a creation. She did not touch the issue. Instead, she smiled and said, “I suppose we all need fun.”

Melody giggled. “Don’t we? Now, I think I might just splurge a little and use some magic for a change.”

Melody never used magic, even at the estate, but today she had little interest in self-imposed limitations. If anything could scrub away her doldrums, a full display of her maid power would do it.

Upon waking hours later, Luciana and her family would describe the resulting aftermath as “distressingly reflective.”

“To think there was such a thing as *too* sparkly clean. Our lord and ladies weren’t too pleased with that, were they?” Melody said.

“I believe it was your working on your day off that offended them most, Gentlesister.”

“They came around in the end, though, didn’t they?”

Melody and her helper were preparing lunch as they reflected on the morning’s events. The brass in the estate shimmered like starlight. The wood carried a luster like fresh varnish. Even the stove’s brickwork somehow managed to shine, it had been polished so thoroughly. The estate had become a hazard for the eyes by the end of Melody’s rampage.

It had been a harsh lesson in the dangers of excess. The maids ultimately had to undo their work, going about the manor and weathering away the sheen Melody had worked so hard to achieve. Now, things were back to normal brightness.

“I’ve never experienced such disgrace,” Melody moaned. “There can be no greater punishment for a maid.”

“All in moderation, Gentlesister.” Serena let an amused giggle escape. “Feeling better?”

Melody froze. “So you knew then.”

“The Gentlesister I know may forget herself at times, but she never forgets the comfort of her family. I thought you looked sullen when you returned yesterday.”

“I did, did I?”

Serena smiled at her. It reminded Melody of her mother.

“Serena, what is the world’s most perfect maid to you?” Melody asked.

“The most perfect maid? Why, you, Gentlesister.”

“Thank you, but I’ve a long way to go still. This dream I have, I’m not sure I even know what it is.”

*I made a promise. A promise I’ve done nothing but strive to fulfill. But if I don’t even know what the perfect maid is, then what have I been working toward?* For all Melody’s vast knowledge and

endless pool of talent, this one thing eluded her. This one singular definition. And the longer she meandered aimlessly toward it, the more likely she was to lose her way. Lect had opened her eyes to that. *I don't get it. Mom…what* is *the most perfect maid in the world?*

She would not give up on her dream. She did not want to. But her faith and resolve were shaken, and that frightened her.

"Gentlesister, you look unwell."

Melody returned to her senses with a jolt. Serena was watching her with worry and a crease in her brow. How uncannily like Selena's that expression was. It gave Melody an idea.

"May I ask something of you?"

"Anything," the doll replied.

"Will you say to me, 'Melody, you had better become the most perfect maid this world has ever seen'?"'

They were some of the last words her mother had left to her, and Serena was the woman's spitting image. Perhaps hearing that directive from her lips would grant Melody the motivation she needed to carry on.

"I'm not sure I understand, but as you wish, Gentlesister." Serena took a deep breath. "Melody, you can do this. Keep your chin up. I'm always with you."

Melody's breath caught in her throat. Those weren't her words. So whose were they?

"I-I'm so sorry," Serena sputtered. "That isn't what you said at all. Um, right, 'Melody, you had better become the most perfect maid this world has ever seen.' Like that?"

"Serena, what was…?"

"Hm?"

*Where did those words come from? And why did they sound like…like…*

"Gentlesister?"

"Never mind," Melody finally said. "It's nothing." Just her imagination, surely.

*But I feel a little better now,* she realized. *Why is that?*

Serena's spontaneous, heartfelt words filled the maid with far more determination than any recitation could have.

A laugh snuck past Melody's lips. "Thank you, Serena. That was just what I needed."

"I-I see. I'm glad I could be of assistance." Love softened the doll's expression, but a different sort of love than it bore moments earlier. A mystery. A mystery with no answer.

Had Melody noticed that faint glimmer in the silver heart adorning the doll's neck, perhaps she might have had a clue.

## Chapter 9:
## Hark, the Heavenly Manager Descends!

THE MORNING OF THE SECOND WEEK OF term arrived, and a carriage bearing Melody and her lady set off for Royal Academy. Luciana was already dressed and ready for class. Her maid, meanwhile, would see to their luggage.

"I'll see you later, Melody."

"Have a wonderful day, my lady."

The carriage stopped at the dormitory. Luciana started toward the academy, while Melody made for the room.

"Best hurry, since I'm getting a late start today," Melody said.

A maid's morning was ever an early one. Ideally, she would have finished the cleaning before her lady awoke, but their commute from the estate set Melody hours behind schedule.

She unloaded and unpacked Luciana's things, then surveyed the room. She nodded, determined. "Let's do this!"

The short break had done much to clear her head. Pretending to push up her sleeves with unnecessarily dramatic flair, Melody began her day.

She darted about the room like a video playing on double speed, and in no time the dorm was spotless. Next came laundry. Melody still had the load from two days prior, before the break, which she would have brought to do at the estate, but Luciana hadn't wanted to bother with the extra bag.

"Dirt and grime like to hide. One mustn't neglect proper—huh?"

Melody arrived at the communal laundry, and to her surprise, encountered a visitor. A gentle-looking and beautiful young (though not quite as young as Melody) woman. She wore a maid's sheet-white cap, and two voluminous, flax-colored braids rested on her shoulders. She had been humming a dulcet tune as she scrubbed a load of cloths and towels but abruptly stopped upon noticing Melody.

“G-good morning!” Melody said.

“Oh. Good morning,” replied the woman. Her cheeks burned, her composure visibly slipping. “G-goodness, I hope you didn’t hear any of that. I didn’t expect to share the room with anyone.”

Melody shook her head. “I personally can’t imagine doing laundry without humming. It was a very nice tune. I wish I could have listened more!”

“That’s very kind of you to say, um…”

“Melody, House Rudleberg maid. Pleasure to meet you.”

“I’m Mary-Ann, maid in service to House Victillium, and the pleasure is mine, Melody. May I call you Melody?”

Melody’s lips stretched and stretched until a smile filled her face. “Of course!”

After so many failures and dead ends in the dining hall, Melody never dared hope she’d catch a break here of all places.

“You serve your lady all by yourself? Goodness, that sounds grueling,” Mary-Ann said.

“It isn’t in the slightest,” Melody said. “My lady is a very kind and accommodating mistress. I wouldn’t want to serve anybody else.”

Melody and Mary-Ann quickly got to talking as they worked, and just as quickly hit it off. Mary-Ann had dropped the formalities somewhat.

She was a housemaid for the Victilliums, Anna-Marie’s house. Typically, she did her lady’s laundry at her estate, but handkerchiefs and cloths and such didn’t warrant such excessive care, so Mary-Ann was using the academy laundry to deal with the past week’s load.

“So you haven’t seen a single other person here?” she asked.

“Not one,” Melody said. “I’ve been struggling to meet people because of it.”

“My, you poor thing. But look at me. If a marquess’s family would make use of the laundry, surely others will in time.”

“I hope so!”

The maids shared smiles. Just then, footsteps headed down the hall toward them.

*A new friend already?!* Melody enthused. *Today’s my lucky day!*

Another woman about Mary-Ann’s age entered the laundry. She was in plain clothes, so certainly not a maid, and she was positively stunning, slender and tall with a sharp, model’s jawline and perfect features. Her silky blonde hair sat piled up on her head, creating a mature impression.

She was, in a word, dignified.

“Mary-Ann,” she said, “doing well? Oh, and who is this?”

“Madam Claris, this is Melody, one of House Rudleberg’s maids. Melody, this is Lady Anna-Marie’s lady-in-waiting, Madam Claris. And mind your manners—she’s nobility. Viscount Herala’s daughter.”

“I’m honored to make your acquaintance, madam.” Melody greeted her with a perfect curtsy. “Melody Wave, maid for the Rudleberg estate, at your service.”

Claris nodded in approval of the maid’s propriety. “Pleasure, Melody. It pleases me to see that Rudleberg is clearly a house of culture. Do get along with Mary-Ann, won’t you?”

“You honor me with your praise, madam.”

The viscount’s daughter nodded again, impressed. “That goes for you as well, Mary-Ann. Our lady is rather fond of Lord Rudleberg’s daughter, so see that you don’t cause trouble for her attendant.”

“But of course, madam,” said Mary-Ann. “Rest assured, we’ve found much common ground already.”

“Very good. Mind you do not find so much that you forget yourself.” And then, like a graceful whirlwind, Claris about-faced and exited the laundry.

Melody waited a beat before asking, “Um, what exactly did she come here to do?”

Mary-Ann laughed like she'd expected the question. "Likely to check on me. It's my first time coming to the laundry room, and she supervises all of the marquess's maids. She's very attentive, as you just saw for yourself."

*A good boss always cares for her subordinates,* Melody noted with admiration. *I wish I had a coworker like her. Serena is… different.*

Ladies-in-waiting sat at the top of the servant hierarchy, being the closest physically and emotionally with their mistresses. Whereas maids could take on any number of odd jobs, a lady-in-waiting's sole duty was attending her lady. Typically, they did not interact with other servants.

*And they certainly aren't supervisors, but Madam Claris…* Claris apparently led Anna-Marie's retinue, which spoke to her character and ability. *Lady Anna-Marie's attendants follow an order. They work efficiently and in tandem. Another thing I lack compared to the perfect maid.*

Melody thought back to how ecstatic she'd once been to monopolize the work of an entire estate. Now, she felt a little silly for harboring such a frivolous notion.

*Being a maid is about working together. Divide and conquer. Teamwork. Something I've neglected to practice. Oh, I hope we can find more servants soon.*

Seeing the relationship between Mary-Ann and Claris and the trust they shared awakened Melody to new truths.

Laundry laundered and lunch eaten, Melody made her way to Lect's office. Today would be her first day assisting with his class.

"I look forward to working together, Master."

Lect grunted. "You, uh, don't need to call me that when it's just us, Melody. I can't take it."

"If you say so, I suppose. Wait, can't take what?"

"Let's hash out a few final details, shall we?!" Lect blurted.

Lect's class took place on the first and fourth days of every school week—Monday and Thursday by the Gregorian calendar

—and during the second elective period of each day. The academy had enough instructors for Chivalry to take place six days a week, but Lect only taught on his two assigned days.

"Right," Melody said. "So what is it I should do exactly?"

"See that there's enough material here for every student to receive a copy. I've enumerated the general precepts of the code of chivalry. Seeing as I'll only be an instructor for the first semester, my goal is simply to prepare the students for the second semester, when their real lessons will begin."

By expanding the Chivalry course, Royal Academy had opened it to a much larger group of students. As a consequence of this and the elective's inherently high barrier to entry, each student's average readiness was lower than in prior years. Therefore, Lect had to ensure he laid out a proper foundation for his students.

"So we're likely to have students who've never picked up a weapon in their lives," Melody summarized.

"Consider it an introductory course in combat for the uninitiated," said Lect. "That's essentially what we'll be teaching."

"Understood. And what should I do while class is in session?"

"Keep an eye on the students. We're likely to have no small number who aren't used to physical activity of any kind, so I want you to ensure everyone stays hydrated. Hand out towels. Administer first aid whenever necessary. Things that, well, maids do." Lect scratched his head awkwardly, adding a few self-deprecating comments about being ill-suited himself for such tasks.

Melody missed the remarks. *That sounds more like something a team manager would do.*

"Right. I'll start soaking some lemons in honey right away!" she declared.

"I…don't know how that's related, but whatever you think is best."

*Being a team manager is a far cry from being a maid, but it takes equal parts compassion and consideration. Who knows what I*

*might learn? It might take me one step closer to becoming the world's most perfect maid!*

Perhaps that was a bit of a stretch, but optimism was a virtue.

"Now, I have a few things prepared I'd like to familiarize you with, if you'll follow me," Lect said.

"Of course. Oh, but I wonder if I should braid my hair. A manager ought to have braids. But if I have braids, I really should be in a sailor uniform too, and find a pair of glasses. Oh, and a kettle. What do you think, Lect?"

"I think we'll make do."

If she was going to do this, she was going to go all-in. After all, Melody was a woman of appearances—even if those appearances were extremely Japanese and extremely dated.

"Attention, trainees! Your first lesson in chivalry is about to begin!"

"Yes, instructor!" The arena rumbled with the students' voices. Class was now in session.

In all, eleven first-years, six second-years, and two third-years attended the class, for a total of nineteen students, primarily noblemen with some commoners mixed in as well. A respectable turnout of mostly new blood for Lect's first foray into teaching.

"I'm sure this goes without saying, but in this course, you will learn how to fight and act as a knight does, starting from the very beginning. To that end, you must understand how a knight *thinks*. Melody, if you would."

"Right away, Sir Lect."

Lectias had backpedaled and instructed the maid to refer to him this way, even in public. He wouldn't survive otherwise.

Melody stepped forward and began handing out papers, swiftly yet properly and with due courtesy. She'd so enveloped herself in her role as a background player that none seemed to perceive that beauty itself had descended before them in maid form. How such a feat was even possible, only Melody knew.

As Lect explained the code he and his brothers- and sisters-in-arms followed, Melody turned to her next task. She needed but refer to the lesson plan they had discussed beforehand.

“Take these principles to heart,” Lect concluded. “Now, as much as I’d like to arm you and send you swinging, I’d first like to take the measure of each and every one of you. We’ll begin with laps around the arena.”

Not a single groan escaped one young man’s lips. These were well-bred adolescents.

“I’ll hold on to your papers,” Melody said, appearing once again. She freed their hands with graceful brevity.

When she finished, Lect took point, leading the students into their laps. “We don’t stop until I say so! Pace yourselves! Use your judgment!”

“Yes, instructor!” the students cried out.

“Godspeed, everyone,” said Melody. She retreated out of the way and moved to her next task.

Some dozen or so minutes later, the arena was a graveyard. Lect wasn’t even winded yet, but his gaggle of coddled nobles lay flat on their backs, wheezing.

Melody approached with a tray of refreshments. She offered some to a boy. “Well done. Have some water.”



“O-oh. Thank you,” the student panted, his breathing mangling his attempt at speech. He pulled himself up, downed the glass in a single go, and let out a satisfied sigh. “That’s just what I needed.”

“Have some honey lemon as well. It works wonders for fatigue.”

“That so? I suppose I’ll try a sli—” Just as the boy reached for one of the lemon slices, he froze.

He was staring beauty in the face.

It did not matter how dated, how Japanese, or how utterly anachronistic it was. When a beautiful girl offered handmade refreshments, the male condition compelled, nay *demanded*, that he accept. That the boy hadn’t noticed Melody until this very moment only lent the realization more weight. After all, he suddenly found himself face-to-face with the girl known as the Angel of the Spring Ball.

Of course, Melody’s propensity for thickheadedness meant that she was utterly oblivious to her impact. Work alone occupied her mind.

*This really does feel more like being a team manager than any sort of maid,* she thought. *But it’s just that kind of perspective that might give me a clue about what the perfect maid could be!*

Lect’s lesson continued in a similarly merciless fashion. And yet, for whatever reason, all complaints died away.

“You’ve a very passionate bunch here,” Melody commented.

“Right, well, men will be men,” Lect replied. He spoke from experience.

*I’d best keep my eye on her while she’s around them,* he told himself.

Through a convoluted series of events, it seemed the knight had found himself in a kind of bodyguard position in the end.

## Chapter 10:
## Shadows Cast by Silver

**O**N THE EVENING OF THE FOURTH DAY of the second week, Melody waited anxiously for her lady to return to the dorm.

When she did, Melody greeted her with a face-splitting grin. “My lady! Serena’s written to us!” She accosted Luciana with the intensity of a hardcore fan meeting their favorite idol.

Luciana reeled back. “Wh-what’s gotten into you? That’s very exciting, yes, but it’s just a letter.”

“You don’t understand, my lady! It’s…! It’s…!”

*Good grief,* the lady thought. *I don’t think I’ve ever seen her like this.*

Her maid leaped and hopped about, squee-ing and yippee-ing for joy. Luciana waited patiently for Melody to remember her words.

“They’ve found a new maid for the estate!” Melody finally announced.

“Really?! I’m so happy for you, Melody!” Luciana started leaping and hopping and squee-ing and yippee-ing with her. Without a level head between them (for they did not amount to one even together), they continued to hop and leap and squee for some time.

When their senses finally returned, they blushed.

“It’s a good thing the construction in this place is so good,” Luciana said.

“Agreed. I hope the soundproofing is sufficient.”

Hindsight was indeed twenty-twenty.

“So what does the letter say exactly?” Luciana asked.

“Oh, yes. We’ll get all the details when next we return, but apparently they’ve hired a maid-in-training. She’s inexperienced, but Serena intends to teach her.”

“Ah, I see. A work in progress, then. That’s a bit of a shame, but it’s a relief to hear *someone’s* willing to work for us.”

About that… How *had* the Rudlebergs at last found a servant unpoisoned by the rumors swirling around the family? For Melody, that concern was secondary to her recent wish to find someone to practice teamwork with.

Luciana giggled. “Our next day off can’t come soon enough, huh?”

Melody clutched Serena’s letter to her chest, beaming. “I can’t wait!”

“So things are going well in that chivalry class you’re assisting, huh?” Luciana said. “*Lectias Froude’s* chivalry class. Didn’t know he was teaching it.”

“He and his students treat me very well, my lady,” Melody replied. “It’s quite an easy job.”

Luciana sipped her tea. “Oh, they treat you *well*, do they?”

She was hearing all about Melody’s new time killer while enjoying some after-dinner tea. Had she known who Melody’s boss would be, she might not have given her permission so readily. She maintained a polite smile while Melody described the class, but deep down, her mind conjured images a lady ought never conjure.

“I’m glad things are going well for you.” Luciana sighed. “I wish I could say the same for myself.”

“Trouble at school, my lady?” Melody asked.

“Not really. There’s just an elective I’m particularly interested in, but I’ll never get to take it.”

“At all? Why is that?”

“It’s Applied Arcane Studies. Only people who can use magic are allowed to enroll.” Luciana’s shoulders sagged.

She could attend the course as much as she liked during this first semester, but as soon as the second rolled around, that door would close. Applied Arcane Studies was, eponymously, about applying studies of the arcane, and as such only those capable of casting spells could realistically take it.

Sadly for Luciana, she had underestimated her interest in the subject. Perhaps she harbored a twinge of jealousy for those with powers she could never possess, but really she owed it to

her environment, and, in particular, the presence of one “beauty in maid form” who constantly wielded great magics in her presence. Would that she could at least sit in on the lessons in perpetuity. That alone would have been enough to sate her curiosity.

“Luna was interested in it too,” she went on. “I wish we could take it together.”

The Rudleberg line was not magically gifted. Quite the opposite, in fact. When Luciana was five and went to the local church to receive her reading, the facilitator found so little magic in her that he questioned whether she possessed any at all.

“But you do have mana, my lady, do you not?” Melody asked.

“Everyone does,” Luciana said. “I just have so little it might as well be none at all.”

Melody considered her own situation. She had been told something similar. During her own reading, they could “sense power” but no “switch with which to access it.”

*But I can use magic now,* she thought. *Who says my lady can’t?*

“You mustn’t give up, my lady,” Melody said. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way, and I’d be willing to assist you. Maybe with a bit of practice, you too can learn to—”

Luciana leapt to her feet. “You think so?!” Hope flickered in her eyes.

Melody reeled back, not entirely unaware of the irony in the reversal of their roles. “I-I cannot say for certain, but it took me some time to come into it as well.”

“It did?! You weren’t always like this?!”

“Not at all. So I do believe that with a bit of effort, perhaps we can bring about the same change in you, my lady.”

“Please, Melody! I am your humble student! Teach me how to use magic!” She reached for the maid’s hand and held it tight.

“Very well, but it won’t be easy.”

Melody did not want to give her lady false hope. She began to regret speaking before thinking. Not even she entirely

understood the change she'd undergone that sparked her magical abilities, but she wanted to try. For her lady.

They changed location.

"So, um, here we are," Luciana said weakly. "My bedroom." Her cheeks flared a vibrant pink, and she couldn't sit still.

"My lady? Why so restless?" Melody asked.

"W-well, um, you said we had to go to my bedroom to get started, so I'm…preparing myself," Luciana said.

"Preparing for what?"

"I read in a story once that mana flows best w-with…" Luciana covered her face, "skin-to-skin contact."

"Good lord, what kind of story was this?!" Melody blurted. "I can assure you, that will *not* be necessary!"

"It won't?"

"You should not be sad about that, my lady! We're only here so you can collapse safely onto your bed in the event of an accident!"

"Oh. The way you were fiddling with the curtains, I thought you were making sure we had, you know, privacy."

"It's a precautionary measure. My lady, are you familiar with the Luce spell?" Melody asked.

"It casts a small light, right? It's the most basic of basic spells. Not that I can use it."

"It was, in fact, the very first spell I cast."

Luciana nodded. "That makes sense."

"And it burned brighter than the very sun."

"It what?"

"I thought I might blind myself," Melody said. "I gained an instant appreciation for the dangers of such power. If something similar happened to you, we wouldn't want the light bleeding out and disturbing others so late at night. Hence my shutting the curtains."

"I feel I can say with relative certainty that you'll encounter no such trouble this time around."

Luciana was not at all surprised to hear of Melody's early magical escapades. Perhaps Luciana's comparative failure would serve as a long overdue wakeup call for the maid.

After one more curtain check, Melody sat across from her lady on the bed, took her hands, shut her eyes, and began to feel for the energy inside her.

The people of this world did not possess an unusual amount of magic. Some could manipulate magic and effect change in the world, to be sure, but they needed specific techniques and spells to detect magical power, such as Archmage Sven's barrier surrounding the Great Vanargand Wood or Anna-Marie's original Analysis Vision spell.

Given Melody's track record, one might have assumed she needed no such detection spells, but it was precisely because of her track record and the immense, swirling ocean of mana within her—power enough to quell even the Dark One—that detecting more fine, more human amounts of mana proved difficult. Would an elephant perceive the ant beneath its foot? A whale the sardine under its fin? A mountain the hill in its bosom?

Melody was really quite blind to the mana of others. There was no need to take note of the ants or sardines.

"It's small, but I do feel it," she finally said. "With practice, I believe we could turn this into a small flame. Create puddles of water, perhaps."

"Phew. Okay." Luciana cocked her head. "You can tell all that just by holding my hands?"

"I'm using something similar to sonar."

"So-nar?"

Sonar was a type of sound propagation used by naval vessels for navigation. By emitting high frequency sound waves through the water, they could collect data about the surrounding geography and environment based on the way the waves bounced off of surfaces.

"I let a small amount of my mana seep into you and waited for a reaction," Melody said. "Based on various parameters, I can then deduce the intensity and amount of mana inside you."

"I-I'll take your word for it," Luciana said.

“I’d be happy to explain the finer points if that doesn’t make sense, my lady.”

“Let’s just move on. So, what next?” Luciana cared little for this so-called “so-nar” and was itching to put this information to use.

Melody thought for a moment before taking Luciana’s hands again. “Before you can begin to manipulate mana, you must have an intimate understanding and perception of it. Can you feel it inside you, my lady?”

Luciana shook her head immediately. Even while Melody had been doing her “sonar” thing earlier, she hadn’t felt a thing. Not a twinge or a trickle or a prick or even a gurgle in the belly.

“That’s okay,” Melody said. “We’ll build on it and keep trying what I did before. I’m going to slowly feed my mana into you, my lady. The more I circulate, the more your own mana should react. Theoretically, there should be a point when you can sense it.”

“Is it safe to fill someone with that much mana?” Luciana asked.

“To fill someone with it, no, but I’ll be circulating it between the two of us. It should be relatively harmless, but you may feel some fatigue. Your body will be unused to the strain.”

Luciana hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose that’s a low price to pay for being able to cast spells.” She tightened her grip on the maid’s hands, and Melody instructed her to close her eyes. “Do I have to?”

“Mana is more easily perceived when your senses aren’t distracting you,” Melody said. “I’m going to begin. I’ll start slow. Focus on the current inside you.”

“Okay…”

Melody let a small trickle of her energy flow into Luciana. Outwardly, they appeared to merely hold hands, but inwardly a resplendent silver power flooded Luciana’s being.

“Do you feel anything, my lady?” Melody asked.

“No,” Luciana replied.

“I’ll add a little more.” She did. “Any changes, my lady?”

Luciana shook her head “None.”

This repeated once more, twice, thrice, and each time Melody supplied ever greater quantities of her mana. Yet Luciana seemingly remained entirely numb to the magic. This did not bode well for her future spellcasting, possibly even more so than her meager reservoir. It reached the point that Melody was pouring vast amounts of her magic into her lady, but still nothing.

A more sensible person might have called the experiment off at this point. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately from a certain perspective, Melody was far too talented to be sensible.

*I'm going to have to start focusing,* she told herself, closing her eyes and supplying yet more magic. By now she was inundating her lady with more than ten times the mana found in an average mage.

"Anything, my lady?" she asked.

"Nothing," Luciana said.

"Now, my lady?"

"Nope."

"N-now?"

"Not a thing."

With each no, more and more magic passed between them. The endless current roared as it intensified, manifesting as a visible phenomenon. Silver filled the room, glistening and bright, and only Melody's fastidiousness with the curtains kept the light from spilling out where others might have witnessed it.

Most of it, anyway.

A man stirred within the shadows of one of the slums' many shady corners. His grimy purple hair clung to his forehead, and the rags hanging off his figure looked one loose thread away from unraveling. One might have taken him for an orphan boy, so stunted and gaunt was Bjork Quichel.

He was, in fact, eighteen, and the fourth route of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*. Possessed by the spirit of the Dark One trapped within his now-broken blade, he had perpetrated the infamous attack on the Spring Ball. Now, however, all he wielded

was an empty relic, its soul purified by Melody, and Bjork was Bjork again. Bjork was Bjork…if that man even still existed.

He clutched the hilt of his blade, whipping around. His ash-gray eyes glared in the direction of Royal Academy.

"Silver… Saint…of Silver…" He clutched the blade harder, until his knuckles turned white. His voice shook with a bestial rage, a rage that pleased the dark haze oozing out of the broken blade. "Will not… Will not…stand… The Dark One…will not…"

The shadows swallowed him once more.

Back in Luciana's bedroom, the lady was beginning to fret. *Melody must have asked me a dozen times now, but still nothing.*

Maybe she was a lost cause after all. Maybe this was a waste of time. Melody had stopped commentating, so surely she felt the same. Perhaps she'd given up trying altogether.

Timidly, Luciana opened her eyes. She couldn't believe what she saw. "What…is this?"

Silver. All around them, silver. A cloudless silver sky. Twinkling silver specks wafting on a silver wind. A field of silver flowers as far as the eye could see, crystalline and intricate like snowflakes growing from the ground.

"This…this isn't my bedroom," Luciana said. "Where am I? Where's Melody? What's—" A sudden breeze knocked her off-balance, though it was not a strong gust, just enough to ruffle her hair and the field of flowers.

Elaborate crystals took flight, platinum dandelions rising like snow falling in reverse. Luciana gaped at the sight. She remained breathless, even as the breeze died and the shimmering "snow" vanished. Something gleamed high above her. A silver light. Awestruck, Luciana watched the light drift and dance in the air. It was another flower, an errant snowflake, estranged from its brethren and slowly, ever so slowly, fluttering down to Luciana.

She held out her hands and caught the poor stray. "So beautiful," she breathed.

Silver. It glimmered oh so faintly, a vaguely argent sheen. At once, Luciana knew she was loved. She was safe. This light would protect her, shield her, cleanse her, and for some reason, she trusted it.

*I know this,* she realized. *This light. This feeling. This love. I know who it…belongs…*

"My lady!"

Luciana blinked awake. It took some seconds, but gradually the world came back into focus and her room at the academy materialized around her. Melody watched her with worry creasing her brow.

"What?" she groaned. "I…"

*I'm back. But what happened to…* She blinked again. *To what? I'm back? Back from where?*

She could not have been anywhere but her bedroom, so why couldn't she shake the feeling that she'd just been elsewhere? She and her maid had been practicing magic. Perhaps she'd fallen asleep and dreamed something, but that dream was gone now. Lost to that place dreams go to be forgotten.

"My lady, are you all right? Are you with me?" Melody pressed.

"Y-yeah. I'm okay. What just happened?"

Melody sighed in relief. Her lady was a bit out of sorts but none the worse for wear. "I stopped circulating magic so we could take a break, but you wouldn't answer no matter how I called. I had to shake you awake, my lady. Don't you remember?"

She shook her head.

"I may have used too much magic," Melody said. "You're certain you're well? You aren't nauseated? In pain?"

"I'm okay, really. Right as rain."

Melody sighed again. "That was much more than enough for one day. I'll draw you a bath and then you can rest." She rose to do just that.

Luciana remained sitting on her bead, dazed. For having done absolutely nothing, she felt exhausted. Downright

lethargic.

“Oh, I should take this off before I get in the bath,” she muttered to herself. She fished around for the necklace she’d made out of the ring Melody had given her and raised it over her head. When she went to store it in the chest next to her bed, however, something made her pause. “Has the stone always looked like this?”

An azure stone rested within the ring, accented in the middle by a tiny silver crystal like a single shimmering star hanging in the night sky. Only this star was twice as beautiful as any other. Had it always been there? If not, how had it *gotten* there?

Luciana gave it a few seconds of thought but no more. No use in stewing over it.

*Still, it gives off this strange light. It makes me feel…*

A tender smile graced Luciana’s lips. That sensation of being loved enveloped her once more.

“My lady,” Melody called, “your bath is ready.”

“Be right there,” she called back. She stowed the necklace away and went.

The next day, they repeated the lesson. This time, it took hardly anything at all. Luciana could feel her own mana. She was still a long way off from making any sort of practical use of it, but this was a massive step toward that goal, and she could scarcely contain her joy. Melody, for her part, was extraordinarily relieved that their efforts had borne fruit.

By the end of the week, the lady and her maid made for home with their hearts full and heads high, entirely ignorant of the greeting they would receive from the estate’s new arrival.

# Chapter 11:
# A Pink Addition to Routine

SOME TIME PRIOR, AS LUCIANA BEGAN the fourth day of her second week at Royal Academy…

Serena rose before the sun, as per her routine. Being a magical construct, she did not actually need to sleep, but Melody had deemed it prudent that a Rudleberg maid act as a maid ought to and imparted upon her a circadian rhythm. Serena could therefore carry herself as a flesh and blood person might, all while economizing on mana usage in her downtime.

She used the room next to Melody's, but they actually shared the space. Her roommate, the Dark One, colloquially known as Grail, lay belly up, sprawled out and snoring in his makeshift bed—a simple cushion and basket.

"Filth… Grovel…" Why, the precious little thing almost sounded like he was speaking people words.

Serena snickered. It had given her a real fright the first time she heard the pup's unique growling, but even that had become part of her routine. She made a delightfully endearing game out of seeing what grisly words she could make out while the little fellow yipped and twitched in his sleep.

Once dressed, she left her snoozing companion to his schemes and set about her work.

"Good morning, my lord, my lady."

Once the estate was spotless, she prepared the master and mistress's early morning tea. *After* being invited in, of course. A certain lady had learned an important lesson once upon a time about entering without knocking and having to wait.

After tea, the lord and lady needed dressing, beginning, naturally, with the patriarch of the house. Typically, a valet or manservant of some sort would handle this task, but with the estate dominated by the fairer sex, they had no other choice. Serena dressed Hughes swiftly and tactfully, entirely unfazed by a brief brush with nudity.

“We really must find more help,” Hughes said while Serena fussed with his wife’s hair. “A man this time, preferably. An apprentice, even.”

“If only we could summon one from home.”

“Which we can’t rightly do if we don’t want another estate falling into disrepair.”

Owing to Prince Christopher’s generous monetary gift as thanks for saving his life, as well as Hughes’s fairly new position at the Royal Chancery, the Rudlebergs could now afford the luxury of more servants. Unfortunately, no servant desired that honor. Ever Ignoble, their coffers suffered their share of hunger pangs. That their finances remained just barely out of the red was a perpetual miracle, and even their home estate boasted only a scant retinue. If they wanted more help in the capital, they would have to find fresh faces.

“How’s that, my lady?” Serena asked, putting the finishing touches on Marianna.

Marianna gave her approval, and they moved to the dining hall for a small breakfast.

“Serena,” Hughes said, sipping his after-meal tea, “how is our posting in the Commerce Guild? Any responses?”

“I’m afraid not, my lord.”

Another sip. Hughes frowned.

“Shall I check again this afternoon?” Serena offered.

“Please. A valet would be nice, but I wouldn’t say no to a new maid either. Anything to ease the burden on you and Melody.”

Serena smiled humbly. She was only a creation. With Melody attending to Luciana at Royal Academy, the estate needed someone to look after things in the maid’s absence. Thus came Serena, a doll given life. In other words, the Rudlebergs owed everything to a single maid, and should she leave one day, the Ignobles would shortly become ignoble once again in more than just name.

Hughes could not imagine Melody ever leaving behind the job she seemed to love so much, but he had a responsibility to

his family, and that meant preparing for any possibility. What if something happened to Melody? What if she fell ill? They had to be able to fend for themselves.

"As a matter of fact, remove the referral condition," he said. "Luciana tells me she hired Melody without a referral, and we'll vet any applicants in person anyway. Let the guild know, will you?"

"Yes, my lord."

With that, Hughes departed for the Chancery, leaving only his wife and Serena in the estate.

"What are your plans for the day, my lady?" the doll asked.

"I really ought to pen those replies to Lady Haumea's and Lady Christina's letters. Would you mind mailing them on your way to the guild this afternoon? I've nothing in particular I'll need your help with after that."

"Of course, my lady, and my apologies. Would that I could split myself as Gentlesister Melody can."

Serena had inherited many things from her creator. She was just as much of a maid and just as bright, but she lacked Melody's power. She could manage some measure of magic, though not much, as mana doubled as her life force. The magic she possessed infused the silver heart on her neck and was most definitely not enough for something as complex as Alter Ego, to say nothing of the fact that her very existence hung on the spell.

Had she been blessed with her sister's gifts, immensity and all, mass-produced Melodys would not be a far-flung reality. A chilling thought.

"Come now, don't sell yourself short," Marianna said. "I'm grateful to have you, Serena. And you're going to the guild expressly see to it that we *don't* have doppelgangers running amok."

"You flatter me, my lady."

They parted ways, Serena making for the kitchen. Grail was waiting there for her.

"Well, good morning, impatient boy. One second, and I'll have your breakfast ready."

Grail impatiently barked in reply.

“Here you are. Eat up.”

The pup buried his face in the bowl at once, nom-nom-ing like his meal might take flight if he wasn’t fast enough. Serena did find it strange that so many of his noises sounded so humanlike, but mostly she found it adorable.

Grail finally looked up, his bowl empty, satisfaction writ on the little one’s face.

“You liked that, did—” As she knelt to collect the bowl, the pup leapt at her with a yip.

Evidently starved of attention this time, Grail set his sights on the doll’s face. His tongue darted for her cheeks and chin, but Serena leaned back on instinct, and the pup instead caught a taste of the silver ornament on her choker.

Instantly, Grail yipped, and his hair stood on end.

“G-Grail?”

The pup stood petrified, eyes wide, tongue hanging out. It was as if a bolt of electricity had zapped the poor thing. Soon enough, he regained his senses, met Serena’s eyes, and yipped again, twisting and thrashing about in Serena’s arms.

He quickly freed himself and bolted out of the kitchen in cartoonish fashion.

“Maybe a bit of static electricity got him. Poor baby.”

Serena tapped the metal heart about her neck. Nothing. Whatever had happened, it instilled Grail with a perpetual fear of Serena from then on, which broke her heart a little. She could not even begin to guess where that fear had come from.

That afternoon, Serena made her way to the guild, where she put forward the requested change for the Rudlebergs’ posting.

“I’ll have that processed right away. But is your house certain they’re willing to hire without referral?”

“Yes, madam,” Serena said. “No one has replied so far, and in any case, we intend on interviewing those who do.”

“Very well. I’ll update your request and have it posted—”

“I-I’ll take it!”

Serena whirled toward the voice to find a pink-haired girl behind her.

“Th-the job, I mean,” the girl said.

She was young, scarcely even a teenager. Her hair hung in two short pigtails, and her hungry, passionate eyes seemed ill-suited to a mere child.

“Back again?” the receptionist said.

Serena turned back toward her. “You know her?”

“She’s an orphan. Seems she’s been short on work of late, so she’s become something of a regular.”

“An orphan? But she’s so little. What kind of work could a girl like her possibly take?”

“Yes, that is the question.” The receptionist sighed.

Once upon a time, some number of employers in the capital might have been willing to take on a child worker. Not so much in contemporary times. With the staging service connecting the kingdom, the capital did not want for able-bodied laborers, and menial housework aside, adult labor would always trump the alternative.

Most citizens welcomed the economic shift. It afforded children more time to be children and play and study. The pink-haired girl was an outlier.

“I wish you’d understand. I have nothing for you, little one,” the receptionist said.

“B-but I…” The girl hung her head, peering up at Serena.

“You want to work for me?” Serena asked.

“Y-yes! You said the job doesn’t need a referral anymore, right?” She bowed her head low. “Please! I’ll do anything!”

Conflicted, Serena held a hand up to her cheek. *She wouldn’t be of much immediate use, that’s for certain. She’s still young and won’t be able to do much at all. Oh, what to do?*

She had not been prepared, mentally or otherwise, to judge a potential coworker right at the guild’s front desk, much less a child. She was well within her rights to turn the girl down,

but that in itself was a gamble. Would they find another applicant so spirited?

Serena did not think so, if she was being frank. They would surely hear from someone after lowering the requirements, but that someone could be anyone.

*She could be an investment. In five or so years, she might prove quite the fine maid. Lady Luciana will be studying for the next three years, and considering His Lordship's position at the Royal Chancery, we can expect to remain in the capital for some time.*

The doll bent to get a good look at the fidgety little girl. She was awfully hygienic for an orphan. Clean. Neat. Her eyes betrayed a keenness, an eagerness to learn. Perhaps she *would* make a fine maid. On second thought, without Melody, Serena was essentially the Rudleberg estate's chief housekeeper. Between this young girl and an old veteran man of the domestic forces, who was more likely to respect the orders of an ostensibly seventeen-year-old (literally zero-year-old) woman?

Even from a practical perspective, this might have been a blessing in disguise.

*It's ultimately His Lordship's and Her Ladyship's decision. I'm only meant to serve as a liaison.*

It was not Serena's place to turn away prospective help based on superficial judgments. In a sense, that made the decision for her.

"The position is for a maid in a noble house," Serena finally said. "Still interested?"

The girl croaked and recoiled a bit at that but quickly found her nerve again. "Yes, madam!"

She had guts. Serena was pleased to see that. "Have you any experience in the field? Any at all?"

"No, madam, but I'm a hard worker!"

She did indeed have guts. Serena had to commend her. "I see. Very well. May I speak with your caretaker?"

The girl lit up and bowed again. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

“Um,” the receptionist stuttered, “this is all very sudden. You’re certain?”

“My lord will decide whether we take her in,” Serena said. “I was instructed to assemble interested parties, whether the posting is up or not. I’m simply doing my duty.”

“So long as your masters don’t mind, I’ll not argue. It keeps her out of the guild, at least. But what about the posting?”

“Please proceed with it. My house is still in need of more servants—a man in particular.”

“As you wish, madam. I’ll see it processed.”

“Thank you kindly.”

With a polite bow, Serena took her leave with her new charge in tow.

“I never got your name, little one,” she said.

“Oh, my name. Of course—it’s Micah!”

On the way to the orphanage, Micah vibrated with excitement, passion burning inside her.

*Now I can finally,* finally *get some money going to the orphanage! I’m gonna steer this plot away from tragedy, so help me God!*

Thus did occur a meeting most strange between the doll wrought by once-Japanese hands and the little once-Japanese grandma. Souls crossing paths between lifetimes. Kurita Maika was in way over her head.

# Chapter 12:
# Micah the Maid-in-Training:
# Featuring the Heroine?

IT HAPPENED WITHOUT WARNING. WITHOUT explanation.

One moment, Kurita Maika was in a hospital bed. The next, “Micah” was in a strange new world, but not an unfamiliar one. Only a few days after being taken to the orphanage, she realized where she was.

Micah spent her days agonizing over the nun who’d rescued her. She could have sworn she knew her. Then, one day, the nun said something that made it all click.

“I hear there was an intruder at the ball at the palace not long ago,” Sister Annabelle said as they cleaned up after lunch. “How frightening.”

“An intruder?”

*If there’s a palace, there must be a king,* Micah reasoned. *This place sure is dangerous.*

She had not yet placed this world, but it was abundantly clear that she wasn’t in Japan anymore. The language they spoke wasn’t Japanese or English or any tongue that she could recognize. Wherever she was, she doubted it was even Earth.

“Pour—*Fare Acqua*.” Water trickled from the nun’s fingertips onto the dirty plate she was cleaning.

They certainly couldn’t do *that* on Earth.

*It’s almost like I got reincarnated into another reality or something. Popular genre. Was all the rage when I was a kid. Wait, how did I get reincarnated if I didn’t die?! Unless… That nap I took. Maybe it was more than a nap.*

She didn’t want to believe it, yet what else could explain all this?

“Something the matter, Micah dear?”

“N-no, Sister. That intruder. What happened exactly?”

“Oh, nothing much to do with us. As I heard it, Royal Academy had to delay the semester.”

“That must have caused a fuss.”

“Pandemonium. The rumors say the palace was in chaos, which is to be expected. The rogue made an attempt on Prince Christopher’s life, the poor thing. Lord Victillium’s daughter was involved too. It’s a miracle nobody was hurt, but I can’t help but worry.” Sister Annabelle stared off into the distance. “I pray that girl is safe.”

“You know the marquess’s daughter?”

“Oh, pardon me. That’s no way to refer to a lady, is it? We’ve only met once.”

“Hm. And she was insufferable and haughty and all around unpleasant, I…assume.”

“Unpleasant? Not at all, Micah. Where in the world did you get… Micah?”

Micah had frozen. Her eyes stared blankly at something a long, long way from their current conversation.

*Lord Victillium. How did I know he’s a marquess? I’ve heard that name.* She racked her brain. *And Prince Christopher too. But where? Why? What…?*

“Micah, dear, are you sure you’re okay?” the nun asked.

“H-huh?” Micah stammered. “Y-yes, I’m fine, sister. Sister… Annabelle.”

“I… Yes, that is my name. I’m beginning to suspect you’ve caught a fever. Let me see your forehead.”

“S-S-Sister Annabelle!” the girl blurted, eyes wide as saucers. “The orphanage caretaker!”

“For goodness’ sake, Micah, what’s gotten into you? I told you who I was the day we met.”

The nun’s concern was beginning to turn genuine, but Micah’s frenzy had only just begun. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together as the memories flooded her mind.

“Sister Annabelle. Orphanage. Prince Christopher. And Victillium. The villainess. Anna-Marie! Then this must be… This

must be the Kingdom of Theolas! The royal capital, Paltescia!"

"Y-yes, you have the right of it—Micah! Where are you going?!"

The girl flew from the orphanage, and then a ways outside of it, turning to get a good look at the exterior. Any lingering doubt vanished. "I know this architecture. This shape. It's straight out of a background from the game."

*I'm in* The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*!* The fog in Micah's mind dissipated in a flash. Her adult memories remained shrouded in a haze, but her younger self came much more clearly into view. *I don't believe it. But I have to. This is the game. Wait, this is the game!*

She turned her attention to the towering palace looming far off in the center of the city. If she wasn't positive before, that sight solidified her suspicions. If that talk of an intruder was true, there was one more thing she could be certain of now.

*The story's already started! It's April, so I guess that... Oh crap, the orphanage's side arc is going to start soon! But that can't happen. They can't shut down when I just got here!*

A side story would start in May in the game. A sort of covert date between the prince and the heroine, though that was only a cover for the prince's true goal. He was out to take stock of his kingdom, observe it, with the heroine along to help. They would arrive last at this very orphanage, where they would learn that an administrator had been abusing funds, robbing the home of vital income, and relegating no small number of children to squalor over the years. The heroine would take it upon herself then to rehabilitate the orphanage.

*I can't let things go wrong. Not now. Not after how good they've been to me! I don't care what the plot says, I'm not letting anything happen to this place!*

In her panic, Micah had neglected to note several important things. Firstly, that Sister Annabelle had denied that Anna-Marie was at all unpleasant. Secondly, that the academy had to delay its term. Were things proceeding according to the plot, the academy would have been in session on time, beginning the very day after the attack.

Thirdly, and most importantly to her, Micah was not living in squalor at all. For an orphanage struggling financially and on the verge of bankruptcy, Micah was eating quite well. That should not have been the case if the May side story was supposed to happen.

Shock had deadened Micah's ability to reason. All that mattered to her was her death, her rebirth in this new world, and the danger threatening to end her second life.

"What in the world are you doing, sprinting off like that?" Sister Annabelle called, trotting up to her.

Micah was too busy muttering harried musings to notice. *I don't recognize my face from the game, so I must not be a named character,* she thought. *Just a random orphan, then? So all I'm supposed to do is wait around for the heroine to show up?*

"Micah?" Annabelle called again.

"No... No!" the girl shouted.

Sister Annabelle nearly jumped out of her skin. Patience be with her.

*Screw sitting on my hands just because I'm some background character! I'm gonna do something about this!*

Admirable aims, but Micah was a stranger in a strange land. She lacked the knowledge, the power, and the connections to do much of anything. If she wanted the latter, she'd have to wait until May when the main characters would arrive, since anyone who was anyone would be at Royal Academy.

*For the love of...! I thought in stories like this I was supposed to be able to, like, use past knowledge to fix everything! Things aren't supposed to be hard. Are you kidding me?!*

Alas, life *was* hard. All the more so in a country with a socially stratified populace. Commoners did not get to choose their circumstances, and children even less so, and orphans *much* less so.

But Micah was a sore loser. "Sister Annabelle!"

The nun jumped again. "Wh-what *is it*, child?"

"I'm going to work!"

“How, why, and from where did you even get such an idea?!”

If Micah couldn’t resolve this situation on her own, she could at least survive it. First and foremost, she needed to pull her own weight. A simple measure, but tried and true in times of crisis.

“There’s a guild in town for finding jobs, isn’t there?” she said. “I’m going to try my luck there!”

“Now hold on!” the nun interjected. “You’re only a child. You’re not going to find much of anything at your—”

“Sister, the orphanage needs me. I won’t let you down!”

“Micah, please, just...! Slow down! Good lord, you’re fast! Micah!”

The child was beyond help today. Strange, given she was usually such a mild-mannered girl. But single-minded obsession took over the moment Micah realized she’d awoken in a game world.

Some time later, she came trudging back to the orphanage. Still extremely unemployed.

And still a sore loser.

She went back again. And again. And again. Oblivious to all the things she’d previously ignored. May came and went, the date of the side story passed, and still Micah visited the guild with the stubbornness of an ox.

After two months of failed attempts, at last fortune deigned to smile upon her. She happened to stumble across an open maid position moments before its posting, no referral required. Through sheer force of will, she’d landed herself an interview.

*Yes! Finally, I can start actually doing something for the orphanage. Hang on, Sister Annabelle! Help’s on the way!*

Micah hummed the whole way back to the orphanage, Serena in tow.

Negotiations did not take long.

“You’ve been wanting this for so long, dear,” Sister Annabelle said. “You can go, but know that you’ll always have a home here if you ever want to come back.”

“Thank you, Sister! I’ll send a little something in the mail as soon as I get paid!”

“Well, you don’t need to go that far.” Annabelle laughed dryly. Micah didn’t see what was so funny.

Then they went to the estate to meet with the lady of the house. Again, negotiations did not take long.

“Well, aren’t you adorable?” Marianna cooed. “We’d be glad to have you.”

“My lady?” Serena said.

Matters of servants, especially those relating to women, were typically the domain of the lady of the house. She had final say. So Serena had thought it proper to speak with Marianna before Hughes, but she hadn’t expected things to progress so quickly.

The countess placed a dainty hand on her cheek. “There’s nothing for it, Serena. How can we know another will simply fall into our laps if we turn this one away?”

Serena did not argue. That had been her own logic as well.

Hughes later gave his approval with similar brevity for the same reason as his wife, making the arrangement official. House Rudleberg had its newest maid(-in-training).

“Thank you so much! I won’t let you down!” Micah declared.

The young girl’s spirit left the lord and lady utterly smitten, and soon they got to theorizing about how Luciana might get on with a little sister. Later that night, they would do more than theorize.

The next day, the fourth day of week two of the semester, Micah rose dark and early. They woke before the sun every day at the orphanage, so this routine came as no shock. Quickly getting dressed, she exited her new room next to Serena’s and met the doll in the hallway.

“Good morning, Miss Ser... Serena!”

“Good morning, Micah. We’ll work on your manners.”

Still a Japanese junior high school girl at heart, Micah couldn’t help but fall into old habits of address. But, as Serena was quick to point out, “Miss” was not the proper form of address for a fellow maid.

“All in due time,” Serena said. “How is your roommate?”

“Fast asleep, but he was making some funny noises. Weird puppy.”

Grail was indeed a weird puppy. After the traumatic experience with Serena’s choker, the pup had become downright petrified of his former friend and now refused to sleep in the same room as her. So Serena passed his care on to Micah, though with no small amount of somberness.

Just what had she done to scare the poor thing so badly? Serena could not unravel the mystery.

“I swear I heard him laugh and growl, ‘Fall before me!’” Micah mimicked in a gravelly tone. “If you hadn’t warned me, Mi—Serena, I might have screamed bloody murder. At least he’s cute, I guess.”

“Isn’t he?” Serena giggled.

When she lived in Japan, Micah had seen some funny clips on TV of animals making seemingly human noises in their sleep. Grail’s murmurings sounded a whole lot more like complete thoughts, but maybe that was just how this world worked. Micah dropped the subject. Truly incredible, the gymnastics the mind could perform when faced with the incomprehensible.

With the morning chatter settled, it was time to learn. This was no schoolhouse, however, and Micah’s lessons would be hands-on. The new maid’s training began with that most maidly of responsibilities: cleaning, the central pillar of the art of domestic service. A maid without an eye for cleanliness likely wouldn’t excel at any of her more important roles. After all, how could someone who could not wield a dustpan balance a tea tray?

Serena instructed Micah to prioritize thoroughness over speed for her first day. So Micah did. It took her the entire morning to clean not a stove, but the area *around* the stove.

Thankfully this did not hamper the estate's ordinary operations, as Serena saw to everything else in the meantime.

While her teacher inspected her work, Micah observed the gap in their abilities with awe and respect. *Fantasy maids are something else. Or maybe maids were this good on Earth too, back in the day. Man. Maids are crazy.*

The Earth maids from "back in the day" might have had a thing or two to say about that, but regardless, Serena was operating on Melody Standards. Even without magic, those standards were absurdly high and not at all a good example for the burgeoning servant.

Indeed, Micah's work failed to impress Serena. Serena sandwiched tactful critiques between positive reinforcement, but nonetheless she could not deem Micah's work passable.

Micah's spirits plummeted. She'd done her very best.

Serena chuckled under her breath. "Being a maid isn't as easy as it looks, is it? Raise your head. It's your first day, and you'll only get better from here."

"Y-yes, Miss Serena! Thank you, Miss Serena!"

"I hope that extends to your etiquette as well. Sooner rather than later." Serena sighed even as she smiled.

Micah couldn't help herself. Serena reminded her too much of a supportive teacher or a senpai giving a motivational speech at a club. Secretly, Serena found it somewhat endearing.

Three days passed uneventfully, until the inevitable meeting arrived at last.

"His Lordship's daughter is coming?" Micah said.

It was the evening of the sixth school day. Tomorrow was Royal Academy's designated day off, so the Rudleberg estate would soon become just a little more lively.

"Lady Luciana, yes," Serena replied. "I apologize for not telling you sooner. It slipped my mind entirely while we focused on your training."

"That's okay. So Lady Luciana's her name. Huh..." The sense that she should know that name nagged at Micah's mind.

"And her attendant as well, Gentlesister Melody."

“Sister? You have a sister?”

“Oh, not really, but she is as a sister to me. She’s been away assisting Lady Luciana while she attends Royal Academy, but Gentlesister Melody is the head maid in the household.”

“It’s not you?! I thought you were the boss around here, Serena. Melody must be something else.”

“That she is. I pale in comparison to her talent. I’ve told both of them about you by letter, so when they arrive, I expect you to put into practice everything I’ve taught you regarding manners. For Lady Luciana *and* Gentlesister Melody.”

*What does she mean she “pales in comparison”?! This world’s maids are nuts! I can’t keep up with these people!*

With nerves frayed on both sides, Luciana and Melody entered the estate and met four eager faces.

After greeting her parents, Luciana turned to the one person she didn’t recognize. “Is this our new maid-in-training?”

“Yes, my lady,” Serena replied. “Micah is her name. Micah, introduce yourself, if you would.”

“I-I am honored to make your acquaintance, m-my lady,” the new girl stammered. “Micah, maid-in-training, at your service.” She punctuated the greeting with a curtsy, albeit a clumsy, imperfect one.

Luciana did not seem to mind, and smiled as she replied, “Welcome to the estate!”

Micah gasped quietly. *Wow, she’s pretty*. *Is she in the game? Luciana Rudleberg sounds familiar, but I definitely don’t recognize her.* She felt she would remember a face like hers, but again her memory failed her. *Oh, right, Serena wanted me to be polite to that Gentlesomething girl, Melody. I’m guessing that’s the girl standing… behind…*

“Gentlesister, this is Micah, our newest addition,” Serena said. “Don’t forget yourself, Micah. Micah?”

Micah was too busy gaping to hear. At last, one of her older memories broke through her hazy recollections. She relived a moment from mere moments before her supposed passing.

*Black hair. Dark eyes. That uniform. It can't be. But it is! She's...!*

"Pleased to meet you, Micah," the maid said. "I'm Melody, another maid in the estate. I very much look forward to working together!"

The hair was wrong. The eyes were wrong. But Micah knew that smile, and it belonged to none other than Cecilia Leginbarth, heroine of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, the game Micah had played obsessively as a child in Japan.

*Wh-wh-what is she doing* here*?!* Micah shrieked in her head.

Were her thoughts not a vortex of confusion, she might have let those words escape from her gaping mouth.

## Chapter 13:
## Creeping Envy in a Broken Plot

MICAH MANAGED TO SAVE FACE BY excusing her rudeness under the pretense of nerves. That night, though, she returned to her mind palace.

*What the heck is the heroine doing here? And as a maid?! She's supposed to be a student at the academy!* She was positive that the maid was Cecilia Leginbarth. Luciana Rudleberg had finally clicked into place as well. *Luciana's supposed to be the first boss. The Jealous Witch. How could I have forgotten? Why didn't I…? Yeah, right. I know why I never realized. What about this entire friggin' place screams "Ignoble"?!*

The visual novel version of Luciana Rudleberg was a sad, miserable, pitiable girl. An Ignoble. A could-have-been with a beauty so neglected even the world's most charismatic charmer could not have found the words to flatter her. Her manor was a haunted house.

*I've seen her sprite in the game, and that's not her! She's an entirely different character here!*

Luciana was no could-have-been anymore. She was the Fae Princess, ethereal and breathtaking, so it was no wonder Micah hadn't recognized her at first. According to Serena, Luciana had Melody to thank for her transformation and everything else that differed from Micah's preexisting knowledge. Melody had turned a shack into a manor and raggedy dresses into ball gowns. She kept their kitchen cupboards perpetually stocked and molded her lady into a work of art. To Micah, that sounded less like a maid and more like a miracle worker.

Clearly this world differed from the game Micah knew. A measure of calm gradually came over her.

*Come to think of it, it's June. The orphanage side arc should have begun by now, but I haven't seen anything to imply that it has. Or…that it* needs *to. The orphanage has actually been treating me really well. Wait a minute…*

The entire reason Micah had groveled for this job was to protect the people who'd taken her in, but the hardship she had braced for never arrived. As far as she could tell, the orphanage was safely afloat.

Then she remembered Sister Annabelle's dry laugh days ago.

*No. No, no, no! Please, God, don't tell me I've been freaking out over* nothing*!*

Micah rolled and flailed about her bed in humiliated agony. She'd thought herself oh so great and knowledgeable because she assumed she knew things she shouldn't. How self-absorbed could she be?

She buried her face in her pillow and screamed. Maybe if she held the pillow against her face long enough she'd suffocate and free herself from this pain. *Okay. Something's changed things in this world. Actually, didn't Sister Annabelle say Royal Academy delayed the term because of the attack on the ball?* More flailing. *Stupid, stupid, stupid! It was staring me in the face for months and I didn't even notice!*

To say she felt a little silly would be the understatement of the century. This wasn't the world she knew anymore. Something had warped and changed the events of the game. Chief among them…

*Seriously, what is the heroine doing working as a maid?! How's anything in the story supposed to happen without her around to trigger it?! Wait, but the attack happened. So that means the story's progressing. But without a heroine?! Okay, that settles it! Melody's the cause of* all *this nonsense!*

Fortunately, Micah would get a chance to interrogate her tomorrow. It was technically her day off, but apparently "resting" didn't compute with Micah.

*I've got to figure this out. Be absolutely sure what's happening. So long as the Dark One's out and about without the Saint to stop it, the whole world could be in danger!*

The Dark One was actually far too sleepy at that moment to endanger anything. And Micah was far too sleepy to prevent it from endangering anything, as a matter of fact. Bidding the little

pup next to her goodnight, Micah went to bed with renewed purpose.

At five on the dot the next morning, she stood in the hallway.

“Good morning, Micah,” Melody said. This morning, Melody would serve as Micah’s mentor, seeing as they had yet to get to know each other. Serena would handle the rest of the day’s chores.

“Good morning, Miss—er, Melody.”

“Miss?”

“My apologies. It won’t happen again.”

“No? But I rather liked the sound of it! Please, I insist. At least while we’re alone.”

“I… Okay?”

Something about that show of respect struck a chord in Melody. Perhaps she’d been taken by a sense of camaraderie. But her mannerisms, her giddiness, they weren’t at all how Micah pictured the heroine.

*She’s like a different person,* she thought. *Different person…*

Was it possible? Was it possible that the heroine, too, had been reincarnated into her role? It would explain a lot. Maybe she didn’t like the prospect of life at the academy as a count’s daughter and used her knowledge of the game to alter the course of events. Why choose to be a maid, though, and for the Rudlebergs no less?

Micah was getting ahead of herself. *I might be sticking my neck out by asking this, but it’s the quickest way to get to the heart of the matter.*

“Well then, Miss Melody, I actually have a question for you,” Micah said.

“Ask away!”

“Are you familiar with *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*?”

“Oh? Is that a story?”

*A-all right, swing and a miss.* Micah eyed Melody closely, carefully, not wanting to miss a single twitch of her eye. She saw nothing. She read nothing but confusion in Melody's expression. No surprise, no hesitation, not a twinge of anything that might betray her.

If only Micah could read minds.

*The House Victillium girl, Lady Anna-Marie, asked me that same question,* Melody noted. Maybe if she'd uttered that bit aloud, Micah might have gotten somewhere. Alas.

"Is it famous in the capital?" Melody asked. "Perhaps I should familiarize myself with it."

"O-oh, no, not exactly! Don't trouble yourself, Miss!"

"No?" Melody raised an eyebrow but let the matter drop. Evidently she wasn't all that curious.

Micah hid a sigh behind a smile. *So she wasn't reincarnated like me, but then what is she doing here?*

"So, um, what made you want to become a maid?" Micah asked.

"Me?" Melody flushed like a bashful maiden. "Well, because it's what I love."

*Okay, that's literally the expression her sprite makes during confession scenes! Why?!*

"I've looked up to maids since I was little," Melody went on. "And when my mother passed, I swore I'd follow my dream to become the most perfect maid in the whole world! That's actually when I learned how to cast my maid magic, come to think of it."

"Maid magic?" Micah's eyebrows raised. She remembered nothing like that among the setting's established schools of spellcraft. How would "maid magic" even function mechanically?

"Ah, yes, a perfect segue into what we'll be doing today," Melody said. "A proper retinue ought to assess all its members' capabilities in order to increase efficiency and cooperation, so I'm going to familiarize you with my own personal repertoire of spells through demonstration."

"Demonstration?"

Melody proceeded to absolutely demolish each and every maidly task with an awe-inspiring display of magic. Remembering the hard-learned lesson of last week, of course. Everything in moderation. Though the surge of sanitizing sorcery that swept through the estate's halls was no less impressive for Melody's restraint.

Micah could offer only a dry laugh at the display. *Yeah, no, she's the heroine all right. And she's mastered her powers so early in the story. Granted, it's all hyper-geared toward…maid stuff.*

Suffice to say, Micah learned exceptionally little about her job that day. Maid magic made for a poor teacher, and an even worse example.

*Maybe she was reincarnated, maybe she wasn't, but it's obvious Cecilia—er, Miss Melody is the cause of all the changes to the story. I wonder how things are at the academy. We're coming up on when the Jealous Witch arc is supposed to begin.*

"Now, Gentlesister, how is Micah supposed to learn anything like that?" Serena said. "Casting spells isn't teaching."

"Y-you're right. Terribly sorry."

Micah wondered which of the two really wore the pants in this household.

"I'm off, Mother, Father," Luciana said.

"Study well," Hughes replied.

"And do watch your health," his wife added. "Melody, see to it that she does."

"Of course, my lady," Melody said. "Serena, Micah, I leave the estate in your capable hands."

"You may rest easy, Gentlesister," Serena assured her.

"I'll do my best," Micah declared.

The next morning, Luciana and Melody prepared to return to Royal Academy. Micah frowned as she watched the carriage trundle away.

As far as she could tell, Melody wasn't reincarnated. That was all Micah could assume from how utterly oblivious she

seemed to most things plot-related. But she *was* the heroine, and her being here would surely cause unforeseen problems as story events unfolded. She'd correctly landed at the academy somehow, but she was supposed to be a student, not a maid.

Micah assumed that only those with knowledge of the game got reincarnated into it, an assumption she'd perhaps inherited from her past friendship with Asakura Anna, who had committed that very same mistake. The experience bias was palpable.

*The fact that there was an attack on the ball all but proves that the Dark One exists. But the only one who can fight it is over here using her legendary powers to dust furniture… This is a hundred kinds of screwed up.* Their one saving grace was that Melody had clearly awakened to her powers. In the event of the unthinkable, they still had a fighting chance, and Micah was more than willing to take what she could get at this point. *The Jealous Witch isn't far off now. I should investigate more when Melody and Luciana return.*

What else could she do? An unnamed, unseen orphan was as powerless against the narrative as she was against unemployment.

"Come, Micah. We've much to do," Serena said.

"Yes, madam."

Alongside a smiling Serena, Micah finally left the foyer.

"I hate always leaving you with our luggage, Melody," Luciana said.

"It's no trouble, my lady. Have a good day at school."

Luciana parted ways with her maid and strolled toward the campus proper. On the way to class, she spied two familiar faces in the courtyard. The men sat on a bench near the thruway.

"Good morning, Your Highness, Lord Maxwell," she said.

"Greetings, Lady Luciana," Christopher replied.

The pair stood and approached Luciana, both clutching documents in their hands.

"Hard at work this early?" Luciana asked.

“Student council business. We were discussing some things before class,” Maxwell replied.

“Oh, well, I apologize for intruding,” Luciana said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

Maxwell grinned. “It was a welcome distraction. We ought to get to class ourselves.”

“That’s a relief,” Luciana said. “You must be awfully busy, though, if *this* is the only time and place you can stop and talk.”

“Indeed.” Christopher shrugged with theatrical weariness. “What cruel irony that we should share the same class yet be so far apart, my good lady.”

Luciana giggled. “Please, Your Highness.”

Maxwell couldn’t stifle a chuckle either.

What a sight this was. Three shining stars, icons of nobility and beauty, laughing together. Such fellowship truly warmed the heart and inspired confidence. Strangers might have assumed they were good friends when they were, in fact, merely acquaintances. The formalities constricting their speech made that apparent to any who could hear it.

But that did not concern the one watching from the shadows well outside of earshot. Not that it would have changed her mind a bit anyway.

Her eyes were fixed on that golden sun of a girl and her radiant smile. She clenched her fist, trembling with an urge she dared not put into words. She stood in the shadows, bearing that burden until the trio departed for their respective classes.

She vented a sigh and made to do the same.

*“Such exquisite envy. Such delicious darkness.”*

The girl whipped around at the sound of a raspy voice. The moment she did, something jolted her from behind. She looked down. A dark, hazy blade jutted out of her chest.

“Wh…what?”

There was no pain. She stared death in the face, but it did not hurt. Her skin crawled. Something black crept and slithered inside her. It whispered seductive evils to her. To give in. To accept the “gift.” All the while, something else begged her to

ignore the voice, to resist with all her being. The urges battled inside her head, driving her to the brink of insanity.

Pain. Pleasure. Hatred. Love. Disdain. Mercy. A plea for help. Sadness. Happiness. Despair.

*Someone…please…*

Her heart shuddered under the strain. A barrage of emotions clawed at her synapses. Inwardly, she cried out for a savior to end her suffering, but no one came. Still she begged, and still no one came.

She wanted to laugh at herself. At how pathetic she was. At how unfair this was. No one would come for her.

They would have come for *that other girl*, though.

*“You have been wronged, and you crave justice.”*

A voice cackled behind her. It crept up her spine and echoed inside her addled brain.

As best she could, she turned toward it. Her eyes widened. “Y-you’re…”

*“Justice I can provide, my new pawn!”*

His grimy purple hair and filthy rags had no place on Royal Academy grounds. With his gaunt, malnourished build, he cut a figure that Theolans wouldn’t forget for some time to come. The assailant of the Spring Ball, Bjork Quichel, met the girl’s eyes with a crazed look that would haunt her nightmares.

A single tear streamed down her face, catching the last of her light.

Another tear fell. This one from Bjork, though he did not know it.

The Jealous Witch had entered the fray, and *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* had its boss.

Rain pounded down that night, long after Royal Academy went to sleep. It lasted mere minutes. By morning, the soil and stones would be dry, leaving no trace of even a single drop of moisture.

Melody, fast asleep, did not and would not notice. Only one would notice. Only one would sense the twisted evil and dark magic contaminating the soot-colored raindrops. The one who harbored that very same mana—a little silver puppy.

# Chapter 14:
# The Jealous Witch Incident

JUNE PASSED INTO JULY, AND ROYAL ACADEMY entered its second month. Luciana fit well into her class thanks to her bright, charming personality, and the hushed murmurings that followed her gradually faded away.

She got along well enough with Olivia on the surface, but at times she could sense something malicious in the way the duke's daughter looked at her. As much as Luciana wished they could be friends, theirs was a tentative relationship. Luna, on the other hand, was perhaps Luciana's closest friend in class, and the two only grew closer. Luciana's ongoing struggles with spellcasting aside, academy life was proving quite satisfying and fulfilling.

For Melody's part, she was (ostensibly) keeping busy with her maid duties in the mornings and with assisting Lect's class in the afternoons. Although the class only met twice a week, Melody helped with paperwork and prep on the off days. Lect may have once dreaded these tasks, but he didn't mind them as much when he had his new helper beside him. Not that their relationship had budged an inch.

"You lost your pencil?" Melody said one day after dinner.

"Yeah," Luciana explained. "I had it the whole time during morning classes, but after lunch, it up and vanished. Luna helped me look for it, but we couldn't find it anywhere."

"And you only had the one, didn't you? How did you fare the rest of the day?"

"Luna lent me one, so I got by."

"Friends are useful to have in such cases, aren't they? I'll prepare you a replacement pencil shortly."

"Thanks." Luciana groaned. "Such a waste. Sorry, Father."

Pencils were the standard writing implement in this world, and while not prohibitively expensive, they weren't cheap either. Given how long a single pencil could last, Luciana was painfully aware of how unfortunate it was to lose one.

Many real-world Western European countries did not default to pencils. Despite this world basing itself on such countries, the Japanese developers brought with them many Japanese influences. Luciana certainly didn't mind the discrepancy, and Melody was more than willing to accept it as a quirk of the fantasy setting.

It was a meaningless conversation. Sometimes things went missing, and this was only the first such instance. The lady and her maid smiled it off.

But the next day, Melody noticed something peculiar while sorting through her lady's after-school laundry.

"Where's her handkerchief?" It should have been in her uniform skirt. Melody searched through her lady's other things but still found nothing.

"My handkerchief?" Luciana repeated later when Melody asked her about it. "It wasn't in my skirt?"

"Not that I could find. Have you done something with it, my lady?"

"I don't *think* so. Maybe I put it in my bag?" Luciana dug through the bag, yet came up with nothing. "Come on, two things in one week? What's going on with me?"

"You went to dance class this afternoon for your elective, yes? Could you have misplaced it then?"

The lady hummed. "I don't know. We did have to change into different outfits, but I could have sworn I left my handkerchief in my pocket. Where could it have gone? I really liked that one too."

"We have some leftover fabric at the estate. I'll make you one just like it, my lady."

"Sorry, Melody."

"Don't lose this next one," the maid chuckled.

Luciana paid extra mind to her things and their locations from then on. And so the vanishings ceased.

If only that was where the story ended.

In the first day of the second week of July, Melody returned from the estate with her lady and began her morning duties.

It happened in the communal laundry. Frantic footsteps interrupted Melody's chat with Mary-Ann, one of Anna-Marie's maids.

Another maid burst into the room. "Melody! Have you heard?!"

"Heard what? What's the rush, Sasha?" Melody asked.

"I don't believe we've had the pleasure," Mary-Ann said.

"Ah," said Melody, "this is Sasha with House Invidia. Sasha, this is Mary-Ann, a Victillium maid."

"Huh? Oh, er, pleasure, Mary-Ann," Sasha sputtered.

"The pleasure is mine, Sasha," Mary-Ann replied.

The two bowed to each other, and for a moment there was peace in the laundry room. But the panic returned like dark clouds rolling in to cover the sun once Sasha remembered why she had come. "Agh, there's no time! Melody! Have you heard what just happened at the academy?"

"I can't say I have," Melody said. "Is it something I should know about?"

"Class A is in utter chaos!"

Class A—the classroom their mistresses belonged to.

"What?!" Melody gasped.

"Goodness!" Mary-Ann breathed.

Notices went out to each dormitory not long after. Royal Academy suspended classes for the rest of the day, including Lect's chivalry class, leaving Melody with nothing to do but wait in the dorm.

Luciana returned straight after lunch and relayed the news.

"Paint? All over the classroom? The walls, the floor, the ceiling? Even the *blackboard*?" Melody gasped.

"It was like someone took a bucket and just, *sploosh*. All over the place." Luciana faced her desk, working on the day's homework in her study.

Melody put the finishing touches on some tea. “Who would do such a thing?”

“It was all over the desks and chairs too, but it didn’t get inside the desks, weirdly enough. Silver linings, I suppose.” Luciana spun her pencil and sighed. It was a rather thin silver lining.

“The paint didn’t hit anything inside the desks? But how is that possible?”

*If the act was as haphazard as my lady says, anything left untouched would have to be* intentionally *left untouched. But why?* The harder Melody thought about it, the less sense it made. Her frown deepened.

“How does the academy intend to address this?” she asked.

“It’s going to take some time to clean everything. A few days, it seems. We’re being transferred to a temporary classroom in the meantime, and lessons are continuing as scheduled.”

“I see. I’m amazed they haven’t canceled anything, seeing as this affected His Highness as well.”

“They considered it, but His Highness himself insisted. He argued that we were already too far behind schedule after the first incident.”

Melody’s eyes widened. “His Highness said that? After his own classroom was vandalized?”

“He’s a dashing man. His decisiveness was very attractive, I will say. Lady Anna-Marie too. She was a model representative of the student council and maintained order so the panic never actually spread very far, while I just stood there with my jaw on the floor.” Luciana’s self-deprecation carried an edge of pride for her friends. “I suppose I could learn a thing or two from them.” She spun her pencil again.

“A lady holds her pencil properly,” Melody admonished. “Where in the world did you even learn to do that? Wait, my lady, is that…?”

“Hm? Oh, you noticed. Yeah, it’s the one I lost.”

“Where in the world did you find it?”

“Our teacher picked it up by his podium while investigating the aftermath of the vandalism.”

“Perhaps it rolled its way over somehow, but doesn’t the school clean the rooms every day after class?”

“They must have missed it. I’m just glad to have it back, personally.”

“I…suppose.”

*Would they really tolerate such oversights in His Highness’s classroom?* Melody wondered.

Something didn’t sit right with the maid. While her lady busied herself with her studies, something told Melody this wasn’t over.

“Be still—*Silence*.” Anna-Marie was alone in her Upper Hall bedroom. Even Claris had been shooed away. With a magical flick of the wrist, she ensured no one but ghosts could disturb her solitude. Or so she wanted it to seem. “It’s safe to come out.”

He emerged from a shadow by her bed. “Never thought we’d actually use that thing.” Prince Christopher stared at the ceiling as he patted the dust off his clothing. “You really think me being here’s such a good idea, Anna? You could’ve come to me.”

“Either way we’re stuck in holy matrimony forever if we get found out. Suck it up.”

Christopher clicked his tongue but offered no argument.

Underground tunnels connected the dormitories, but the tight campus security prevented any funny business. Anna-Marie and Christopher had created their own personal secret passages during construction to keep up their trademark trysts. Theoretically, they would seal off the routes after their time, hopefully saving any future princes and marquess’s daughters from potential scandal. Theoretically.

“I’m guessing this is about the game if you’ve got me skulking around like this,” the prince said, availing himself of the nearby sofa.

Anna-Marie took a seat on her bed and nodded. “He’s learning. I think it’s safe to assume this confirms that the first big

event, the Jealous Witch Incident, is officially in motion."

"The thing from this morning?"

"Right. The Dark One is supposed to possess a certain student and try to frame the heroine for a bunch of crimes. There's three big events to look out for, the first being the paint. We saw that today. The second should involve vandalizing desks, specifically the desks of commoners with good grades. The third will be a girl getting doused in water."

"Wow, that's a lot more vanilla than I expected. I thought we were in for some, I dunno, real sinister stuff."

"You say that like today wasn't total chaos. The damage adds up."

"I guess." Christopher scratched at his head, unconvinced. This was all small-time bullying like something out of a kid's manga. Then again, he wouldn't have wanted to be on the receiving end of any of it. He ultimately concluded that bullying was bad, regardless of scale. Truly a momentous discovery.

"We need to work out what we can do about it. Thing is..." Anna-Marie sighed. She knew just about all there was to know about *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, for all the good that would do them. They were so horribly off track that her knowledge might be for nothing.

"Not a whole lot we *can* do without a heroine, huh?" Christopher said. "It'd be one thing if that meant we could just skip the whole thing, but that ain't happening. And now we don't even know who the main characters are."

"There very well may be a force in the world compelling these plot events to take place. You'd think that'd include making the heroine *part* of those events, but I guess not!" Anna-Marie said.

"Our Jealous Witch is probably totally different too. So much for you and that noggin of yours, huh, Anna?"

Anna-Marie grumbled. In the game, the Jealous Witch referred to Luciana Rudleberg, but she no longer fit the role. There was no poverty to nurture her inferiority complex, nor a comparatively happy-go-lucky heroine to envy, and thus nothing for the Dark One to take hold of. Melody had made sure of that.

But those were only the obvious factors at play.

“We have to consider the fact that Luciana’s our acting substitute heroine,” Anna-Marie reasoned. “It’s all but certain at this point.” Another sigh.

“What, because of the pencil thing?”

Following the paint incident, they’d moved to a temporary classroom. There, Instructor Regus announced he’d found a pencil during his investigation of the ruined classroom and asked whom it belonged to. When no one came forward, he revealed it bore the letter L, prompting Luciana to suggest that it might have been hers.

“She did mention having lost it a few days ago,” Anna-Marie said.

“It’s a classic move. Leave something at the scene of the crime that belongs to the person you’re trying to frame.”

“In the game, it belongs to the heroine.”

“So our first boss gets to be the protagonist this time around. First the ball, now this. Sheesh, this plot’s all kinds of screwed up. What the heck’s causing all this crap?” Christopher winced. “Er, right. Us.”

Neither of them had played their roles properly, so they only had themselves to blame for the deviations. Well, themselves and a certain oblivious maid fanatic. But she was the furthest thing from their minds.

“We’re definitely responsible to a degree, but there’s no point dredging all that up again,” Anna-Marie said. “Let’s focus on the problem at hand. Since the event has triggered, that must mean the Dark One escaped after the ball and is still at large. There’s also the issue of our substitute heroine not actually being the Saint.”

“That’s what it comes down to, huh? Doesn’t matter who our sub ends up being, because none of ’em will ever fit the role. Only one Saint out there.”

“That’s where we come in,” Anna-Marie said. “We have to do everything we can to pick up the slack, otherwise we flub the conclusion and the Dark One gets even stronger.”

“Or worse, Luciana gets hurt,” Christopher said. “So give me some good news. Tell me you’ve got eyes on a potential culprit.”

“There’s *one* person I *might* be suspicious of.”

“Yeah? Who?”

Olivia’s face flashed through Anna-Marie’s mind. She shook her head. “It’s just a hunch. Don’t want to throw accusations yet or color your perspective. I’ll keep you unbiased for now.”

“Makes sense, I guess. If you say so. Anyway, who’s the victim of that third thing that’s supposed to happen? The girl who gets doused in water.”

“Oh. Her. It’s, er, Lady Olivia Rincot’dor.”

Which was one of several reasons Anna-Marie questioned her suspicion. Olivia didn’t like Luciana, but that wasn’t much to go on when she herself was meant to be a victim of the events to come. At the same time, Anna-Marie couldn’t discount the possibility that, like the main characters themselves, the victims could have changed.

There were too many ifs and maybes and possibilities. She could only wait and see how things progressed.

*Who is she?* she agonized. *Who is the Jealous Witch this time?*

How Anna-Marie wished she could live the carefree life her wayward heroine did.

# Chapter 15:
# Breakthroughs Good and Bad

DAYS PASSED. WITH THE PAINT INCIDENT tidied up, Luciana and her classmates returned to their classroom, though questions remained. Who was responsible? Why had they done it?

At least their school days had returned to normal.

At Lect's behest, Melody had come to the Royal Academy library.

"Excuse me," she said to the attendant, "may I enter?"

"Your permit, please."

Melody produced it. Lect had given her a permit, or rather a letter serving as a provisional permit. The library was off-limits to anyone other than students or faculty, so Melody could only enter in her capacity as Lect's envoy.

Once inside, she immediately set to work gathering the texts he'd requested. Daunting though her first foray into the library was, lest we forget, Melody was in fact a young genius. She ascertained the library's sorting methods and classification system with ease, thereby uncovering the locations of everything she needed. If the staff ever found themselves short of librarians, here was one to strongly consider. Doubtless she could have found any book by its title alone, as useless as that skill was in her current line of work.

"That's everything," she murmured. A smirk spread across her lips. "Now then."

Melody set off between the shelves at a leisurely pace, unburdened by responsibility, though also not wasting time. Lect himself had given her a curfew with leave to browse as she wished until the appointed hour. This had powerfully motivated Melody to finish her work quickly.

The knight had his wiles, it seemed. He knew how his beloved swooned at the mere mention of the library. Perhaps if

he facilitated her passions, she might become more receptive to his. All is fair in love and war, after all.

Which was, of course, sophistry. In truth, Lect only wanted to make Melody happy. Mostly.

“Oh, my lady could use this.”

Melody picked out and opened a book on the fundamentals of magic. It was simple and easy to follow, presumably meant for children, and perfect for Luciana’s current skill level.

Luciana had succeeded in perceiving her mana back in June but still struggled with the next step. The leap from mana to spell proved difficult for her to grasp. Try as Melody might to convey the concept, the maid’s genius worked against her, as her innate talent rendered her a flawed teacher. To say nothing of the fact that she was entirely self-taught and commanded world-bending powers through little more than gut instinct.

Melody finished perusing and replaced the book. She could have borrowed it under Lect’s name, but she hesitated to deviate from her explicit instructions while operating under someone else’s name. When it was time, she pried herself away and returned to Lect’s office with the prescribed items in hand.

“Grrr... Lamplight—*Luce*!” Luciana stared hard at the tip of her finger, which remained decidedly unlit.

Once it became apparent that no spontaneous illumination was imminent, she slumped.

“Keep your chin up, my lady,” Melody said. “Believe in yourself. I know I do!”

“Okay. You’re right. One more time!” With all her focus and more, Luciana concentrated on the current of mana coursing through her body. Gathering all she could into her finger, she pictured the image of a small, gentle light. “Lamplight—*Luce*!”

No lamplight appeared.

“Forget it!” she blurted, throwing herself onto the bed. “Why won’t it work?! I’m focusing on my finger like I’m supposed to! The mana’s there, so where’s the magic?!”

“That you can control your mana at all is progress, my lady.”

That night, Melody put into practice the steps outlined in the book she read at the library, and they were bearing fruit. Progress inched forward, but it felt to Luciana like yet another agonizing source of failure.

“This is supposed to be the easiest spell in the book, and I can’t cast it even once,” Luciana grumbled into her pillow. “I must be the worst spellcaster in the world.”

Melody was just as confused, though she kept that to herself. She could sense the mana seeking to escape from Luciana’s fingertips, but the instant it should have manifested, it retreated instead.

“Now is a good time for a break, I think,” Melody said. “I’ll pour some… Oh. Goodness, the teapot’s empty. One moment and I’ll prepare some more.”

Luciana rolled onto her back and watched her maid leave her bedroom.

*Why won’t it work?* she wondered. *According to Melody, there’s no reason I shouldn’t be able to cast this spell. She even said I might be able to learn to create water, but we’ll never get there at this rate.*

She rolled over again and held her hand out, imagining in vain that she possessed a sliver of the talent Melody did. “Stream—*Fare Acqua*.”

Something happened. She did not know how to describe it, but she could feel it leaving her fingertips.

*Splash*.

Melody whipped back around. A dark spot marred the rug beside her lady’s bed, and liquid dripped from Luciana’s outstretched hand.

“M-my lady, you…”

“S-stream—*F-Fare Acqua*!”

Water beaded at her fingertips, floated, and then succumbed to gravity, adding to the stain beside the bed. Melody gaped. Luciana trembled.

“I…I did it. I did it!” Luciana shot up and started hopping up and down on her bed. *“Fare Acqua!” Splash*. *“Fare Acqua!” Splish*. *“Fare Acqua!” Sploosh*. “*Fare Acq*…wah…”

“My lady!” Melody returned to her senses as Luciana crumbled. She rushed to her side. “My lady, are you okay?!”

“Y-yep… Just fine,” Luciana slurred. “Just a little woozy. Used too much magic.”

“Are you certain? You look like you’re going to pass out!”

“That’s not a bad idea. I’m so sleepy…” Luciana could hardly form words through the exhaustion. Casting her first spell had been an intense experience in many ways.

Thankfully, no water dampened her sheets, so Melody got Luciana changed and laid her down to rest.

Luciana giggled dumbly. “Did you see, Melody? I cast magic.”

“I saw, my lady. Perhaps water is your element, but I only complicated matters with my obstinacy. I thought Luce the obvious first step, but it served only to frustrate you.”

“Don’t think about that. We made it. I can use magic now.” Luciana giggled again. “I’m going to brag to Luna tomorrow. And then I’ll practice with her. And then we can take Applied Arcane Studies together…next…” She slipped into a deep sleep before she managed to complete her thought.

Melody smiled softly at Luciana. “I’m so happy for you, my lady.”

The next day, Luciana made good on her plans. Luna was beside herself with shock at her friend’s new talent and happily accepted the offer to practice together. Luna could grasp her mana but had yet to cast any spells. She and Luciana took advantage of their lunch break and after-school hours to brush up.

“I’ll keep in mind everything you taught me!” Luciana told Melody. “I’ll even get Luce down one day. I’m not giving up on that.”

“I believe in you, my lady.”

Academy life naturally included a few speed bumps. But all told, Luciana's days had been pleasant so far, a fact that filled Melody with both elation and pride. Plus, Luciana was more inspired than ever to pursue her dream.

But the peace would not hold for long. For the Jealous Witch still had schemes upon schemes.

Luciana spotted her friend as she entered the Royal Academy foyer.

"Luna! Good morning!" she called.

Luna turned and smiled. "Oh. Good morning, Luciana."

"Want to walk to class together?"

"Sure. Not that it makes much difference, I suppose, seeing as we sit next to each other."

"Isn't it great?"

"Yes, I can't deny that," Luna said.

They enjoyed a short but pleasant walk. But the moment they entered the classroom, their bright mood sobered.

"When do you want to start practicing?" Luciana asked. "Afternoon will probably be best, considering our time restrictions."

"I suppose we'll have to excuse ourselves from electives for the time being if we want... Oh my."

"What?" Luciana followed Luna's gaze and found the Class A entrance swarming with people. "Oh. I wonder what happened."

The girls braced themselves. This was beginning to feel very familiar.

Inside, they found their friend in quite a state.

"Good morning, Perriand," Luciana greeted her. "What's going on?"

"L-Lady Luciana..."

She gestured with her eyes. When Luciana and Luna followed her gaze, they could hardly comprehend what they saw.

Desks lay flipped over, their contents flung about the room, chairs scattered across the floor. Stranger still, this only applied to a select few desks. Most remained untouched, which made for a striking contrast amid the disarray. Luciana counted her acquaintances among the unfortunate victims.

“Lucif!” she gasped. Her backseat neighbor’s desk and chair sat upside down.

Lucif Gelman narrowed his eyes at the scene, only snapping out of his glaring at the sound of Luciana’s voice. “Ah. Good morning to you, Lady Luciana, Lady Luna.”

“Er, g-good morning. Luna, will you help me flip this?”

“O-of course,” she replied.

“Leave it, if you would,” a voice interjected.

All three turned toward the sound to find a disgruntled Anna-Marie. Luciana and Luna hadn’t noticed her in their startlement.

“B-but Lady Anna-Marie…” Luciana started.

“I know,” Anna-Marie cut in. “But this classroom is an active crime scene. We have to leave it untouched for the sake of the investigation. Relevant parties are on their way as we speak, so I must beg Master Gelman for his patience. Forgive me.”

Anna-Marie had once again been entrusted with the role of student council representative. Evidently, Prince Christopher had already left to speak with the faculty directly.

“There’s nothing to forgive, my lady,” Lucif replied with a bow. “Though your concern is appreciated.” Ever the businessman, he wore a mask of geniality, but Luciana noticed how white his knuckles were as he clenched his hands.

*Just when things were starting to calm back down,* she lamented. *Who’s doing all this? And for what?*

“My, my, what’s all this?” came a voice that sent a shiver down Luciana’s spine.

Olivia sauntered into the chaos.

“Good day, Lady Olivia,” Anna-Marie said.

“Good day. Or maybe it isn’t, by the looks of things. What has happened here?”

Anna-Marie explained, and Olivia listened. As she did, her eyes met Luciana’s for the briefest of moments. That fleeting glance was enough to send a chill down Luciana’s spine.

*Wh-what in the world…?*

Perhaps she’d imagined it. She must have.

“So we’ll be transferring to another temporary classroom, I presume?” Olivia said.

“It’s likely, yes,” Anna-Marie replied.

“Goodness me. The mind of the villain who could commit such heinous acts truly precludes all understanding.”

“Unfortunately, we have nothing to help us identify said villain,” Anna-Marie said.

“Nothing? Nothing at all?” Olivia narrowed her eyes.

Anna-Marie furrowed her brow. “Do you mean to imply something?”

“The last offense was untargeted, but that doesn’t seem to be the case this time. Only some students suffered this crime, so they must hold something in common. Something that may lead to this culprit of ours.”

The ladies surveyed the room, searching for the pattern, but whatever it was, Luciana couldn’t see it.

“Oh,” Luna said.

“What?” Luciana urged. “Have you figured something out?”

“N-no. It’s probably nothing.”

“We’re only theorizing. Speak freely,” Olivia said.

After a moment’s hesitation, Luna said slowly, “The desks… all belong to commoners. And those with high marks.”

“Commoners. Well-studied ones…” Olivia mused.

The attack affected five students in all, and each one had scored well within the top thirty on the midterms. Lucif had even outdone Luna, ranking eighth.

“But what about Perriand?” Luciana said. “Her things haven’t been touched.”

Perriand was a quiet girl but by no means an incapable one. She ranked second only to Lucif among the commoners yet had escaped the tumult.

“W-well, she’s not, um…” Luna’s eyes darted around the room as she stumbled over her words.

Luciana cocked her head. What could be tripping up her tongue so?

“Wealthy,” Lucif finished. “The victims were commoners who are intelligent and *wealthy*.”

“W-we aren’t very well off,” Perriand squeaked.

“Dare I say that gives us our motive?” Olivia said. She produced a fan from her breast pocket and hid her mouth behind it. “Jealousy.” Her eyes swept the classroom, once again stopping on Luciana, who shuddered under that cool look.

“Th-that’s only conjecture, of course,” Luna said.

“Certainly. But a theory is a theory until disproved, is it not?” Olivia said.

Luna did not like that it was *her* theory propping up these accusations. Olivia would not let her take it back now.

“Intellectual prowess and monetary success in spite of one’s station is to be admired, and, for the less fortunate, more than enough to engender envy,” Olivia said. “Noble and commoner alike are susceptible to such vices. To be sure, motive is by no means justification, but it would appear to me wealth is, indeed, the central factor at play, if our well-read exception here is any indication.”

Perriand yelped when Olivia’s cold, calculating gaze turned to her. Those icy eyes did not stay on her long before returning to Luciana.

Implications clicked into place in Luciana’s mind. *Does… Does Lady Olivia suspect me?*

But she was innocent. No one was more sure of that than Luciana. Where was this coming from?

Anna-Marie, meanwhile, had not torn her gaze from the duke's daughter for some time. *Is Olivia trying to frame Luciana? That's out of character for her, even in the game... It's too soon to decide who the Jealous Witch is. I'll just have to de-escalate as best I —what's this?*

As Anna-Marie stepped forward to speak, her foot landed on something soft. She reached down and picked it up—and discovered a small handkerchief.

"Wait, that's mine," Luciana said.

"This? It is?" Anna-Marie said.

"I lost it a few days ago," Luciana said. "How did it end up here?"

"Well, not to be crass, but," Olivia said as she fluttered her fan, "I do believe we've heard that one before."

All of a sudden, every eye fixed on Luciana. Her voice caught in her throat.

*Oh, crap!* Anna-Marie thought. *I just made the heroine the prime suspect, like the villainess would!*

Just like that, Luciana was no longer Luciana. She was a Rudleberg. An Ignoble.

## Chapter 16:
## To Believe in Your Lady

ONCE AGAIN, ROYAL ACADEMY CANCELED afternoon electives due to an incident. For want of something else to do, Melody awaited her lady's return at the dorm.

"Welcome home, my lady," she said.

"Hi, Melody… I'm guessing you heard?"

"Another mess in your classroom, I've been told."

"Yeah…" Luciana hung her head.

Melody wondered what had her so down. Perhaps it was the accumulated stress of repeated scandal.

Melody took Luciana's bag, and Luciana darted for her bedroom.

"You're back early," Melody called after her. "Did you have a chance to eat lunch, my lady?"

Luciana froze and said, "I wasn't hungry," without looking back.

"Not at all? Shall I prepare something light?"

"I-I suppose. Sure. Please."

Luciana didn't look Melody in the eyes once that night. Not when she got home. Not when Melody prepared her lunch or dinner. And she never ate a single bite. Whatever ailed her, she would not share it, no matter how hard her maid tried to reach her.

The next morning, Melody succeeded in coaxing Luciana into eating some small portion of her breakfast, though she did so with uncharacteristically paltry conversation.

Then Luciana hurried right back out the door.

"My lady, won't you rest for a day?" Melody implored. "You look ill. I really can't advise—"

"Bye!"

“M-my lady! And she’s gone. Just what is going on with her?”

This surely had something to do with yesterday’s trouble, but how? Luciana would not divulge a word, so what hope did Melody have of comforting her? Situations like these played on Melody’s insecurities about having so few colleagues to turn to.

*Is it something she thinks I can’t help with? Some “perfect maid” I am. My own lady doesn’t even feel she can trust me in her time of need.*

Melody stared down the now empty corridor and sighed.

Another sigh. She’d been doing that all morning, and by afternoon she was convinced her doldrums were here to stay. School would let out for the weekend tomorrow, and Melody simply could not find enough to do to occupy her mind. Every idle moment increased her concern for her lady.

Muscle memory took over as she prepared tea in Lect’s office. What she made surpassed anything the knight had ever drunk, as per usual, but the sight of his beloved so forlorn left a bitter aftertaste.

“Is everything all right?” he couldn’t help asking.

“Pardon? O-oh, yes. Rest assured, I didn’t neglect a single step in the brewing process.” Melody forced a smile and held the teapot up in a feigned show of pride.

Lect’s worries only deepened when he saw how Melody misconstrued his words. Granted, that was nothing new, but this was not the endearing sort of misunderstanding he had Stockholmed himself into loving.

“Is it yesterday’s incident?” he asked. “Lady Rudleberg’s certainly found herself in hot water over it.”

“My lady’s found herself in *what*?!” Melody blurted, slamming the teapot down on the desk. In her panic, she lunged into Lect’s personal space, their noses nearly touching.

“C-calm yourself, Melody! Take a step back!”

“I’ll calm myself when you explain!”

The maid could not spare a shred of concern for the blushing knight, not when her lady might be in danger. Even as

Lect forced himself as far back in his chair as he could, it did not stop Melody's advance. The more he tried to retreat, the farther she leaned, and she had far more body than he had chair.

"Th-there are suspicions that she may be the culprit behind the happenings in Class A!" Lect finally blurted.

"Ex*cuse* me?!" Melody shrieked, voice cracking. She reeled back and puffed up like an angry mama bear. "Why, I...! I never! What absolute hogwash!"

His personal space restored, Lect at last managed a breath. "It's largely a rumor circulating among the students, the first-years in particular. But it's taken on a life of its own, even among the faculty. It must have if *I'm* hearing of it."

"But this is so sudden. Where did such nonsense even come from? And why?"

"I wish I could tell you. All I can say is, while the administrators still profess objectivity, a good many instructors are taking the rumors as fact. I will admit it feels almost unnatural. For a mercy, the headmaster isn't tolerating it."

Melody grew faint. It wasn't just baseless hearsay among peers, but a genuine suspicion that the faculty believed as well. *That certainly explains Luciana looking ill this morning. If it's already gotten this bad after one day, I can only imagine how it must have been yesterday. Yet she didn't feel she could talk to me...*

"My lady is innocent," Melody declared.

"I can't claim to know her well, but I'm inclined to agree," Lect said. "She doesn't strike me as the type to stoop to something like that."

Lect's assurance eased Melody's mind somewhat. Yet again she was reminded of the importance of having friends and allies at times like these.

"Thank you, Lect."

The knight turned away as color flushed into his cheeks, as if averting his eyes from the sun. "I-I would never doubt you. Or your mistress."

One might have struggled to identify which was the dotty maiden between the two of them.

Melody hurried back to the dorm after concluding her assistant duties and immediately set about preparing for the trip home to the estate. The third week of July would be upon them soon.

*This is perfect timing, really. Some time alone with her loving parents is just what my lady needs to clear her head.*

Melody knew this from experience and allowed herself a moment to think of Selena.

Luciana returned that evening.

“Welcome home, my lady.”

“Hi, Melody.”

The maid studied her lady’s face, and what she discovered surprised her. *She looks…better than this morning.*

“Everything is ready for our departure,” Melody said. “We can leave whenever you like.”

“Thanks. Could I maybe have a cup of tea before we go?”

“Certainly.”

Melody had expected Luciana to want to leave as soon as possible, but she seemed composed now. Melody bit back dozens of questions about Luciana’s school day as she prepared a cup of tea.

“Thank you,” Luciana said when Melody presented the cup. She took a sip. “Delicious as always. I really do love your tea, Melody.”

“I’m honored, my lady. Have you had lunch? I could… prepare something light again, if you wish.”

If what Lect said was true, Luciana couldn’t have been eating well on campus. Doubtless the situation had done a number on her appetite all on its own, and the attention she’d garner in the dining hall would only compound the effect.

Luciana laughed dryly. “I assume you heard about the rumors.”

“Well, I, um… Yes, my lady.” Going behind her lady’s back left a sour taste in Melody’s mouth.

But Luciana simply laughed again. “I’m sorry for not saying anything to you.”

“P-please, my lady.”

“I didn’t want you to worry. In hindsight, I probably only made you worry more. I wanted to pretend I was fine, but it turns out I’m a lot weaker than I thought.”

“My lady…”

Luciana Rudleberg was never a strong girl, even in the context of the game. She only pretended to be, and the Dark One used that facade to its advantage. Even now, she borrowed her bravado from Melody, letting the maid lend her strength through her actions.

“You look much better than you did this morning,” Melody commented.

“The thing is, my entire class started to suspect me. They turned against me all of a sudden. It was the worst luck. Twice, things I lost turned up at the scene of the crime, and people drew the obvious conclusion. No one outright accused me, but I could tell. I saw it in their eyes.”

“So why the…?”

“Why the change in attitude? Because it turns out some people still believe in me. I ran yesterday because I was scared, but today I listened. Some friends came to me and told me that they’re on my side.”

Among them, Luna, Perriand, and even Lucif, despite having been a target himself.

“I remember those names,” Melody said. “You spend a lot of time with them, so they know you, my lady. They know your heart.”

“Yeah. It’s strange, when I think about it. Nothing’s changed. Most of the school still thinks I did it. But those few who don’t—knowing they’re there makes it feel like I can breathe again. It warms my heart.” She smiled, a sad, tired smile, but it was a smile.

“My lady, I want you to know that I’m with them!” Melody said. “I believe in you and trust you and care for you with all the

heart a maid can muster for her mistress!”

Luciana fluttered through rapid blinks. Then she chuckled, and the sound swelled into a proper laugh. “Thank you, Melody. I feel all warm and fuzzy again.”

“I’ll say it once more,” Melody said. “I believe in you, my lady! I’ll say it as many times as it takes! I am your warmth in the cold!” Melody set one hand on her heart and reached for the heavens with the other. Quite the theatrical performance, but she would perform these dramatics for her lady’s sake. Anything to cheer her up.

Luciana spied an opportunity. “As a matter of fact, I’m feeling rather chilly.” She gently placed her teacup down—and promptly threw herself at her maid.

Melody shrieked.

“Now, now,” Luciana cooed, “proceed with the warming! I hear skin-to-skin contact works well, and look at how perfect yours is!”

“This is so unbecomiiing!” Melody howled.

She had miscalculated. Such a drastic change in mood fell outside expected parameters, and now she was helpless, pinned to the floor by her own mistress. And there she would remain, cuddled against her will until Luciana had her fill.

“Whew, that’s just what I needed!” Luciana said when she finally relented. “Luciana Rudleberg is back in action, and her spirits are most rejuvenated!”

“*Where* do you keep learning these phrases, my lady?”

*I feel…violated.*

Not that Luciana had actually done anything inappropriate. The worst Melody suffered was a few tight squeezes and some rolling around on the floor, but that didn’t stop Melody from wondering how in the world such things left her lady positively glowing.

“Thanks, Melody! You’re the best maid in the whole world!”

Try as she might, Melody never could bring herself to reproach her.

## Chapter 17:
## Micah: Reincarnated Maid-in-Training and Straight Man Extraordinaire

“YOU’RE NOT GOING TO TELL YOUR PARENTS, my lady?” Melody asked.

“No. They wouldn’t be able to do anything if I did, and it would only worry them.”

“I will abide by your judgment, but please, mind that you don’t weigh yourself down.”

“I know. Thanks, Melody.”

The lady and her maid passed the time in the carriage with idle chitchat. Melody thought more wizened counsel might go a long way in lightening the burden on Luciana’s shoulders, but Luciana apparently believed otherwise. There was nothing for it for Melody but to abide by her mistress’s decision.

As always, Luciana’s parents and the two resident maids greeted them at the estate.

“Welcome home, my lady,” the maids said in unison.

“Welcome home, Luciana,” said her father.

“It’s good to see you, love,” her mother said.

“Thank you, Mother, Father.” Luciana curtsied with proper filial deference. “And you too, Serena, Micah.” She smiled at the maids. Naught was amiss.

“Gentlesister,” Serena said. “Welcome.”

“Welcome back, Miss Melody,” Micah said.

“It’s good to be back. I see your curtsy has improved, Micah.” Melody copied her lady’s poise.

After a month of lessons, the Rudleberg estate’s newest addition was shaping up to be a most polite young maid. Micah blushed with timid pride.

“You must be starving, darling,” Hughes said. “Shall we sit down for dinner?”

“That sounds perfect, Father.”

“Help me set the table, Gentlesister?” Serena asked.

“Of course,” Melody said.

Everything proceeded in typical fashion. Things had gone the same last week, and the week before. Melody and Luciana could relax. Here, they could find some respite.

Then Hughes dropped a bomb.

“We can discuss what you’re keeping from us while we eat,” Hughes said.

“I expect a full account after our work is done,” Serena added to Melody.

Luciana and Melody froze. Their accusers wore chilling grins.

“M-Melody, I think the proverbial cat is out of the bag,” Luciana hissed in her maid’s ear.

“B-but how? We let nothing on! We were perfectly natural!”

Marianna shook her head, incredulous. “It’s written all over your face, Luciana. Parents have a way of knowing these things.”

“That’s right,” Hughes said. “Clearly you underestimated us.”

“Because you’re so oblivious about everything else!” Luciana snapped.

“Oblivious?” Hughes said. “Me? Perish the thought. M-Marianna, I’m not oblivious, am I?” His wife looked away. “Tell me I’m not!”

Meanwhile, among the trio of maids…

“Serena, how did you know?” Melody said.

“I may only be two months old, but I like to think I have a rather good read on you, Gentlesister,” Serena said. “Just as you created me with loving detail, so too am I attuned to the intricacies of your mind.”

“That frightens me somewhat, to be honest.”

Serena only simpered. Melody took a precautionary step back.

Micah did not know what to make of any of this. “Um, what is everyone talking about?” Her newness showed in her ignorance of what everyone else had guessed, but that was to be expected. “What’s this about Serena being two months old? You ‘created’ her, Miss Melody? Like in a metaphorical sense?”

“Serena, did you neglect to explain to her?” Melody said.

“It seems I did,” Serena said. “In all the hustle and bustle, I most definitely did.”

This was not helping Micah’s confusion. “Explain what to me?”

Melody put an end to her misery. “Micah, meet Serena, a magic doll created by yours truly.”

“Late greetings, Micah. I am Serena, maid automaton. Pleasure to at last make your full acquaintance.”

“Oh, the pleasure is…” The girl trailed off as the words sank in fully. “Wait, what?”

“I am Serena, maid automaton,” Serena repeated. “Pleasure to at last make your full acquaintance.” She offered a curtsy that displayed skill and grace the likes of which Micah could only aspire to. Under any other circumstance, Micah might have allowed herself a moment to admire it.

As it was, questions flooded out of Micah. “Magic doll? Automaton? Serena? She’s a doll?”

“That’s right,” Serena said. “A maid doll. Made with magic. Gentlesister Melody gave life to me herself.”

“You’re a doll. Who’s a maid. A maid doll.”

Serena grinned in reply. It was warm and beautiful in all the same ways as a human grin. But she wasn’t human, apparently. She was a doll.

*“What?!”* Micah screamed, her voice echoing around the Rudlebergs’ tall halls.

That halted the family debate entirely. All three Rudlebergs turned toward the sound, Serena stifled a giggle behind her hand, and Melody whipped herself into a propriety-driven panic.

The Rudlebergs were not offended, however. Far from it. If anything, seeing exactly the kind of reaction Melody’s work

warranted was a much-needed reality check.

"I humbly apologize for my outburst," Micah said as the family started on their after-dinner tea.

"You're quite all right," Marianna told her gently. "Anyone would react the way you did if they heard the truth about Serena."

Micah blushed fiercely, gratitude battling with embarrassment. "Thank you, my lady," she squeaked.

"Let's not forget the most pressing issue," Hughes said. "These vile rumors circulating around my princess! I'll not stand for it! Who is the rogue behind all this, and how do we find them?"

Luciana had not managed to wiggle out of explaining herself that evening.

"The gossip and the culprit may not be one and the same, Hughes," Marianna cautioned. "We should direct our efforts toward the source of the accusations."

"So you say, dear, but would ferreting out the true culprit not nip the problem in the bud?"

"I suppose."

The Rudlebergs arrived at a stalemate, and the maids had no meaningful inclination one way or the other.

Micah, however, was of a different mind. *If this were the game, the gossip and the culprit* would *be one and the same.* She glanced at Luciana and furtively shook her head. *No. Luciana's essentially acting as the heroine this time around. Then again, the real heroine is her maid, so at this point anything's possible.*

Deep in her soul burned the fervent desire to quip about the sheer absurdity of the old culprit playing the victim, a desire that took every ounce of Micah's willpower to restrain.

*Anyway, someone's got to do something. If we trigger a bad end, there's no telling whether Miss Melody will be a match for the Dark One, even with all her powers.*

A little silver puppy shuddered in a corner of the room, overlooked by all.

Micah, racked with anxiety about the future, timidly opened her mouth. “U-um, if I may, I have a request.”

“Oh? And what’s that?” Hughes humored her with a smile.

She took a breath, pressed her lips into a firm line, lifted her head, and shouted, “I’d like to go to the academy as well!”

*I’ll make some actual use of all this background knowledge and set things straight!*

Micah’s suggestion landed better than she expected. She had mastered the basics of etiquette, and a new environment would make for an excellent chance to broaden her skills—all of which provided quite the convincing pretense. In actuality, she wanted to ensure Luciana had as much support as possible in such a trying time. Serena would have been the better choice of protector for Luciana, but Micah couldn’t handle the entire estate by her lonesome yet.

And so, when the time came to return to campus, three people left the estate rather than the usual two.

“I’m off, Mother, Father,” Luciana said.

“Keep your friends close, understand? And come home whenever you need,” Hughes said. “I’ll have plenty of great big hugs waiting!”

“Rely on those you trust,” his wife added. “I know you only act willful to hide how sensitive you are deep down.”

“Okay, I get it!” Luciana snapped. “Thank you for caring, but you’re embarrassing me!”

The pouting and complaining relieved Luciana’s parents. Their daughter was herself again. Some time back at home had seen her through the worst of this.

“I hope you can manage on your own again, Serena,” Melody said.

“Rest easy, Gentlesister. I have Grail to keep me company.”

The pup whined and shivered further back in the foyer.

“Just what in the world has made him so afraid of us?” Melody wondered aloud.

“He’s normal with me,” Micah said. “Have you done something to frighten him?”

“No?” the maid sisters replied with the same rising inflection.

Grail made no move to say goodbye. Perhaps he was too busy worrying about where he would sleep tonight.

Later, when they arrived at the academy, Luciana prepared to head straight to class as usual.

“This is where we split up,” she said. “Be nice to Micah, Melody.”

“Have a wonderful day, my lady. You’re certain you’re well enough?” Melody said.

“I’ll be okay. My friends will have my back. As long as I have them, nothing can break me! Just watch!”

“Then I have nothing to worry about,” Melody said. “But please, my lady, no more bottling up your grief.”

“I know. I won’t make that mistake again. Now, I really should be off.”

“Take care,” the maids said in unison.

Luciana kicked into a run. Melody should have chided such an unbecoming gait, but she turned a blind eye this once. She and Micah smiled as they watched Luciana go.

“Well, we’ve much to get done, Micah. Are you ready?”

“Yes, madam!”

*And while we’re working, I’ll get to meet all sorts of other maids and gather intel!* Micah thought.

She followed close behind Melody, her hopes high. Which made it all the more painful when those hopes crashed back to the ground.

“I didn’t get to meet a single maid.” Micah pouted.

“It’s a shame we didn’t see Mary-Ann today,” Melody said.

*The whole reason I came here was because I thought it’d be easy to build a network, dang it!* Micah groused.

Most servants were far too busy attending to their masters and mistresses to chitchat in the way Micah had been hoping for. She'd put a lot of stock in the communal laundry, but she quickly learned the same lesson Melody had about Upper Hall residents and their laundering habits. She encountered not a soul, not even Mary-Ann, who usually turned up on this day of the week.

"Let's take a break in the dining hall," Melody suggested.

"The dining hall… Yeah!"

*Everyone has to dine, even servants!* Micah thought. *I'll bet there's heaps of them there, and with gossip to spare. Gossip is the lifeblood of maids, after all. There's no telling what I could learn!*

Her determination rekindled, Micah marched to the dining hall with renewed conviction. She was right about one thing: a well-connected maid was a well-informed maid. But she forgot a very important aspect of the house she served.

The instant she and Melody entered the dining hall, all the air went out of the room. The whole place fell so quiet that Micah could have heard a pin drop, but the next instant the drone of conversation returned.

"Wh-what was that about?" she asked.

"Well, it's common knowledge that I'm Lady Luciana's attendant."

"So…we're outcasts?"

"Something to that effect." Melody placed a hand on her cheek and sighed. "It wasn't much better before this whole debacle if I'm being honest, though."

Micah did an excellent job at stifling a wail befitting the damned. *But my netwooork!*

Another miscalculation. She hadn't anticipated the cloud of doubt hovering over Luciana would cast a shadow on her attendants as well. Even if she'd seen this coming, Melody said the other servants weren't very friendly even before all this hubbub. Apparently Micah had never stood much of a chance of sneaking into the rumor mill.

To make matters worse, Melody still had not met Milliaria's or Beatrice's servants. She doubted she ever would, left to her

own devices.

“I don’t even see Sasha. Shame,” Melody said.

“Shame,” Micah growled.

They shared a quiet lunch together, just the two of them, and Micah’s mission progress remained firmly at zero.

Afterward, Micah wasn’t entirely sure what her afternoon duties would entail.

“You’re assisting an elective, is that right, Miss Melody?” she asked. “And you’re certain I can go with you?”

“Positive. I’ve already confirmed with Lect.”

“I see. Then I guess that… ‘Lect’?”

*I’ve heard that name before.* Micah recalled a fiery-haired, golden-eyed young man, but Melody couldn’t mean him. Impossible. *He’s the heroine’s bodyguard. How does the heroine’s bodyguard end up teaching Chivalry at Royal Academy? As if. A knight has no business giving lessons on…chivalry…*

Her stomach dropped.

Melody knocked on an office door, and who should open it but a fiery-haired, golden-eyed young man. Micah had no choice but to believe her eyes. This was *the* Lectias Froude, third love interest of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*.

“Glad you could make it,” he said to Melody.

“Of course! I wouldn’t miss it.”

The knight’s cheeks turned a similar shade to his hair.

Micah’s jaw hit the floor. *Okay, what the* hell *is this?! We’re clearing routes now?! Hello?! Madam heroine?! One second you’re screwing off doing maid junk and the next you’re ending entire character arcs! I can* not *with this right now!*

So many quips, Micah might as well have qualified for honorary citizenship in Kansai, the capital of comedy.

“My name is Micah, maid-in-training,” she greeted him with entirely feigned composure. Serena’s lessons had paid off. “I am at your service.”

“I might just take you up on that offer,” Lect said. “Melody, I trust you can guide her.”

“Indeed, I can.”

The way Melody smiled at him made Micah believe they were at least friendly, but was it more than that? *No,* Micah decided, *I don’t think so. This feels unrequited. I can’t imagine Miss Melody having eyes for anyone or anything that isn’t maid work.*

For the first time all day, Micah’s prediction proved unequivocally, infallibly correct.

Lect reached for a book resting on his desk and held it in awkward silence.

“What’s that?” Melody asked.

“I, um, wanted to give this to you.” He held it out.

Melody gingerly accepted, seemingly confused. Micah squeezed close enough to read the title on the cover.

“‘*Magic Fundamentals for Children*’?” Melody looked up at the knight. “What’s this about, Lect?”

“Well, you, er, mentioned having seen it in the library before,” he said. “And I know I gave you permission to borrow whatever you liked, but you, um…you didn’t. So I borrowed it for you.”

It was the book Melody had used to teach Luciana magic some days prior. She’d left it on the shelf, as it was irrelevant to her business at the time, but mentioned it in passing. Lect, however, clearly remembered even the most fleeting reference Melody made.

It was a sweet gesture. Earnest and, frankly, a little bit cute. But Micah couldn’t help noting something.

“Miss Melody,” she whispered, “Lady Luciana can already cast magic, can’t she?”

“Y-yes, she can,” Melody said.

Moreover, Melody had already memorized the majority of this book as she perused it. The gesture, then, turned out to be a rather fruitless one.

*Yikes,* Micah thought. *Every present-giver’s worst nightmare right here.*

It wasn't even a present, technically. The book still belonged to the library. If Micah were Melody, she might have had a few words for her secret admirer, but Melody said nothing.

"Thank you, Lect," Melody said. "I'll pore over it."

"By all means," Lect said. "It's an old book. Out of print, it seems, and that is the only copy the library possesses, so do be careful you don't lose it. The return date is one week from now."

"Noted."

Only the sentiment mattered to Melody. The genuine smile on her face testified to that, a smile that Lect could only gaze upon for a moment before he averted his eyes and his cheeks flushed.

*Okay. Since when was Lect this cute?! He's all stoic and straitlaced in the game, but this? This is a totally different character!*

The quips made themselves.

With that little romantic subplot on hold, the three of them got to work. It wasn't long before a knock at the door interrupted them. Melody answered, and Micah had to keep from rolling her eyes.

"Greetings, Melody. How have you been?"

"Oh! If it isn't Max!"

The honey-blond hair. The long, swaying ponytail. The androgynously beautiful features. This could be none other than Lord Maxwell Reclentos, son of the lord chancellor, second-year, and love interest number two. He and Melody chatted like old friends catching up.

Quips piled up on Micah's tongue. *What. The. Hell. What is this "Max" crap?! She's calling him nicknames?! Oh, so you're not gonna be the heroine literally anywhere it matters, but you're gonna cozy up with all the pretty boys?! What's next?! Is Prince Christopher swooning and making eyes at you too?!*

"Another acquaintance, Miss Melody?" Micah asked oh so humbly.

Melody patiently explained how she'd met not just Max but Lect as well. As she spoke, Micah's fear grew, fear of what else Melody might be capable of if she could so perfectly circumvent

supposedly immutable story events. The fact that this was only the CliffsNotes frightened Micah even more.

“You didn’t happen to bump into a young man with black hair on the day of the opening ceremony, did you?” Micah asked hesitantly.

“As a matter of fact… Wait, how did you know that? Micah?!”

*Oh, sure, you’re gonna follow* that *event to a T! Why the heck not?!* Micah couldn’t contain herself this time. Her legs trembled from the strain of these baffling revelations. How had Melody done it? How had she so perfectly ignored every single thing the heroine was meant to do *except* meeting each of the potential love interests? She had to know about the game. It was a statistical certainty at this point. *Unless there are certain events that always happen, no matter what. I swear, nothing in this world makes any sense.*

“Micah, are you okay?”

Micah propped herself up to keep from toppling over. She would have to put a pin in her endless list of wisecracks to address the maid currently fretting over her. “Just lost my balance a little. More importantly, what brings our guest here?”

“An excellent question.”

“I have a delivery for Instructor Froude,” Max explained. “I’m enrolled in Chivalry under a different instructor, you see, and I’ve been asked to pass along a few documents.” He handed them over.

“Ah.” Lect accepted the bundle. “Much appreciated.”

“No thanks necessary. I’m only the errand boy.”

“Errand boy? A marquess’s son?” Micah muttered. Even here, in a self-described bastion of equality, she struggled to believe any instructor was bold enough to task the lord chancellor’s son with busywork.

Maxwell caught Micah’s grumbling and grinned. “Ithas a strange ring to it, doesn’t it? But that’s the magic of Royal Academy. I’ll only ever get to hear or experience such incongruities during my time here, and I mean to make the most of it. I make a point of taking on such tasks whenever the opportunity arises.”

“Is that so?” Micah said.

“Melody, forgive me, but I must ask. How fares Lady Luciana?” Maxwell said.

“So you’ve heard the rumors,” Melody said.

“It’s difficult not to,” Maxwell said. “Talk has extended to the upperclassmen, though I’m sure it’s worse among the first-years.”

Micah pricked up her ears.

“I’ve heard something of what the student council intends to do regarding the investigation as well,” Maxwell said. “We have no leads, I’m afraid, but I’m almost certain Lady Luciana is innocent.” Maxwell shook his head in frustration. “How these rumors have become so inflated is a mystery unto itself.”

Melody lit up. “Thank you for believing in my lady, Max.”

Accustomed as he was to women’s advances, even Maxwell swallowed hard at this. He knew in his heart Melody would never see him as more than a friend, yet that same heart fluttered from her praise.

Micah didn’t miss the subtle change in his demeanor. *Don’t tell me. Is this* another *route Miss Melody’s gone and unlocked?!*

Maxwell obviously harbored no small amount of affection for the maid, though he wasn’t as intense about it as Lect. Why, Melody was only a few carefully selected choices away from locking him in for good!

*No! Bad Micah! Not a game. This is real life. Not a game. This is real life.*

“N-now hold on,” Lect interjected, with little regard for the young maid currently shaking her head at the whole display. He stared hard at Maxwell, then Melody, and then Maxwell again.

“Yes?” said Melody.

“Wh-what’s your relationship with this man?”

“With Max?”

“You, er, seem very close, judging by how you address him. Is it a…term of endearment?”

Micah stopped shaking her head. The little otome worms came creeping back into her brain. *Lect! Oh, Lect! You poor baby, it's over for you! Your route's as good as cleared!*

She had ascended beyond quips into outright fangirling.

Maxwell, instantly picking up on the obvious, quietly snickered and shook his head. Nothing could get past the future lord chancellor, and dotty maidens were his specialty.

The only one who *didn't* pick up on the obvious was the one and only queen of thickheadedness. "We are close," Melody said. "Max is a very dear friend to me."

"Indeed," Maxwell agreed, collecting himself. "Friends. That's all we are and ever will be."

"Friends... I see." Lect turned his back to them.

The gesture was not lost on Micah. How simple boys in love were. Some things never changed, no matter the world. *What'd I come here for again?*

To safely lead the plot of an otome game to a happy ending, supposedly. And yet here she was, getting absorbed into romantic side plots.

Needless to say, Micah accomplished little in her first day at the academy, though she by no means lacked notes to cram into the margins of her journal. Such was the nature of an otome gamer. Some things never changed, no matter the world.

Days later, in Anna-Marie's room...

"Perfect."

A girl who looked a lot like Anna-Marie sat in front of her bedroom mirror, but this was not Anna-Marie. She had her build but not her crimson hair, nor her figure. Her hair, tied back in a ponytail, was a darker, ever so slightly rustier shade of red, and her proportions were more slender. Her features, normally striking and womanly, appeared more youthful and girlish, and bore only a light layer of makeup. Gentle eyes rounded by glasses stared at the figure in the mirror, in contrast to the keen, daggerlike gaze of the real Anna-Marie.

This was not Anna-Marie but an altogether different girl—a girl who went only by Anna. Anna-Marie, now Anna, admired her work with pride. She had made the hair dye herself, and the binding around her chest worked wonders. Doubtless she could fool even friends and acquaintances with this disguise.

She finished donning a maid uniform, then did a twirl in the mirror. She nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty awesome. All right. Time to gather some intel!”

*If I can’t learn anything from the students, then I’ll try the servants! So help me, I will pin down who our boss is!*

How very alike she was to a certain maid-in-training.

## Chapter 18:
## The Undercover Lady and the Puppet on Loose Strings

ANNA-MARIE VICTILLIUM WAS THE PERFECT lady. The Scarlet Seductress. A paragon of charisma, intellect, and beauty.

In actuality, she was Asakura Anna, an average Japanese girl who possessed none of those qualities, reborn into the life of a lady who was even less of those things. Her persona was an act, and a difficult one to keep up twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five. Something had to give. She had to let her hair down, lest she utterly lose her mind.

Thus was born Anna, the cute little commoner girl with no particularly outstanding qualities.

Anna-Marie liked being Anna. Every so often, she'd don Anna's face and saunter about the Lower District just to let herself breathe for a moment. To let herself be something other than the all-important marquess's daughter. This time, however, Anna threw on the disguise for a purpose.

The investigation into recent incidents was quickly losing momentum, and Anna-Marie could only get so far with cold interrogations. Her prying had yielded nothing but accusations so far, all primarily directed at Luciana. Her fellow student council members' investigations hadn't fared much better, according to the record. Olivia remained the prime suspect, but Anna-Marie couldn't cast doubt on that conclusion based solely on gut instinct, especially while hard proof against Luciana existed in the form of her pencil and handkerchief.

For lack of better options, she finally busted out Anna. A different perspective might help her see things more clearly. As a mere servant, she wouldn't be acting as someone directly involved in the incidents.

With immense finagling, she managed to free up an afternoon and slipped into the dormitory as Anna the Maid by way of a secret passage.

She did not get far before hesitating. "Well. What now?"

It was almost lunchtime. The dining hall would be the most efficient place to start, but how would she manage that, practically speaking? Her own servants used that same dining hall, thus increasing the risk of discovery. Though no one but her knew of Anna, and she doubted they'd recognize her at a glance, she couldn't deny the possibility.

*If only I had someone to go with, I'd blend in better. But there's only one other maid Anna knows, and she's…*

"Anna? Is that you?"

What fortune. Anna-Marie turned, and there she was, the only other maid Anna knew—Melody Wave.

"Melody!"

"I thought that was you!" Melody clapped her hands and beamed. "I didn't know you'd come to the academy as well."

It had been some time since Anna-Marie—Anna, rather, had seen her old friend. Not since May, during the obligatory day off Luciana forced Melody to take by kicking her out for overworking herself. By pure coincidence, Melody encountered Anna during one of her strolls and the pair ended up spending the day together. They'd hit it off instantly. Anna introduced herself as a Victillium maid, and that was enough for Melody to gain a new companion for life.

"Have you been taking good care of the doll I gave you?" Anna asked.

"Oh, yes. She's doing very well. And yours?" Melody asked.

"I keep her safe and snug on my shelf, and I think of us every time I look at her."

*She's "doing well"? Dunno what that's supposed to mean, but okay.*

Serena was doing *quite* well at her maidly duties, as a matter of fact. Indeed, the doll that served as her vessel had been a gift from Anna. In many ways, Anna was like Serena's second mother.

As Melody and Anna chatted by the dining hall entrance, Sasha appeared, leading two other servants.

"This a friend of yours, Melody?" Sasha asked.

“A new face. How novel,” Warren said.

“Pretty…” drooled Blish.

“This is Anna, a maid for House Victillium,” Melody said. “Anna, this is Sasha and Blish, servants for House Invidia. And this is Warren. He works for the Gelmans.”

Everyone exchanged appropriate greetings.

“Would you like to join us for lunch?” Sasha said. “We’d love to get to know you.”

“Yes, absolutely!” Anna-Marie answered at once. She had a cover *and* a group to squeeze info out of, *and* she got to spend time with Melody again. This day couldn’t possibly get any better.

“Wonderful!” Melody cheered. “I’m so excited to get to talk with you again, Anna.”

“One can never have too many pretty faces around. Isn’t that right, Blish?” Warren said.

“Don’t look at me… What? I’m not going to say no.”

The five of them entered the dining hall while Anna-Marie struggled to rein in a grin.

“Oh,” Sasha said, “where’s Micah?”

Anna-Marie’s heart skipped a beat. That name sparked memories of a close friend from her previous life. Kurita Maika, Prince Christopher’s younger sister in his past life as Kurita Hideki. She’d been Anna-Marie’s partner in crime and helped rope Hideki into playing *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* with them. The rants and ribs they shared at his expense were as precious as they were plentiful.

A part of Anna-Marie wondered if and hoped that Maika was here in Theolas too. But she set those thoughts aside. It wasn’t an uncommon name, and the chances of her Maika being in this world were infinitesimally small. Or so Anna-Marie wanted to believe. If Maika *was* here, it could only mean she had been reincarnated. It could only mean she had suffered an untimely death.

*If we meet again, and I hope we do, we could do a lot better than here.*

They'd have their reunion. In heaven, once Maika lived a long and full life. Anna-Marie allowed herself a moment of melancholy before returning to the task at hand.

Little did she know Maika *had* lived a long and full life. But Anna-Marie couldn't be blamed for failing to intuit that a grandma had de-aged into a fantasy child.

"Melody, who's this Micah?" she asked.

"The Rudlebergs' newest maid-in-training," Melody said. "She was with me a moment ago but darted off, saying something about needing to 'catch someone.'"

"Should we be worried?"

"I started to give chase, but she told me she would catch up with us later, so I let her go."

"That's a shame. I would've liked to meet her."

"There's always next time," Melody said. "She's a very hard worker. I think you'd take quite a liking to her, Anna."

"Oh, now my hopes are high indeed."

It seemed they were destined for a reunion after all. But under what circumstances would it take place?

"Let's get going, shall we?" Sasha said. "I don't know about you all, but I'm starving."

They continued into the hall.

"Wait!" Micah called out.

The boy did not slow.

"Wait, I said!"

She struggled to keep the boy in sight. Nothing Micah did seemed to reach him as they sprinted through the dormitory block. But she knew this boy. She could not forget him if she tried. He had cleaned up quite well and now wore a valet's uniform, but there was no mistaking that mop of purple hair, nor his dead, gray eyes.

"Will you just—" Micah's legs surrendered. The boy was too fast, and no matter how hard she ran, she could not close the

distance between them. Her legs gave out, and she tumbled with a shrill yelp. “Ow…”

Micah stayed there on the ground in a stupor. Her long skirt had spared her knees at least.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over her. A hand reached down as though waiting for something. She looked up and saw her savior, the boy who’d rescued her from the slums on her first day in this world.

To her, that was all he was. She could not guess the forces she’d entangled herself with, that this man was in fact Bjork Quichel, pawn of the Dark One and fourth love interest of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*. She could not have known the waves these ripples would make in the story to come.

Bjork Quichel, a man doomed by the narrative. He undid the seal in the Great Vanargand Wood, and the Dark One possessed him instantly, making him an unwilling pawn in a greater scheme. Though a young man of eighteen, he still looked like a boy.

Under the Dark One’s influence, he set upon the Spring Ball intending to harm the crown prince. When Luciana stood in his way, she thwarted his plan thanks to the powerful defensive magic that enchanted her dress. The dark blade containing the Dark One’s essence shattered, unleashing the majority of that essence into the ambient atmosphere. From there, it found its way into the body of a pup, but Melody unknowingly put the Dark One to rest in that state.



Without a master to tug at the strings of his soul, Bjork should have been a free man, but his was a miserable existence, and fate would never allow him to rest. What little remained of the Dark One in that shattered blade still had a hold over him. The connection was fragile and weak now, so at least the Dark One could not control his every whim like in the game. He would only regain his mind in the latter half of the story, if things progressed naturally. But this version of events had strayed off course. In this version, Bjork's ego had begun to awaken mere days after the Spring Ball.

The girl's cries echoed in his fractured mind. His vision settled, and he found a teary child sitting before him. He watched her for a moment, unsure. Then instinct kicked in, and before he knew it he was guiding the girl by the hand. Before long, they'd left the slums together.

He was no stranger to tears himself. To cries of all kinds. He'd heard them all when the slavers came and slaughtered everyone and everything he ever cared about.

This was no place for a child. He had to protect her, to shield her from what he'd suffered. Naught else filled the man's mind as he led her. And then the cries stopped, and the darkness took hold again. He could feel it seeping into his mind. It always struck when he felt at peace. Thus, he could never allow himself peace. He returned to the shadows of the slums, determined not to suffer another lapse.

One day, the darkness stirred more restlessly than usual. It seethed with hatred for that silver power and the loathsome maiden who wielded it. So little of the Dark One remained that it lacked ego. Only id survived. Pure, feral emotion—rage against the Saint. That day, the id stirred. It wanted revenge.

It bade Bjork to enter Royal Academy and seek out a willing pawn. The Dark One's memories of its defeat hardened its hatred and taught it to act more wisely. It could not defeat the Saint head-to-head. It knew that despite the flaws in its memory. To it, Luciana was the Saint. The silver power that had inhabited her dress proved it. So the hatred, misplaced and savage, sought out pitiful pawns that might bring about retribution against the one it deemed deserving.

Thus did it discover *her.*

The Dark One resonated with the anger of that poor soul and salivated at the dark thoughts tormenting her. And so it assumed control, weakened though it was. The human heart was a fragile thing, all the more so when burdened as hers was by negativity.

Its first order for its new puppet was to fix up the old one. Bjork's rags would be a liability in the schemes to come, so he would need a disguise. He himself had suggested the idea—he. Bjork. The man. Unlike in the game, Bjork had regained a sense of self, and the Dark One did not dictate his heart. It lacked the power to do so. Bjork's self was returning more and more each day.

To wit, the Dark One would never have urged him to proffer his hand to the fallen girl as he did now.

"Th-thank you," the girl stammered. She had not expected him to come back for her.

The boy said nothing, did nothing for a while, until he noticed the dirt stains on the girl's skirt. Almost inaudibly, he asked, "Are you hurt?"

"Huh? N-no, I'm okay. Just took a little tumble, that's all. Thank you for worrying about me."

"I didn't." He looked away. Embarrassed, perhaps?

"So, um, you're the boy who rescued me from the slums, aren't you? Two months ago?" No reply. Micah cocked her head. "Aren't you?"

Bjork's eyes skittered along the floor before he finally nodded.

Micah let out a little sigh of relief, then smiled. "I wanted to thank you for that. You saved my life, you know. I wouldn't be here without you." She bowed low.

The boy's eyes widened. His breath caught in his throat. His shoulders trembled. He had not heard the words "thank you" in a lifetime.

When finally Micah raised her head, she froze at the sight of him. "Wh-what? What's wrong?"

“Nothing.” The surge of emotion left his expression as quickly as it had come. Meaningless. Stupid. All of this. He had to get away.

And yet his legs would not carry him. Why?

“Let me thank you properly,” Micah said. “Come have lunch with me. My treat!”

“Don’t want to.”

“Aww, don’t be like that. Come on, it’s the least you can do for making me chase you around. The dining hall’s going to close any minute.”

“Leave me—”

“Micah!” someone shouted.

“Oh! Miss Melody! Over here!”

Melody must have come looking for her.

“You’d better get a move on before the dining hall closes,” Melody said. “Oh, who’s this? A friend of yours?”

“That’s right. He rescued me from the slums not too long ago.”

“Goodness, and I’ve forgotten my manners. Hello, I’m Melody, House Rudleberg maid. Allow me to thank you for coming to the aid of my colleague here.”

Another smile. Another thank you. Bjork froze up.

“You’re doing that thing again,” Micah pointed out. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he muttered.

“You should let us treat you to lunch,” Melody said, “so we can thank you properly. Please, I insist.”

Like mentor, like pupil.

“He says he doesn’t want to eat, Miss Melody.”

“Oh? Then we’ll have to think of something else. I’ll not let your savior go unrewarded, Micah. Could I ask your name and the house you serve, sir?”

It occurred to Micah that she never did ask the boy’s name.

Bjork’s mood only darkened. “I serve no one.”

“Er, pardon?” Melody didn’t understand. He wore a servant’s uniform, so naturally he must have been someone’s servant.

“I take orders from no one. Bow to no one!” he growled. A swell of emotion roughened his heretofore toneless voice. But suddenly, he grit his teeth and clutched at his chest. “I am…the master of…myself!”

“Hey, are you okay?!” Micah cried.

As Melody approached to examine him, a faint dark haze misted from his body. She drew her hand back in shock, and in that instant Bjork leaped into the air with inhuman strength, landing all the way on top of a nearby roof.

Then he vanished.

“What…in the world?” Melody said, staring at the place where Bjork once stood. “Who was that boy?”

Micah had a feeling she knew. *Dark, concentrated mana in the form of a mist. Purple hair. No… It can’t be. Bjork Quichel?! But it has to be. I didn’t recognize him all cleaned up, but that’s him all right. The fourth route. Agh, why do I always realize this crap too late?!*

Melody and Micah checked the area, but the boy never reappeared, and Micah never got her lunch. Luckily, Melody had time to whip up a snack for her.

“Anna?” Micah said after Melody described her own lunchtime activities. “And she’s with House Victillium?”

“That’s right. She’s a friend of mine. I’ll introduce you two the next time we get a chance.”

“Please do.”

*I know I’m reaching right now, but Anna… I wonder if she’s my Anna. I’d like to see Anna-oneechan again. There’s no way, though.*

Anna had been a fan of the game this world was based on too, so Micah wanted to believe in the possibility of a reunion. She was also realistic, however, and knew the odds were stacked against her.

If there were a world championship for being off the mark…

“Lord, I needed that!” Anna(-Marie) sighed. “Melody’s as pretty as the day I met her, and Sasha seems like she’ll be a reliable ally. The boys with her… I could take or leave them, but I really hope we get to have lunch together again. I still have to meet Micah.”

“Great. Real happy for you. What am I even here for? To smile and nod?”

Anna-Marie cringed. Christopher had stuck out his neck to sneak into her room that night so she could relate the information she’d gathered, but all he’d heard thus far was how pretty the other girls were and how perfect Anna-Marie’s day had been.

“I’m sorry, okay?” she said. “I did remember to ask about the incidents but didn’t get anything we haven’t already heard. What did you want me to do? Sulk and be mad about it all through lunch?”

“You could be a little less obvious about your taste in women.” Christopher sighed. How was he the one who always got a bad rap?

His companion held her tongue, a Herculean task in Christopher’s company.

Meanwhile, with Sasha…

“Welcome home, Lady Luna,” Sasha said.

Blish bowed in greeting. “My lady.”

Wearily, Luna surrendered her bag to her valet and made a beeline for her bedroom, where she sat and waited for Sasha to see to her hair.

“How was your day?” the maid asked.

“Same as the last. Everyone in class is still on edge,” Luna said.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I can only imagine the pressure Lady Rudleberg must be facing, with so little new evidence coming to light. Even the Victilliums seem to have sent their servants digging. So far, it has been to little avail, unfortunately.”

“Their servants? How so?” Luna asked.

“I lunched with one today,” Sasha said, “and she was kind enough to reveal that her lady had tasked her and her colleagues with probing public opinion on the recent controversy. I shared with her what I thought pertinent.”

“Goodness, I had no idea Lady Anna-Marie was being so proactive. Say, Sasha, could you tell me more? In detail, please.”

“Certainly, my lady.”

Gliding an elegant comb through her lady’s locks, Sasha recounted the day’s events. Luna’s sudden, passionate interest gladdened her. Ever since the accusations began, her lady had not shown much interest in anything else.

Unfortunately, things would get worse before they got better.

## Chapter 19:
## It Started with a Book

IT WAS THE SIXTH DAY OF THE THIRD WEEK of July, lunchtime.

Luciana and Luna, having finished their meals, passed the time on a lovely shaded bench in one of the courtyards. The classroom did not offer much in the way of a relaxing retreat, for obvious reasons.

Luna told her friend what Sasha had recounted of the Victillium maid called Anna yesterday. Truthfully, Luciana had heard it from Melody already, but she didn't mind hearing it from someone else. New perspectives could offer new insights.

"They don't call her the perfect lady for nothing," Luciana said. "She really thinks ahead."

"That she does. Keep your head high, Luciana. You know I'm here for you as well, even if I may not be of much... Oh!"

"What?"

"Heaven have mercy, I forgot I have a book from the library due today."

"What book is that?" Luciana asked.

"Oh, um, *Magic Fundamentals for Children*," Luna said. "The one you recommended not long ago."

"Right, I remember that. I already had magic figured out before I found it, so I never ended up checking it out."

"You told me it was very beginner-friendly," Luna said. "I gave it a read, but maybe I'm not quite at beginner level yet. I'm still trying to work out casting spells unfortunately."

"That's a shame," Luciana said. "Do you need to get going then? I know you'll be busy after class, so now might be your only chance to make it in time."

"I suppose I'll have to. Feel free to head back to class without me if I end up running late."

"Will do."

Luciana saw Luna off with a smile. And there she sat, quietly waiting for her friend's return. The wind tickled her cheeks and rustled the leaves overhead. Wrapped in the perfection of a serene, sunny afternoon, Luciana nodded off.

"I apologize for the wait," Luna said as she returned. "I'm glad I made it in time."

"You're back sooner than I thought. Any later and I might have really fallen asleep."

"We wouldn't want you to miss class. Speaking of, we have semester exams soon. Would you like to—"

"Luciana Rudleberg!" someone roared.

The girls jumped and searched for the source of the voice. One of their classmates stormed toward them, a boy who'd never treated Luciana very kindly.

"You'll get yours this time, Luciana Rudleberg!" he growled.

"What? What are you talking about?" Luciana said.

The boy scoffed. "Come with me!" He snatched her arm and forced her to her feet.

"Now hold on!" Luna protested.

The boy paid no mind to Luna's objections as he dragged Luciana to the classroom. Evidently, they'd arrived last, and as soon as they did, it was clear this would not be a repeat of the last two times this happened. As Luciana's classmates swiveled toward her, she watched the doubt in their eyes harden to conviction.

Luciana could not speak.

"Wh-what happened?" Luna asked in her place.

Someone offered a hasty explanation.

During the lunch break, Anna-Marie had been on her way back to the classroom from student council business when a great mass of water crashed down on her head, soaking her to the bone. Christopher and Maxwell stood among the witnesses to this atrocity. It all took place in a completely different courtyard than the one where Luciana and Luna had taken their break, but that did not matter when those who witnessed the dousing claimed to see a flash of golden hair atop a nearby

school building. By the time anyone could reach the roof, the culprit was long gone.

“Wait, you’re saying someone drenched Lady Anna-Marie?!” Luciana said.

“The audacity!” the boy from earlier spat. “You are as abominable as the crimes you commit!”

Luciana flinched but swiftly regained her nerve.

“You can’t seriously believe that’s enough to implicate Luciana,” Luna said.

“Who else would stoop to such petty delinquency?!”

“You watch your tongue!” Luna said. “I’ll have you know Luciana has been with me all break!”

“Was she? The *entire* break? Every second of every minute of every hour?”

“I-I did have to excuse myself to return a book to the library, but that’s hardly—”

“The charlatan has no alibi!”

Luna deflated. “Y-your proof is only circumstantial,” she said, yet she struggled to muster further resistance with all of her peers apparently set in their convictions.

“You will not throw around accusations in my name,” a firm voice interjected.

“Lady Anna-Marie!”

Presentable again, Anna-Marie Victillium returned to the classroom, Christopher and Maxwell close on her heels.

One look at the ring that had formed around Luciana and Luna, and Anna-Marie ascertained the situation. “As I’ve said many times now, we will not cast judgment based on conjecture. You do not honor me when you do so.”

“But, my lady,” the boy started to argue.

“Think for a moment. How could Luciana have committed this crime? A bucket? It would have needed to be a rather large and unwieldy one, in that case. No, it’s apparent to me that the culprit used water magic.” Anna-Marie knew better than anyone that Luciana was innocent and could not use magic. This was her

ultimate, infallible, airtight defense…if it were true, that is. “Someone cast a spell from the third floor of the building. That is the most likely—”

“Which Luciana could never do!” Luna blurted. “Yes, she can use water magic, but to be able to wield it so accurately is another matter entirely!”

Silence swept through the classroom like an icy winter wind.

“Luciana,” Anna-Marie began, “you can use magic?”

“I, um, well,” Luciana spluttered, “y-yes, but I can only make enough water to fill a teacup. Nothing on the level of—”

“There’s our proof right there!” the boy yelled.

“What?! No, you’re not listening to me!” Luciana cried.

But a roar of fresh accusations rose to drown out Luciana’s frantic pleas of innocence. The possibility existed: Luciana could have cast the spell. That was enough to feed a level of mass hysteria that even Anna-Marie was powerless to control.

Her focus went instead to the single student standing aside watching the chaos unfold: Olivia Rincot’dor. Olivia, who’d never held much affection for Luciana. She should have seized on such an easy opportunity to fluster her rival, but instead she simply stood there, her fan hiding any hint of emotion her lips might have betrayed. What was she waiting for? The perfect moment to deliver the final blow?

*So it’s you after all, Olivia. You’re the Jealous Witch. What happened to me was supposed to happen to you, but here we are. But wait. If she’s the Jealous Witch and I’m a victim, then who’s…?*

Who was the villainess?

Olivia snapped her folding fan shut. At once, silence fell and every eye turned toward her. The crowd parted to allow her to make her slow, deliberate way to Luciana.

Finally, decisively, she thrust the fan at Luciana’s nose. Anna-Marie was stunned. Could it be? But how?

“I’ve got it,” the duke’s daughter grandly proclaimed. “First, you attacked our illustrious class, Class A—the highest scorers on the exam. Then you attacked its students, the most successful

of us, that is. And now, Lady Rudleberg, you turn your ire on Lady Victillium. Because sharing the spotlight at the Spring Ball simply wasn't enough for you, was it?"

*It can't be,* Anna-Marie fumed. She knew this monologue. Every word. *It literally can't be! How is this possible?*

"At last, the truth comes to light," Olivia went on. "Jealousy inspired your misguided quest for revenge. *That* is why you've committed such heinous, shameful acts against your bright and shining peers! Had you any shred of dignity left, you'd admit your guilt at once and atone for your crimes!"

*Yep, nope, yep, there she goes! Saying all my friggin' lines! What is going on?!*

This denunciation, every single utterance just uttered, came straight from the lips of the villainess. The heroine's foil. In the game, this would have been where Christopher stepped in and publicly rejected such baseless slander, but things had gone off the rails. No one dared speak up.

*Olivia's the villainess? So then who's the Jealous Witch?!*

Mysteries upon mysteries.

Snapping back to his senses, Christopher did fulfill his role in quieting the panic. Eventually. But Luciana was in a bad way. Perhaps her worst yet.

Luciana returned to her room early that afternoon, skipping the elective period. Melody and Micah, hearing of the day's events, had taken off work with Lect to be with their lady.

Luciana set down a cup of Melody's trademark tea, sighing as she did. "Why do these things keep happening?"

Her one solace was that tomorrow was her day off. It would not be long before she could put this behind her and recharge with her family, or so Melody hoped. Secretly, the maid blamed herself. What kind of attendant was she if she could not be there for her lady when she needed her most? Micah shared Melody's frustration at her powerlessness. She'd come to Royal Academy to prevent exactly this, after all.

*Becoming the world's most perfect maid might as well be a pipe dream at this rate.* Every time Melody came a step closer to realizing her goal, something forced her two steps back. Cheering Luciana up and warming her heart had put Melody on the right track, but now it seemed like melancholy weighed heavily on her lady's mind. *Did I just imagine all that progress?*

"Miss Melody, I've completed preparations for our departure," Micah said.

"Thank you, Micah. Shall we, my lady?"

"I suppose," Luciana said. "Let me just finish this tea."

Minutes later, Luciana set her cup down one last time.

"Allow me," Micah said.

"Thank you," Luciana replied.

The young maid smiled genially, then left with the tea set. Once she finished cleaning the dishes, they would set off.

*I do hope this will help get her mind off things,* Melody prayed.

"Stream—*Fare Acqua*." Luciana languidly held her hand out. A small bubble of water, hardly enough to fill even a single tea cup, danced along her fingertips. "They just won't listen. It couldn't have been me, but no one believes me. Not even Luna could convince them."

"She sounds like a very good friend. I haven't had the pleasure of seeing her since our first day, unfortunately," Melody said.

"She's so kind. She wouldn't stop apologizing about leaving me to go return that book, and now I feel bad that she feels so bad. Sometimes I worry she might be *too* nice."

"Book? What book was she returning?"

"*Magic Fundamentals for Children*. We were talking during our lunch break, and she forgot the due date was today. So now there's a period of time where I was alone, and people think that's when I did the deed. Melody? Why are you looking at me like that?"

The maid's eyes went wide. "M-my lady," she muttered, "what did you say?"

“Hm? Luna left me alone because she had to go return a—”

“Not that part. What was the book called?”

“Um, *Magic Fundamentals for Children*. You remember that one, don’t you?”

Melody scurried to her room and rummaged through her things, then rushed back with a book.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Luciana said.

She did indeed hold *Magic Fundamentals for Children*, but something didn’t add up.

“Lect borrowed this from the library not long ago,” the maid said. “They only keep one copy in stock, my lady.”

Luciana blinked. “But that… By not long ago, do you mean today? After Luna returned it?”

Melody shook her head. “No, my lady. Lect checked it out for me five days ago.”

Her lady didn’t understand. Perhaps refused to. “B-but Luna just returned it today. She told me so. She…”

“Did you see the book in her hands, my lady?”

“No,” she admitted quietly. The color drained from her face. What was the meaning of this?

“Lady Luna testified to your innocence. Is that right?”

“Y-yeah! She did!”

“But she also facilitated your guilt by precluding an alibi that could have *proven* your innocence,” Melody said. Luciana did not respond. “Lady Anna-Marie said that the crime was more than likely committed by water magic. Am I following so far, my lady?”

“Y-yes.”

“According to your account, Lady Luna then again came to your defense, claiming that would have been impossible for you. But not without first announcing that you *can*, in fact, use water magic.”

Luciana’s heart pounded hard and fast, echoing against her eardrums alongside the inevitable implications. *Luna…*

Melody did not relish laying out her case this way. She took no pride in her ability to infer under these circumstances, but there was a clear line of logic, and she had to follow it to its conclusion. No matter how painful.

And Luciana knew that.

*It was my lost pencil that first cast doubt on me,* the rational side of Luciana said. *How did I lose it? Could Luna have stolen it to leave at the scene of the crime?*

*You have no reason to think that!* her emotional side argued.

*Who discovered the pattern to the second incident?* logic countered. *That was when people really started pointing fingers. That was the biggest factor. And now this most recent incident. Who is it that always precedes the blowups? Who is it that always somehow makes things—*

"It's not true!" she cried.

"My lady…"

Luciana cowered on the ground and pressed her hands over her ears. But she could not shut out the voices. She knew she couldn't. With the seeds of doubt planted, all Luciana could do was watch them grow and grow until she could be rid of them, one way or another.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to take so long," Micah said as she returned. "We can depart whenever we're…ready."

She took one look at Luciana huddled on the ground before shooting a glance at Melody. Her mentor did not elaborate, but the pain in her expression said enough.

Luciana slowly clambered to her feet, eyes glued to the ceiling, then let out a heavy breath. "We won't be departing."

"My lady?" Micah said. "Aren't you going home?"

"Not this week. I have something to do."

"My lady," Melody breathed.

Tears clung to the corners of Luciana's eyes, but she would not let them fall. Not yet. Not until she knew the truth. "Micah, would you pen a letter to the estate letting my parents know I won't be coming? Melody, I'd like tonight's dinner to be light, please. I'll be retiring early."

“R-right away, my lady,” Micah stammered, still unsure what was happening.

“Yes, Lady Luciana.” Melody, however, bowed without question.

Melody debated speaking her mind but ultimately held back. Her lady carried herself with a resolve that a maid had no business interfering with.

# Chapter 20:
# Paths Diverged

THAT SAME NIGHT, RIGHT NEXT DOOR, Sasha was brushing her lady's hair.

"Thank you, Sasha," Luna said. "That will be enough."

"Of course, my lady. What, may I ask, are your plans for tomorrow?"

"Well, it seems I forgot something in the classroom. I intend to rise early so I can stop by and retrieve it."

"I'd hate for you to go to such trouble, my lady. Shall I contact the academy and retrieve it in your stead?"

"That won't be necessary, thank you. Now, I think I ought to retire early if I'm to be out the door at a reasonable hour."

"Yes, my lady." Sasha excused herself with a curtsy and gently shut the door behind her. She let out a small sigh once she was certain she wouldn't be overheard.

"What's that about?" Blish asked, as stony-faced as ever.

Sasha sighed again. Bigger this time. "Nothing. It's nothing."

Blish did not think it was nothing. It certainly didn't look like nothing.

Sasha lingered in front of the door, staring blankly past it. *Something's different about my lady. I can't place it, but she's just not herself. Lord, I wish I could figure it out.*

Luna, now alone, shot a glance at a dark corner by her bed. It was small, hardly enough to contain the shadow that defined it. And yet a boy emerged from it, seemingly gliding out of the darkness itself, groaning and clutching his chest as he did.

Luna regarded him coldly. "My loss is your pain. Ironic, isn't it?"

A dark haze poured off the purple-haired boy's body. Weakened as it was, what little remained of the Dark One's

essence could not fully subdue this subject. Bjork was resisting. He was through being a slave, answering to higher powers, dirtying his hands for others, taking their beatings for them. He would control his own destiny.

But even a fraction of the Dark One's power was immense, and fighting it was destroying Bjork's body. He was losing the battle.

He collapsed to the floor. Luna approached as he writhed, presenting the palm of her hand. The same dark haze, the Dark One's borrowed power, seeped from her body.

"This vessel will hold. With a little assistance," she said.

Bjork shrieked a voiceless, guttural shriek as the haze enveloped him. Gradually, it faded to nothing, as did the light in Bjork's eyes. Calm returned, and eventually, stoically, Bjork climbed to his feet.

"Tomorrow, I will have what I was promised. You will deliver," Luna said.

Bjork said nothing, wordlessly retreating back into the shadows.

"Tomorrow, Luciana. Tomorrow..." Luna mused.

Her bedroom went dark.

The next morning, Luciana paid Luna a visit. Unfortunately, she found Luna absent. Apparently, Luna had forgotten something in their classroom and went to recover it.

"Allow me to accompany you, my Lady," Melody implored.

"No. I'll go alone."

"But, my lady!"

"I'll be fine. I promise. I just want to talk. I have to know the truth, and if it's what I fear, I have to know why. You won't be necessary."

Melody gritted her teeth behind firmly closed lips. Those were the magic words. She had to respect her mistress's wishes, lest she become a nuisance, the worst thing a servant could be.

"I'll be back soon," Luciana said.

“Y-yes, my lady,” Micah replied awkwardly.

Melody’s spirits remained firmly sunken. “Yes, my lady.”

Luciana departed.

The academy lay quiet today. Normally, all doors remained locked when class wasn’t in session, but Luciana made her way to Class A with surprising ease.

And there she was.

“Luna.”

Luna greeted her friend as she always did. “Good morning, Luciana.” With a smile.

But this was not the smile Luciana knew. It was not the smile she recognized. Had it changed? Or had Luciana changed? She couldn’t say.

“I have to ask you something, Luna.”

“Say, do you remember the order in which we made our debut at the Spring Ball? Specifically, when my name was called?”

“What? I don’t—”

“I didn’t think you would.” Luna giggled. “It was right before you, silly.” Luciana said nothing. “It’s not your fault. Who’d remember plain old me? But let’s not kid ourselves. I could have been third or second or first and still managed to go unnoticed. And after your entrance? Gosh, I might as well have not existed.” Another giggle. Genuine, as if at a joke. “I thought you were the prettiest girl in the world, you know. So perfect and beautiful, and, well, you were the Fae Princess, after all. If I had to lose to anyone, at least it was to you.” She scoffed. “I tried. I really tried to leave it at that. But I couldn’t. I was jealous.”

“Luna…”

“I studied for hours. Oh, the sleepless nights. But you beat me again. The midterms weren’t my chance.” She started to pace around the room. “I’ve always admired Lord Maxwell, but he invited *you* to join the student council. That wasn’t my chance either.”

“Luna, I put your name forward.”

“Oh, and how *humbled* I was,” Luna mocked. “I must seem so pitiful to you.”

“That’s not at all how I think of you!”

“We’re equal, you and I. Daughters of counts. But your family holds land, and we owe our status to office. That’s enough to make you better, I suppose. I have no hope there either because we’re Nobles of the Robe, and the Ignobles may be a laughingstock, but at least they have a fief.” Her giggles mutated into a derisive cackle. “It just never ends.”

“Luna! Where is this coming from? Aren’t we friends? I thought we hit it off when we first met.” Luciana’s stomach dropped when Luna did not reply. “Luna?”

“Yes. I suppose we did hit it off. I was fond of you. Very fond. That, I cannot deny. But for every trace of affection I felt, I felt jealousy in equal measure. Every instance of love was overshadowed by pure…seething…*hatred*!”

Dark energy suddenly erupted out of Luna.

“Is this…mana?!” Luciana gasped. “This power…!”

Waves of magic rippled off of Luna, so concentrated that Luciana could see them wavering in the air and feel them crashing against her. A whirlwind kicked up, sending desks and chairs clattering around the room. Luciana ducked and dodged out of the way of the flying furniture.

Luna cackled maniacally. “Yes! *Yes!* This is all I’ve ever wanted! My envy, my anger, my hatred—it has become my power! With it, I can finally have what I’ve always wanted. A world without *you*!”

Cracks fractured the walls. The ground threatened to split. Even the ceiling groaned and creaked, until the entire room seemed about to shatter. This was not Royal Academy, not anymore, but rather a boundless, endless dark void.

“You’ve nowhere to run, Luciana. You’re mine!” Luna thrust out her hand, a ball of dark energy gathering in front of her palm. It crackled and flashed as if the power hungered for freedom, growing too great for containment.

Luciana could not fathom the destruction that power might cause should it escape. “Stop this, Luna! Please!”

“At last, I can truly say I am happy. Goodbye, my friend. Today, my anguish dies by my hand!” A mad grin split across her face.

In one eye hung a single, trembling tear.

“Luna!”

The ball of energy broke free and struck its target. A strobe of darkness engulfed the fake world, distorting reality and threatening to tear through into the physical realm.

Luciana was no more.

“Farewell. At last, I have… What?”

“Um…”

Impossibly, Luciana stood exactly where she had before, distinctly alive. Neither of them knew what they had just witnessed. Luna, completely assured of her victory, was utterly dumbfounded by the scene before her. Luciana, completely assured of her death, was utterly dumbfounded that she even had eyes to *see* the scene before her.

Luciana returned to her senses first. She looked herself over, tugged her sleeves, flapped her skirt. Then she nodded. “Okay. So clearly that wasn’t enough to blow me to smithereens. In fact, I don’t have a scratch on me. Smithereens is a long way off, I think.”

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?”

Luciana’s lips turned up in a snide, cocky grin. “I’ll tell you what it means. It means I’m not alone after all, and all my bluster about coming here by myself was for nothing.”

“You’re talking nonsense!” Luna bellowed. This was not supposed to happen.

“I’ve heard you out, Luna.” Luciana’s expression sobered. She clenched her fist and held it by her heart. “But now it’s my turn to talk. Frankly, I’m neither accommodating enough nor in the mood to wait for you to agree.” She took a bold step forward. Luna retreated an equal amount. “So, fine. If this is how you want to do things, then I’ll speak your language, but I hope you know what you’re getting into.” She thrust her fist straight out. “Because Luciana Rudleberg never backs down!”

Elsewhere, away from this battle of shonen manga proportions…

“Miss Melody! Miss Melody, the leaves!”

“Huh? Oh!” In an attempt to take her mind off her lady, Melody was making a pot of tea, though rather poorly. Rest assured, dropping the tea leaves on the floor was not a secret maid technique to add extra flavor. “Goodness, such a waste.”

Melody dumped the squandered leaves into the garbage.

“I thought you could use those for cleaning,” Micah muttered to herself.

“Hm? Oh, for the love of…!”

It was too late. They belonged to the rubbish now.

*Our heroine’s gone a bit wacky. A maid of all wack, if you will,* Micah thought.

Being told she was “unnecessary” by her own lady had done a number on Melody’s mental state, and she’d regressed to an empty-headed, klutzy heroine from ages past.

All of which left Micah worried. *Today must be the day of the boss fight.*

It was very likely at this stage that Luna Invidia was the Jealous Witch. Luciana, the substitute heroine, going to settle things could only mean one thing: She was heading straight into the arc’s climax. It would begin with a confrontation of words, and as soon as the Jealous Witch knew the jig was up, the conflict would escalate into combat. In the game, the conflict played out in public, but this version likely wouldn’t do that. Melody accompanying Luciana would have been truer to the original, but that ship had sailed.

She had been deemed unnecessary—much to the detriment of her mental well-being.

A shriek drew Micah from her contemplation. Melody tripped on the hem of her own skirt. After building a reputation for herself as the all-perfect, all-powerful maid of maids, this tumble was less a fall from grace and more an inelegant nosedive.

Micah was plenty aware of Melody's abilities, having witnessed them for herself at the estate. Her stats were probably maxed out, if Melody wasn't already maxed out from skill alone. How she had managed to reach such heights, Micah could not fathom, but that talent was the reason Micah had not protested Luciana's decision to leave Melody behind.

The magic on Luciana's uniform would keep her safe no matter what. But with Luciana lacking a means of counterattacking, Micah wondered if the fight would ever reach a conclusion. The plot might have made Luciana the heroine for the purposes of continuing; but meanwhile, the real heroine with all the actual power was too busy being a maid of all wack and nursing bruised knees to guide this world toward a happy ending. How would the world fare without her? Certainly not well if Melody couldn't get a hold of herself.

Micah could sense Melody's indecision. She stood at a crossroads, but refused to proceed down either path. This could not continue. Until the heroine made her choice, the world would stand still…or worse.

Melody rose to her feet, rubbing herself where she still ached. "Micah?"

Micah approached. "What's the plan?"

"The plan? You heard what our lady said."

"I did. Lady Luciana made her choice. But that's not what I asked. What's *your* choice, Miss Melody? What would you like to do?"

Melody shrank back. Was this the same Micah? "But our lady said…"

"I know what our lady said. I'm asking what *you* would like to do. We have instructions to wait for her return. Will you accept them? Will you go after her? Or will you do something else entirely? The choice is yours, Miss Melody."

"The choice is…mine."

*It doesn't matter who subs in,* Micah thought. *Miss Melody's role will never change. So long as she wields the power of the Saint, she can wear the uniform of a humble maid, but she'll still be the one and only heroine. The fate of our lady, of the plot—of the very*

*world rests on her shoulders!* Micah's conviction held strong, despite lacking proof. *It all begins and ends with you, Melody. So make your choice!*

"You are a maid, and your lady is in need," Micah said. "Now, how will you be of service to her?"

"My lady…"

"What will you do for her? It's time to decide, Miss Melody!"

"I…"

Melody made her choice.

"Excuse me, Master, but I must trouble you to get off your rear and leave. I have to clean this room."

"I know a few maids who might take umbrage at the way you speak, Paula."

Lect relaxed at his residence, making full use of his day off from the academy. A little too much use, his all-works maid thought, cleaning utensils in hand.

"Don't make me take you over my knee. I've no interest in being your mother," Paula chided. "Now move!"

"As much as I admire that strong personality of yours, sometimes I wish you'd show a little…restraint."

"What in the world is *that*?"

A simple wooden door had suddenly blinked into existence at their periphery.

It opened.

"Pardon me, but there's no time to explain! Lect, I need your help!" Melody said.

"Perfect timing, Melody," Paula said. "He's all yours. Ta-ta! Buh-bye! Off you go, Master!"

"What? Now what's—Wait! Stop! Hold—Melody!" Lect sputtered. "There's no need to tug! I'm coming!"

"You two have fun now!" The door shut as they passed through it, and Paula let out a sigh. "All right. Where was I?"

The maid got on with her day without a second thought.

Melody had made her choice—to seek out aid. From everywhere she knew to look.

Anna-Marie was one of the few to remain on campus that weekend. She analyzed everything she knew about the Jealous Witch Incident with Christopher, who'd snuck over yet again.

"So Duke Rincot'dor's daughter wasn't the culprit after all. She was the villainess," Christopher summarized. "She's swapped roles with you, then?"

"Based on her monologue after the water incident, yes," Anna-Marie said. "It sounds sillier coming out of the original Anna-Marie's mouth, granted. She's supposed to be the stupid, hotheaded, borderline comic-relief character."

"Wow. I'd pay money to see you play that role."

"Sure. It'll cost you an arm and a leg, though. Literally."

"Have I ever told you that you're starting to freak me out?"

Anna-Marie sifted through the facts over in her head. Olivia was more than likely innocent, but then who was the true Jealous Witch? Surely, the Witch's power had been the thing to turn people against Luciana.

*In the game, a black rain falls and brainwashes everyone at Royal Academy, but the effect is light. Those with a certain degree of magical aptitude can resist it, which is why it doesn't really affect the school administrators yet makes everyone else feel more inclined to point fingers. At Luciana, specifically. But then how did it manage to affect Olivia? She's a powerful mage. Does she really just hate Luciana that much, entirely divorced from anything to do with the Dark One's influence?*

Using the original plot as a baseline, Anna-Marie could assume the true Witch would be in Class A.

She scanned the roster of students for the umpteenth time. Their perp likely had blonde hair, and they had to be able to manipulate water magic. They would need a reason to loathe the substitute heroine, which implied they had some sort of connection with Luciana. That was the most important factor, more than hair color or magical ability or anything else—the

Jealous Witch had to *envy* Luciana. Without jealousy, the heart would not crack, and the Dark One could not fill it.

Anna-Marie slowly slid her finger down the list of names. She paused. “Luna Invidia,” she read aloud.

*She fits the bill as far as being connected to Luciana goes, but they’re best friends. She’s always the first one to come to her defense. Still…*

More often than not, Luna’s defenses only weakened Luciana’s position. When Anna-Marie thought back on all the incidents, Luna’s attempts to exonerate Luciana invariably implicated her instead.

“Luna?” Christopher repeated. “What about her? I mean, I guess if we’re talking shoujo tropes, she’d be our top suspect. It’s always the main character’s best friend who turns out to be some secret ringleader for all the bullies. And there’s that whole scene where she’s like, ‘I never liked you! We were never friends!’ Y’know what I mean, Anna?”

For once, Anna-Marie didn’t feel like biting his head off for making offhand remarks. The dork had a point. Women could be cruel to each other. She could attest to that herself.

Just then, someone knocked on the door. “My apologies for disturbing you, my lady,” Claris called. “Do you have a moment?”

“Yes?”

“A maid-in-training from House Rudleberg is asking to see you.”

“A maid-in-training? Not Luciana?”

“I’m told it involves Luciana. The girl says it’s very important.”

“Important?” Anna-Marie’s brows drew down. She glanced at Christopher and pointed up at the ceiling, gesturing for him to hide himself in their secret passage. “Let her in, please.”

She quickly prepared the parlor in the adjoining room to welcome the girl, and then she entered.

“Th-thank you ever so much for humoring my sudden and impertinent request, my lady. It’s an h-honor to meet you,” the girl said.

“It’s no trouble. May I offer some tea? Please, have a seat.”

“You’re too kind, my lady, but I’m afraid time is of the essence. Forgive me if I forgo formalities in the name of urgency.”

“I see. Continue.”

There, in Anna-Marie’s dorm, a fated reunion took place. Asakura Anna, Kurita Hideki, and Kurita Maika unwittingly stood in one place. How cruel it was that they lacked the luxury of time enough to realize.

Micah explained all she could about the situation involving Luna. How Luna’s defenses always implicated Luciana, how going to the library on the day of the water incident had been a bald-faced lie, and how she had conveniently chosen the very next day, a day off, to return to the classroom. Lastly, Micah shared that Luciana had gone to confront her.

“My lady has instructed us to wait for her, but we’re simply beside ourselves with worry,” Micah said.

Melody had proposed a creative solution. She refused to wait, but so too did she refuse to leap before she looked. There were others, however, who could do what she could not. She’d thus tasked Micah with begging for aid from Anna-Marie, who lived one floor above them.

It had been a shot in the dark on a day when most students went home. Anna-Marie could have been home with her family as well, but luck was on the Rudleberg maids’ side that day.

*Weird,* Micah thought. *I thought Anna-Marie Victillium was supposed to be brick-wall stupid.*

After hitting a dead end with Melody, Micah had given up on anyone else from Earth inhabiting this world. The thought that there might’ve been others like her did not even cross her mind as she stood in Anna-Marie’s room.

Anna-Marie shot up. “I’m going out, Claris.”

“Yes, my lady,” her lady-in-waiting replied. “Shall I accompany you?”

“Not necessary. And please see to preparations quickly. This could be an emergency.”

“So it would seem.” The door to the parlor clicked open, and a regal figure entered. A man, no less.

“Y-Y-Your Highness! B-but this is the ladies’ dormitory!” Claris squealed. Micah, too, went bug-eyed. “You’re not engaged! This is scandalous! This is…!”

“Claris,” Anna-Marie snapped. Her eyes could puncture steel, and they quieted the lady-in-waiting at once. “We don’t have a problem, do we?”

Claris froze before eventually curtsying. “I’ll take this to my grave, my lady.”

“Splendid. Thank you, Claris. That goes for you as well, Micah.”

The young maid’s spine went stiff as a board. “Y-yes, my lady!” The world of high society was a demanding one indeed.

“Things could get hairy,” Christopher said. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Anna-Marie replied.

The prince produced a silver dirk, held it up, and then incanted, “Creation—*Alchemy*!”

Various silver bits and bobs around the parlor fell apart at invisible seams and gathered around the dirk, lengthening it into a robust longsword.

Micah gaped with awe. *Wow! I didn’t know the prince could do that! Imagine having him for a big brother!*

Alas, she could only imagine. There was very little family resemblance currently.

“I’m off,” Christopher said.

“I’ll catch up once I see to my own preparations,” Anna-Marie said. “And send word to Lord Maxwell. The more the merrier, after all. He ought to be in the student council room.”

“Will do.” Christopher threw open the window. Micah wondered what for.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” she cried as Prince Christopher leaped straight out of the window. From the third floor. “What is he…?! He’s… He’s hopping on air!”

She scrambled to the window to watch him descend gently to the ground on invisible stepping stones. *Now that's a man! Totally different from my big brother!*

Alas! She could only imagine. There was *very* little family resemblance currently.

"There. I'm ready. Leave the rest to us, Micah." Anna-Marie, changed from plain clothes into her uniform, approached the same window, and, "Light as air—*Airstep*."

By condensing the air around their feet for only an instant, Anna-Marie and Christopher could effectively leap in midair. It was yet another spell of their own creation, and it came in quite handy during situations such as this where verticality posed a problem.

Anna-Marie, too, landed safely outside, then sped off.

*Who are these people? The people Miss Melody trusts to help our lady, I guess. Er, right, still on the clock!* With a quick word of thanks to Claris for her understanding, Micah made a mad dash for the classroom. *He'll be there! I know he will! You're not getting away this time, Bjork Quichel!* She remembered their last meeting, the pain that had gripped him. *The Dark One's slipping. They're not unified, and that means…*

He could be saved. *She* could save him.

Micah left the dormitory and flew toward the campus proper.

"Honestly, who do you two take me for?" Maxwell cried in despair.

"A fast friend, my bosom companion!"

"Your support is ever a boon, Lord Maxwell."

Maxwell tried and failed to glower. He (against his will), Christopher, and Anna-Marie now stood at the door to Class A, though that door did not seem inclined to open.

"It would seem we're at an impasse, Your Highness," Maxwell said. "Perhaps it's a barrier?"

"Perhaps, but can it withstand my blade?!" Christopher infused his silver sword with mana and stabbed at the stubborn

door. Ebony flashed as the blade collided with some dark, otherworldly material sturdier than iron. “That did not work.”

“The battle’s already begun,” Anna-Marie murmured. “Luciana…”

The strangeness of Christopher and Anna-Marie’s involvement in all this did not escape Maxwell’s notice. “You both seem uncannily attuned to the current situation. I’m hurt. I thought there were no secrets among friends.”

Maxwell belonged solely to this world. He had not been reincarnated and so likely would not understand half of what weighed on Christopher and Anna-Marie’s minds, despite the outbursts from Christopher that he’d steadfastly ignored.

The time would come when true danger loomed. The conflict they faced now served as proof of that. If Christopher and Anna-Marie wanted Maxwell on their side when the real threat emerged, they would have to tell him the truth…someday.

“We’ll tell you everything. Soon,” Anna-Marie said. “Once we put this well and truly behind us.”

“I suppose that’s fair enough,” Maxwell said. “I’ll keep my mind on the task at hand, but I *will* hold you to that promise.”

“We take no joy in secrecy, friend,” the prince added. “Look! The barrier!”

The dark material guarding the door suddenly cracked. A silver line cut across the barrier, spreading like spider webs and weakening its defenses.

“Where’s this coming from?” Anna-Marie said.

“Whoever’s doing it, we owe them one. Now’s our chance!” Christopher said.

“I hope I needn’t remind you two that rescuing whoever’s inside is our primary objective,” Maxwell said.

*I won’t let anyone fall to ruin. Not in my world,* Anna-Marie resolved. *There will be no tragedy!*

“The barrier’s down!” Christopher shouted. “Let’s go!”

# Chapter 21:
# Jealous Witch Versus Jealous Witch

LUCIANA'S BATTLE WITH LUNA CHURNED to a standstill. Neither side had suffered so much as a scratch, Luna's blasts doing little more than repelling Luciana while Luciana lacked a means to fight back at all.

Luciana made another break for it, and Luna fired another ball of energy. The world shuddered, lights flashed, and by the time Luciana's vision returned, she'd once again made no progress.

How long had they been at this?

"This is bad," Luciana muttered. "We'll go on like this forever unless I find a way to fight back."

Invulnerable though she was, fatigue posed a very real threat. So long as she was stuck in this realm, she remained at Luna's mercy. At any time, Luna could decide she'd had enough and leave her here to rot.

"Where did you get that power?! Why aren't my attacks working?!" Luna snarled, launching a fresh volley of attacks. "You won't rest until I lose absolutely everything, will you?! It's not fair! It's not fair!"

The darkness consuming her had taken refuge in every corner of her heart, magnifying the otherwise quiet emotions that slept there, and Luciana's impenetrable defense only served to agitate the festering envy further.

"Like you know what fair is!" Luciana snapped back. "Like you're the only one who's ever suffered!"

Luciana wasn't having it. What wasn't fair was Luna making Luciana bear the brunt of all of her petty insecurities. And that frustration was the key.

As emotion swirled inside Luciana, power swelled up within her. Somewhere near her chest, a strange yet tangible energy coalesced. It seeped out of the necklace she constantly wore around her neck. When she fished the jewelry out of her clothing, the ring on the end of the chain was glowing silver.

“This… I remember this,” Luciana said.

About a month had passed since Melody helped Luciana perceive her mana by filling her with wave after wave of magic. In the end, a single silver speck had appeared in the center of the ring’s stone. Luciana hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but now…

Now, she knew what it was.

“Melody’s power.”

The pieces clicked into place. How hadn’t she realized this sooner? Once, filled with her mana, Luciana had felt Melody. She knew this sensation well. This ring bore that same glimmer.

It almost seemed like it was trying to tell her something. But what?

While Luciana was distracted, Luna let out a guttural shriek and let loose yet more balls of energy. Luciana realized too late to dodge. They would not hurt her, but she did not like taking them head-on, so she flung herself out of the way.

As she did, her necklace swayed in just the perfect way so that the ring made contact with one of the orbs.

“Oh no!” she cried.

But the ring remained intact. More than that, it batted aside the crackling sphere of darkness. Utterly obliterated it, even.

“What now?!” Luna shrieked.

Luciana stared in bemusement. Perhaps this was what the ring was trying to say. “I can fight back?” The ring glowed slightly brighter, as if in reply. “But I don’t want to hurt her.” What if the ring struck Luna and not one of those dark orbs? Luciana didn’t like that image one bit. The ring glowed again, communicating, and somehow Luciana understood. “On my finger?”

Keeping on the move and out of the way of the ceaseless onslaught, Luciana removed the ring from the chain and slid it onto her right middle finger. It glowed yet again, brighter than ever, the beams converging into a familiar shape near her palm. She gripped it.

“A harisen.”

Indeed. The light solidified into her weapon of choice, passed down from Melody, who had taught her how to wield it—a mighty, silver harisen. Luciana knew it well. Her own father could attest to the implement's torturous yet conveniently harmless nature.

Luciana gripped the paper fan tighter. This would do nicely. "Now I can *really* beat it into her, and she'll be fine. Oh, how I love you, harisen."

Luna flinched, sensing the new confidence in Luciana's eyes just before Luciana darted at her.

"You won't get the chance to use that thing!" Luna shouted.

Another volley. This time, Luciana didn't dodge. The rumbling and the flashing was annoying, but so long as she was safe, she could keep charging. So that's what she did, rushing unwavering at Luna.

Luna stumbled and froze. Her attacks couldn't damage Luciana, and now they couldn't even keep her back. Terror gripped her as she watched Luciana sprint through eruptions and tremors without a second thought. It didn't even cross her mind that she could have run too.

In mere moments, they stood nose-to-nose.

"L-Luciana!"

*"Lunaaa!"* Luciana raised her arms up high, then brought the fan down square over the top of Luna's head. "I have had just about enough of this!" she roared.

*Thwack!*

All at once, the silver power infused in each fiber and fold of the fan dispersed against the unfortunate target of its wrath.

The radiance sought the darkness within Luna, like a predator sniffing out its prey, and Luna howled. The light consumed the parasite inside her, and then Luna herself. Only when it purged every trace of the Dark One from Luna's heart did it fade.

Luciana glanced down at her hand. The harisen, too, had faded, and so had the silver speck in her ring. She had used up all of the power in that one swing.

A warm smile graced her lips as she gazed at the plain old stone of the necklace. *All that bluster, and it's still you who comes to my rescue.*

She remembered the hurt on Melody's face when Luciana called her unnecessary and resolved to apologize as soon as she got home. *After* wrapping up this current situation.

Luna stood there like a husk. Motionless. Addled. Distant. When she finally looked down at her hands, she cried with shame.

Hot tears still streamed down her cheeks when she looked up at Luciana. "I'm so sorry…"

And then she crumbled.

"Luna!" Luciana sped to her side and caught her. She was entirely limp, as if the harisen had drained her very consciousness along with whatever had possessed her. "Are you hurt? What do you need from me?"

"How…? How can you still care for me? After what I did to you. *Tried* to do to you. I wanted to kill you, Luciana. I don't deserve your help."

"That wasn't you. It was that *thing* controlling you."

"No," Luna said. "It wasn't. The power did something to my mind, true, but the things I thought. The things I felt. The things I said… Those were me."

She was right, even if the power had amplified those thoughts and feelings. Luna did think those things, feel those things. Luna Invidia had been terribly jealous of the success, beauty, and kindness of her peers.

Now that she was free from the black temptation, she could see her true self for what it really was. And it was ugly.

More tears tracked down her face. *I'm…simply despicable.*



“Luna,” Luciana sighed. “I don’t think we’ve quite shaken that monster in your head.”

“What?”

“You’re allowed to feel those things because you’re human. Just like the rest of us. I can’t even begin to count the ways I’ve been jealous of you since we became friends. Frankly, the fact that you never picked up on it hurts me more than any of the rest of this.”

Luna just blinked at Luciana. She was jealous? Of *her*?

“Oh, fine. I’ll lay it all out, so listen up,” Luciana said.

Luciana proceeded to give Luna’s supposed jealousy a run for its money.

Firstly, she gushed about Luna’s devotion. Luna had no mad maid tutor to keep her on top of her studies, and she still placed tenth in the midterms. Luciana admired that drive, and she made sure her friend knew it. She couldn’t claim to have half the work ethic Luna did.

Second, her assertiveness. Luciana could never dream of greeting her dorm neighbors on the very first day of school, but Luna had fearlessly taken the initiative. Luciana envied that terribly. She wished she had that confidence, wished she could be a light for others the way Luna was, because that had set the tone for Luciana’s entire first semester at the academy.

“Third,” she went on, “your smile.”

“My smile?” Luna said.

“It’s so warm and genuine and every time I see it I can’t help but smile back. Honestly, that’s number one, I think. I *wish* I could smile like you.”

“*That’s* what you’re jealous of?”

“That is what I’m jealous of. I could say the same thing to you, you know.”

“B-but your qualities are so much more impressive than mine. You *have* so much more.”

“You have plenty,” Luciana said. “And your qualities are more than enough. Because the things you have are what make

you Luna."

"Luciana..."

"So no more tears. I want to see a smile. That warm, genuine one that I love—and that I love to be jealous of. Can you do that for me?" She offered a smile herself, warm and genuine.

Luna's cold heart thawed. "Okay," she croaked. And then she smiled a crooked, tear-stained smile.

*I don't know if I'll be able to get over everything quite that easily,* she thought. *But I can try.*

"Luciana. I'd like to start over. I'd like to be friends. True—"

*"Worthless."*

Even as Luciana reached for Luna's hand, reality cracked around them. The dark magic that had conjured the space was running out and would not last much longer. But before Luna and Luciana could return to the classroom, a dark figure appeared behind them.

By the time they realized, it was too late.

The dark, hazy silhouette of a boy loomed over them, holding aloft a blade of pure darkness. *"I've no use for spent pawns. Begone."*

The figure brought the sword down.

"Oh, no you don't! *Shooting Star!*"

A star-shaped bolt of mana zipped toward the blade, knocking it aside at the last moment.

"Christopher!" a man called.

"Max!" another panted in reply.

With choreographic timing, the two noblemen set upon the attacker. Their swords flashed like beams of light, but the second they converged on the husk of Bjork Quichel, he leapt out of the way.

He turned to them just enough to make sure Prince Christopher and Maxwell could see the empty contempt in his gaze.

"Just your luck, eh?" the prince taunted.

Bjork's eyes narrowed venomously. *"Vermin."*

"This vermin's foiled your plans twice now. If I were you, I'd start reconsidering my life choices."

Unease undercut Christopher's bold taunts. Inwardly, he quaked.

*"Weaklings. All of you. You struggle in..."* Bjork froze. His eyes shot open, and he started to wheeze. He clutched his chest, and in a voice too small to overhear he groaned, *"I* bow*...to* no *one...!"*

Once it lost Luna's assistance, the Dark One also lost its hold on Bjork, who resisted with all he had, waging a battle in his heart.

He screamed as the fake world shattered, returning everyone to the classroom, then threw himself from the nearest window.

Christopher and the rest of the cavalry stood stricken for a moment but quickly came to their senses and started after Bjork. The boy knew the shadows well, however, and managed to slip away among them.

## Chapter 22:
## A Plot in Tatters

THE OVUNQUE PORTA SPELL DEPOSITED Melody and Lect safely and swiftly on Royal Academy grounds. They dashed for the classrooms, soon catching up with a straggler.

“Micah!” Melody called.

“Miss Melody! Sir Lectias!”

Micah relayed how she’d recruited Anna-Marie’s party, allowing Melody a moment to catch her breath. But the relief didn’t last long.

Something dark darted toward them from the direction of the classrooms.

“Back, both of you!” Lect barked.

The thing dropped in front of them and rolled lifelessly across the ground. Somewhere within the dark, hazy mass they could just make out the figure of a human.

Micah gasped. “Bjork Quichel!”

The dark mass writhed and shrieked as the boy battled with himself. His refusal to surrender his will to another clashed with the residual hatred of the Dark One, sending him into a frenzy and fraying him both mentally and physically.

Still screeching, the rabid remnants of Bjork lurched for Melody, but Lect was faster. His sword hand moved in a flash, and before Bjork could act, Lect placed himself and his blade between the boy and the maid.

The howling boy advanced regardless. But Lect was ready. The boy savagely brought his broken blade down on the knight, who gracefully sidestepped it and shifted his weight to counterattack all in one fluid motion. His opponent clearly possessed strength, as well as some sort of uncanny power, however.

Bjork caught Lect’s blade with the hilt of his own sword after a series of frantic motions. Against a trained knight, the boy

moved like an amateur. He should have been no match, yet he held his own.

Lect groaned. “Must…hold!”

Lect strained from every strike and parry, whether he was attacking or defending. The boy fought with supernatural forces on his side, weak though they were, and Lect began to doubt he could triumph in this war of attrition. Melody, though competent in self-defense for the purposes of her profession, was powerless to lend him any sort of aid. Micah did not even entertain the possibility.

The men roared, sparks dancing on their blades as they clashed again.

This could not go on forever. The maids scrambled for something, anything they could do to tip the scales, when Micah realized something. *Wait a minute, this is the start of his route!*

Normally, this would have happened in the latter half of the story. Bjork would go into a frenzy much like this one and attack the party. Upon defeating him, the player would unlock a special CG for freeing him from the Dark One’s influence. *If* they freed him from the Dark One’s influence.

Micah shouted, “Sir Lectias! Separate him from that sword!”

That was his sole connection to the ancient evil. Once disarmed, the Dark One would lose its hold over Bjork, and the Saint could purify whatever traces lingered within Bjork’s body.

“Believe me, I’m trying!” Lect growled between swings.

He certainly had the technique to disarm Bjork, but the boy’s strength was unnatural, his defense ironclad thanks to the dark energy protecting him.

*We have to do something! Distract him somehow. I could… I could… Oh!*

Of course! All this time, they had the perfect anti-Dark One weapon right here. “Miss Melody! Get his attention with your magic! And make it flashy!”

“Fl-flashy? But what spell should I use?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Micah said. “Just, I dunno, make fireworks or something! Anything! We’ve got to distract him, and

your magic should do the trick."

After all, what could push the Dark One's buttons more effectively than the Saint?

Melody held her hand to the sky. "Here goes nothing!"

She summoned a giant silver orb, large enough to fit three grown men with room to spare. It was much more than nothing, though Melody made it seem trivial.

Such an immense concentration of mana stole not only Bjork's attention but Lect and Micah's as well. Thankfully, the orb simply sat floating in the air. Too frantic to conjure any kind of spell, all Melody had done was emit a small fragment of her inner mana, which was decidedly harmless when woven without a purpose. Had she put any offensive intent behind it, the mana would have emerged in a very different form, one that could knock out everyone presently gaping at it.

"Should I fire it now?" Melody asked. "I'm going to fire it!"

She did. The orb zipped away so swiftly it turned invisible. She might as well have blinked it out of existence. In fact, perhaps it really *did* blink out of existence, depending on how close one believed the speed of light came to "blinking out of existence."

Needless to say, no one but the four of them noticed the orb.

Which was all it took. With Bjork distracted, Lect could swoop in and end the battle. Any minute now...

"Lect! The sword!" Melody shouted.

"Huh? Oh! Yes!"

Bjork reacted to Melody's voice a split second later than Lect, a delay the knight seized upon.

Lect disarmed the boy with a decisive *clang*, and the broken blade soared out of Bjork's hands, landing in a thicket of bushes. The haze around Bjork began to dissipate at once.

He dropped to his knees before toppling to the ground.

Micah rushed to him. "Bjork!" She picked him up and cradled him in her arms, but his mind was gone. He clutched his chest as if the pain lingered.

*The sword's gone. That should sever the connection. Maybe we need…* Micah glanced around. *Wait, where's the sword?!*

Now was not the time to go hunting for it. They had to take decisive action.

"How is he?" Melody asked gingerly.

"Miss Melody, can you help him?!" Micah said. "Can you use your magic to get rid of the dark mana inside him?!"

"Dark mana? I can certainly try."

Melody was not confident, but seeing her pupil's panic, she could not abandon the boy. She took his hand and circulated her mana through him, much like what she'd done for Luciana. It did not take long to find what she was looking for. Something did indeed lurk inside him—an intruder.

Melody saturated the foreign mana with her own in an attempt to neutralize it. The effect showed immediately in the boy's complexion. Micah started to relax.

"I'm sorry," her mentor said. "I've eliminated most of what I could, but traces remain."

"What does that mean?" Micah asked.

"It means… How to put it? The mana polluting his body has taken root in corners I can't reach. *Shouldn't* reach, I should say. It's technically possible, but at great risk to the subject."

Months of subjugation under the Dark One had taken its toll on Bjork's heart. Even Melody, for all her omnipotence, could do nothing to separate Bjork's soul from the intruder's touch. They were like different colors of paint mixed together into a new shade.

"No…" Micah examined the boy. He did look much better but still winced in pain as the Dark One's talons scraped at the deepest recesses of his heart.

"Is there nothing to be done?" Lect asked.

Melody remained silent. Were it only that simple.

*Wait! It* is *that simple!* Micah's own omniscience, thanks to her knowledge of video game lore, provided the answer.

"The pedestal!" she blurted.

“The what?” said Melody.

“You have a spell that can warp us to different locations, don’t you, Miss Melody?”

“Y-yes.”

“Then would it be possible to, say, create a spell that can *locate* certain places? There should be a great forest with a silver pedestal meant to hold a sword. That may be what we need!”

Not even in *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* had the heroine managed to restore Bjork’s mind all on her own. Originally, the battle took place in the Great Vanargand Wood, at the site of the Dark One’s old prison. After emerging victorious, the heroine borrowed the previous Saint’s powers, which lingered in the pedestal, and the combined power of both Saints cleansed Bjork and freed him for good.

*The only catch is we don’t know where the pedestal actually is. Do we have time to go searching for it?*

“A pedestal? Oh, we don’t need a spell to locate that,” Melody said. “I believe I know what you’re referring to.”

“Great! Forget I said anything!” Micah said.

*Didn’t think it would be* that *simple!*

How in the world did Melody know? Micah wasn’t about to question it. You shouldn’t go looking gift horses in the mouth and all that. Though she did once again doubt Melody’s supposed ignorance of the game.

“You’ll want the forest just outside the city,” Melody continued. “I often use it to gather ingredients, but one day I happened to find a pedestal that matches the one you described. It won’t take long at all to get back.”

*She…gathers ingredients. In the Great Vanargand Wood.*

“Pardon?” Lect said. “Melody, what did you just say?”

The maid wore an expression of pure innocence.

*Uh-oh. She doesn’t know that place is forbidden. God, how oblivious can one maid be?* Micah thought. *But we can figure that out later!*

“Take me there!” the young maid said.

“Can do! *Ovunque Porta*.”

An unassuming door appeared, and on the other side stretched the Great Vanargand Wood. They put Bjork in Lect’s care, and the four of them stepped through the doorway and gathered around the pedestal on the other side.

“So what now?” Melody asked.

“Right,” Micah said. “So there should be some residual power left in there, and it should resonate with yours so we can…” *Crack*. A little fissure snaked up the pedestal right where Micah’s fingers rested. “We can…”

More cracks. More fissures. A veritable symphony of crumbling rock resounded as the pedestal crumbled into dust.

“Excuse me?!” Micah shrieked. Had she done that? Was this her fault? But how? All she’d done was touch the thing! “You’re kidding! We needed this! We needed that magic! Without it, he’ll…”

Micah wilted. This had been their last hope. It wasn’t fair.

But the source of her despair also supplied her salvation.

“Magic?” Melody said. “Oh, there was a little magic in it. It’s powering Serena now.”

“It’s *what*?! For crying out—how far off the rails are we going to go, Miss Melody?! Bring her here! Quickly! Please!”

Micah could stomach neglecting her heroinely duties for the sake of becoming a maid, but not all the massively important plot points Melody had either skipped over or ruined. And she’d done it all completely unwittingly. Micah barely held back a scream. Who could say what other threads Melody had snapped? But now wasn’t the time to worry about that.

Shortly, Serena emerged from another gateway.

“I, um, understand it’s urgent,” Serena said, “but I’m unclear as to what ‘it’ is, exactly.”

“I need you to work together with Miss Melody, so her mana can resonate with yours and we can save this boy here,” Micah explained. “There’s something unnatural inside him that we’re trying to purge.”

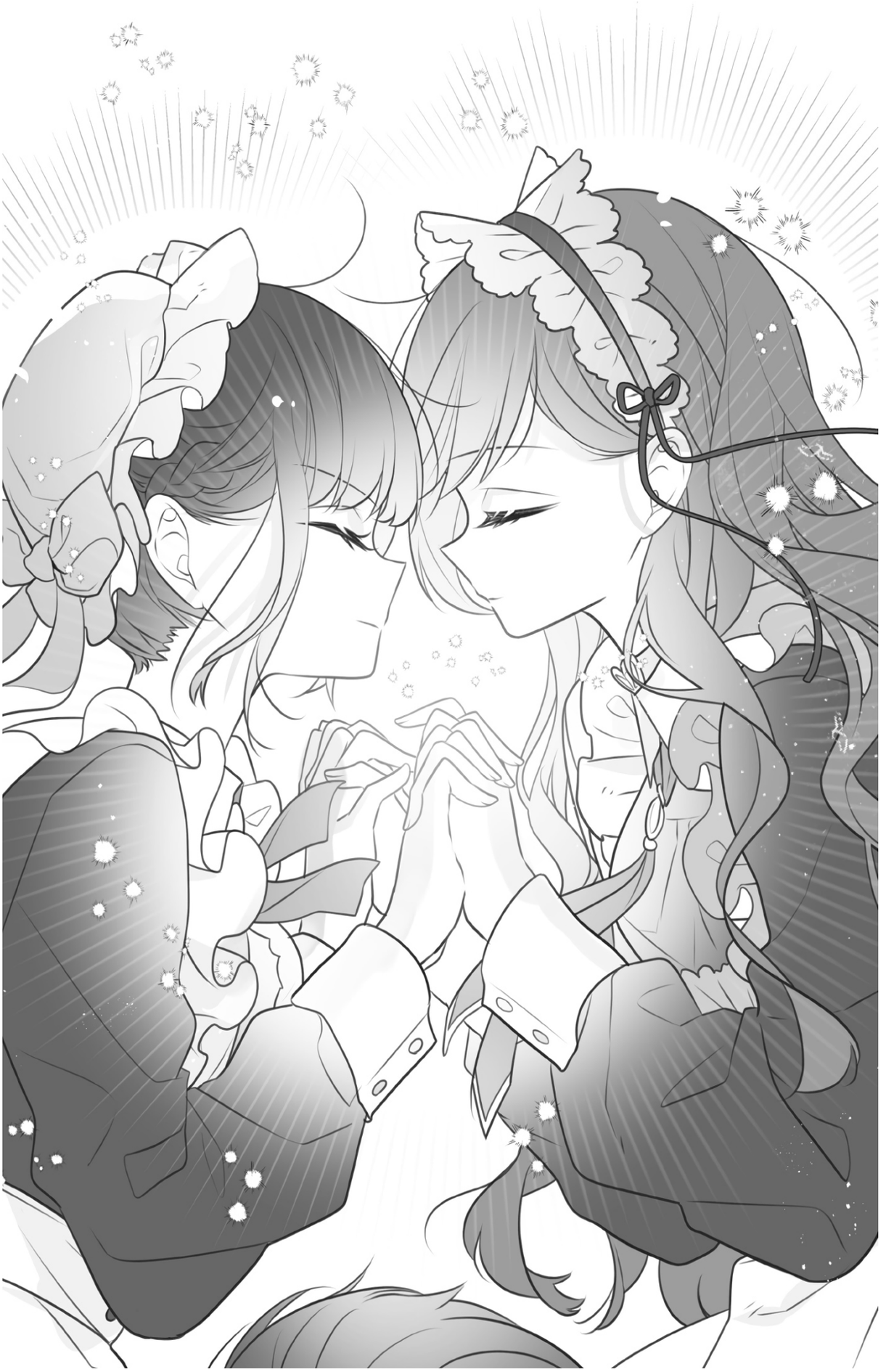
“That raises more questions than it answers, I’m afraid,” Serena said, “but I see now why time is of the essence. This boy is the one in need, is that right, Gentlesister?” Melody nodded. Serena smiled and took her creator’s hands. “Very well. Then let us go to his rescue.”

Lect set Bjork on the ground, and the maids knelt on either side of him, hands clasped. Their mana mingled, flowing back and forth between them, resonating and growing as it did.

Based on the game, they could expect an explosive increase in magical potency, past and present Saints becoming one for an instant. Micah clasped her own hands, praying she would witness the miracle from the game, despite Melody’s track record of defying expectations.

“Incredible,” Melody breathed. “I’ve never felt magic like this. It just might work.”

Eyes shut, she began to fill Bjork with silver energy. Melody could feel Serena’s assistance infusing the magic and making it shine even brighter. With her eyes closed, she found the glimmer of Bjork’s soul and watched the dark vines ensnaring it wither one by one. The boy took on the energy in the form of a silver light, a holy successor to the Dark One’s malicious presence. The light supplanted every nook and cranny the Dark One once inhabited, until nothing of it remained and color at last returned to the boy’s cheeks.



His breathing steadied. The fist clutching his chest relaxed.

Micah let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. You did it, Miss Melody, Serena. Thank you… Um, guys?” Bjork continued to glow, and the girls continued to resonate. “Hey, it’s over. You did it. Y-you can stop now. Hello?!”

The light swelled until it was nearly blinding. Sensing the overflowing mana, Melody and Serena finally came to their senses and opened their eyes. The first thing they saw was each other. They smiled.

“I’m really happy you two enjoyed yourselves, but we have a problem!” Micah fumed. “Something’s wrong with him!”

Bjork emitted an odd groaning, but not the human kind. The inanimate kind, like wooden boards straining or cloth tearing.

Melody looked down at Bjork and glimpsed the latter. His clothing was tearing at the seams. His body was *growing* before their very eyes. As if to reconcile years and years of malnutrition, Bjork rapidly grew from a boy to a man, a man befitting his true age. Unfortunately, his attire could not keep up. His pants were the first thing to go.

His hair lengthened, his limbs stretched, his chest broadened, and abs carved up his smooth midriff. In real time, the boy became a man—a very masculine and strapping man. With very little in the way of fabric to conceal that fact.

And there was no shortage of fair eyes about to admire the change. The sheer beauty of the human form in all its naked glory. For three maidens had been made witnesses to the display.

The Great Vanargand Wood, land of the Blight and death, scourge of Theolas, shook that day with their shrieks. Shrill, sustained cries pierced the veil of leaves and the ears of their unfortunate witness—Lect.

## Chapter 23:
## Workings in the Dark

SILVER GLIMMERED AMONG THE BRUSH. There, the shattered remains of a once great sword lay inert. Forgotten by those who had subjected it to such a fate, on account of the traumatic appearance of another, less inert “sword.”

A malevolent haze trickled from where the blade was broken all those months ago. The haze would not forget so easily the hatred it bore for its captor, nor for her meddling successor. Never. It seeped from the blade like a will-o-wisp of rage. A small field mouse scurried just a little too close, approaching the metal with innocent curiosity.

A fatal mistake. The Dark One, if it could even be called that anymore, spied an opportunity and lashed out, frail and without a vessel. Defenseless, much like the mouse. But the mouse could hide and bide its time, so the Dark One consumed the mouse, assimilated it in its dark, hazy form, and assumed control. The time had come to abandon its old prison in search of a new, more permanent vessel.

Before the mouse could scurry away to do the evil’s bidding, a foot descended seemingly from the heavens and held the creature in place. It squeaked in shock and terror.

*“You,”* a voice rumbled, *“or should I say we have been busy, haven’t we?”*

The mouse trembled in as much fear as its tiny mind could comprehend. That it, the last dregs of the Dark One, could even feel such an emotion shook it to its core.

Squirming, the mouse turned to see its oppressor. Glaring down at it were the predatory eyes of a silver-furred pup. The Rudlebergs’ very own Grail—the *true* Dark One.

Just over a month ago, Grail had been a normal puppy wanting for nothing but his next meal and a few belly rubs. But everything changed when, after the excitement of one such meal, he pounced on Serena and tried to cover her in little doggy kisses, as a pup does. In the process, he happened to lick the

silver ornament on her choker, an ornament that contained the vestiges of the last Saint. What remained of her power and her mana shocked the pup down to his soul. And that was impetus enough to awaken the sleeping giant within him.

Ever since that moment, Grail had lived in fear of his once beloved Serena and Melody. Of their power, specifically.

The little mouse trembled terribly. That the mouse and the pup were one and the same made the difference in their might all the more apparent. This hill had met its mountain.

Grail let out a disappointed sigh. *"You see me and tremble, but you saw* that *and felt nothing?! That orb of destruction the girl unleashed with nary a blink?! We who have not known death would surely become intimately familiar had that* thing *so much as grazed us! Do you understand?! Do you comprehend that she can produce such peril on a whim?! And what would you have done if she were aiming at you?! You would have perished!* I *would have perished! Okay?! Disappeared without a trace! Dust in the wind! Know your place, you absolute embarrassment of a fragment!"*

The Dark One pressed harder on the mouse, forgoing all pretense of composure or somber stoicism. It was that shaken. It quivered much like the mouse. Did this bumbling fragment not think for a second that perhaps the whole had been keeping its nose clean and being a good boy for a reason? How could it be so utterly stupid as to tempt fate like this?

The Dark One yanked the mouse up and clamped its tiny jaws around it. *"Feel my wrath and think on your foolishness!"* it growled between half bites.

It chewed on the mouse for a while before deciding it had had enough and spitting it out. The mouse lay there for a while, squeaking and sopping as it sank in that its puny life *hadn't* ended. Seconds later, it sped off.

*"Hmph. Nothing but prey now that my mana is mine again. I'll need every drop as I bide my time. Yes, bide my time. That's what I'm doing. Waiting for the perfect moment, lest I find myself trapped in another accursed sword! I will be the mildest-mannered of pups, not out of fear but tactical necessity."* There was no one around to hear the Dark One's excuses. One might have thought they were

for itself. *“N-now, I’d best be off. I believe tonight’s dinner was sausage.”*

Off the Dark One trotted, back to its peaceful routine. How utterly domesticated it had become.

The broken blade remained where it lay, inert and forgotten.

Platinum clouds rolled in to blanket the capital that night, reacting to a certain someone’s mana in the atmosphere. They rained streaks of silver, but not a drop of moisture would remain by morning. Not a soul would know that anything had happened at all.

## Bonus Story:
## The Princess's Knight Out

SOME DAYS AFTER THE JEALOUS WITCH Incident, Micah exited her room at the Rudleberg estate, preparing to visit the orphanage during her day off, only to find that she was not alone. Her colleague and mentor made her way into the hall as well.

"Good morning, Miss Melody," Micah said. "It's rare to see you in your room this late in the…" Come to think of it, nine in the morning was unthinkably late for Melody, even on her days off, which she more often than not ignored. But that was only the first reason for Micah's shock. "What's the occasion?"

Melody was, to Micah's disbelief, *not* in a maid uniform. She wore a simple yet tastefully elegant ensemble: a plain white, short-sleeved blouse and a long red skirt. A small black bag hung diagonally across her chest, and her hair flowed freely save for the half tied up with a pretty bow. Micah couldn't recall having *ever* seen Melody in common clothes before. This was unheard of. This was feminine.

This was…

*I smell a date!*

This was a war in the making! And love was the battleground! Micah's junior-high-schooler brain went into overdrive.

"Good morning," Melody replied. "I've some business in the Upper District so I'll be out for a spell."

Micah nodded, satisfied. A woman dressed like Melody would not look amiss among nobles. "Not alone, surely."

"Lect's graciously offered to squire me around, as a matter of fact."

*By god. The boy's grown a pair!* This day was full of surprises. In her time assisting Lect at Royal Academy, Micah had not gained the impression that the man possessed so much as a drop of initiative. He certainly didn't live up to the same stone-faced man so many fangirled over when he was just a still image on a screen. *Wait. This timing. Is this what I think it is?*

Her mind went back to the game. A sub-event called “The Princess’s Knight Out” triggered sometime after the Jealous Witch Incident, but only if you specifically selected Lect as the heroine’s partner during the investigation phase. Mere moments before Luciana and the heroine made amends, the villain would reveal himself and eliminate Luciana, crushing the heroine’s hopes for a friendship. Afterward, when the heroine was at her lowest, her knight in shining armor, her bodyguard, would offer to take her out as a means to raise her spirits.

*I remember there being a hedge maze, a café, and a jewelry store. Make the right choices, and you get an accessory that matches his eyes, and he gets one that matches the heroine’s. It’s a big moment. Huge boost to affection.*

Lect would offer to buy the heroine something to commemorate the day, the heroine would refuse, he would insist, and the player would face a choice of gifts.

*He asks what she wants, and if I’m remembering right, you can let him pick for you, ask for something that matches his eyes, or ask for something that matches your eyes. Of course, there’s only one right answer.*

“I should really get going,” Melody said. “Oh, one other thing. Keep this a secret from our lady, would you?”

“Huh? Miss Melo…dy. There she goes.” The out-of-uniform maid hurried off, leaving Micah to her delusions. “There’s only one reason she’d want to keep this from Lady Luciana. She’s going for it! For real! *Gah*, I wanna see this date so bad!”

Alas, pesky concepts like privacy prevented her from doing so. Additionally, being a commoner meandering about the Upper District was a great way to get the guards called on you, and that was not a risk Micah felt like taking.

She went to her orphanage before she could change her mind—but it was quite a close call in the end.

“My goodness. It’s beautiful,” Melody said.

“Isn’t it?” Lect said. “Few nobles come to the capital without also visiting these gardens. The hedge maze in particular is a popular destination for lovers looking to…c-consort in private.”

Lect's face burned brighter than his hair.

At the center of the gardens stood a grand fountain. To either side of it stretched a veritable labyrinth of meticulously trimmed hedges. Bowers punctuated the crisscrossing paths to allow guests respite, and several gates along the way ensured no one was lost for long.

Micah's intuition could be spot-on at times.

"Very Italian in design," Melody mumbled to herself.

"Very what?" Lect said.

"Don't mind me. Shall we take a stroll? I'd love a closer—ah!" the maid yelped as she stumbled over the paving stones.

"Melody!" Lect caught her just in time, wrapping one big, muscular arm around her.

"Oh. Th-thank you," Melody said.

The knight swallowed. "Watch your step."

"That I should. Anyway, shall we?"

"R-right."

Lect trailed behind Melody, slow as molasses, and burning just as hot.

*Soft... Squishy... Soft...*

Ladies and gentlemen, the realm's most innocent twenty-one-year-old man.

The rest of their day went about as Micah had predicted. After a jaunt through the maze, Melody and Lect made their way to a café to rest and chat. When they'd had their fill, they started for their next destination.

"This is the place," Lect announced.

He'd guided them to the last stop on "The Princess's Knight Out": a jewelry store.

"Good day, milord. How may I be of service to you?" the shopkeeper greeted them. She addressed the man first under the culturally ingrained assumption that he had come with a gift

in mind for his fair companion. This typically proved a safe enough assumption.

“Not to me. Her, perhaps,” Lect said.

“Pardon?”

Lect broke his stony mask to reveal a few wrinkles in his forehead as he gestured to Melody with his eyes. The shopkeeper followed his gaze, unsure.

The girl at Lect’s side smiled gently. “I’m looking for something to give to someone very precious to me.” A comely blush graced her cheeks. “A small accessory, I was thinking.”

The shopkeeper, surmising that this precious someone was not the strapping lad beside her, looked back at Lect. How tragic the triangle of love could be.

*Spare me the pity!* the knight pleaded inwardly. *Please!*

“There’s so much to choose from,” Melody said. “What do you think would make a good birthday present for my lady?”

Neither the triangle nor the love was on Melody’s radar. For her, there was only maid and mistress. That was all there ever was; all there ever would be.

Luciana’s birthday was August 7th. Seeing as they would soon return to the Rudlebergs’ demesne for the summer recess, Melody wanted to prepare a gift for her lady in advance. Upon hearing this, Paula suggested Lect assist Melody in her quest, and so the “date” came to be.

As for the hedge maze, that was another clever recommendation by Paula. Melody knew little of the Upper District, but she simply had to experience the famous hedge maze, Paula insisted.

Truly a caring and not at all conniving soul, that Paula.

“Here we have a very modest design, fit for a lady. Not so extravagant as to preclude regular wear, yet fine enough to suit even a ball gown.”

“Oh, yes, this is quite stunning.”

Melody cradled a gorgeous blue topaz pendant, complete with a golden chain. It would suit her lady very well, especially her eyes.

The maid's first gift had been very plain. Being a noblewoman, Luciana couldn't actually get much use out of a cheap ring, so this time Melody was determined not to repeat her mistake. She was prepared to spend her entire savings to make sure of that, in fact.

"I'll take it," she decided.

"Thank you kindly for your patronage." The shopkeeper smiled with far less tension than she wore previously. The knowledge that this gift was for a woman and not a man at least ensured that she was not caught in the middle of an imminent bloody conflict. To her knowledge, anyway.

Melody giggled. "This is just perfect."

What was meant to be Lect's big event had somehow become Luciana's. Any "affection boost" toward him was redirected by a convoluted series of events toward someone who wasn't even a potential love interest. Was the mad maid heroine really so powerful? Was one birthday gift enough for her to obliterate yet another plot thread?

Would the powers that be abide it?

"Melody."

"Yes, Lect?"

She turned to him while the shopkeeper gift wrapped her pendant. He was blushing, and his lips formed a tight line.

"Is something the matter?" Melody asked.

"I, um... I enjoyed your company today."

"Hm? Oh, of course. And I yours. Thank you for escorting me." Melody smiled politely, a little confused.

"I was thinking..."

"Thinking what?"

"Thinking I could...get you something. A piece from here, perhaps. To, um, commemorate our...time together."

"Huh?"

In that moment, the realm's most innocent knight learned the true meaning of courage.

“No, I couldn’t let you do that,” Melody said. “You’ve been an excellent guide, and I’d hate to ask anything more of you.”

“It would be no burden,” he said. “I insist. I’d simply like something for you to, well, remember the day by.”

Melody found herself unable to argue. But what was the meaning of this? His speech was unsteady and uncertain, but firm. She could not seem to get a word in. How was he simultaneously tongue-tied yet filled with, dare she say, equal passion to hers for maidly pursuits?

*I don’t understand,* she thought. Try as she might.

Frankly, the man might as well have been screaming his intentions from a mountaintop, but Melody’s thickheadedness was legendary. She would fit right in among even the densest, most hard-of-hearing, oblivious protagonists to ever grace fiction. One could almost hear Lect’s chances at romance crumbling into dust.

Melody eyed him, studying, trying to comprehend. Lect could not bear to meet her gaze for long.

Fellow shoppers and employees looked on at the rather dramatic (and exceedingly public) display in reverent silence. Oh, to be young.

A fuzzy, heart-fluttering aura permeated the shop before Melody finally spoke up. “If you insist. But I propose a compromise: an exchange.”

Lect cocked his head. “An exchange?”

Melody grinned. “Today was a day we spent together, right? Would it not then make sense for me to gift *you* something in return? I say we find pieces for *each other*.”

“O-oh. Oh! Yes! Great idea!”

*Perfect,* Melody thought. *That way we’re equal. As friends should be!*

That heart-fluttering disease continued to spread to onlookers. Little did they know the truth of these supposed lovebirds.

“Any specific requests?” Lect asked.

“I leave it entirely to you. I want you to find what you think would best suit me, and I’ll do the same for you.”

The knight perked up. “W-will do!” He hurried off with purpose.

Melody studied him silently as he strode away. He’d dressed in a navy vest fitted to his waist, a complement to his otherwise plain outfit. He wore the uninspiring but fitted garment well.

*Some color might go a long way,* Melody thought.

She spied an unadorned white collared shirt, and inspiration struck.

The princess and her knight saw to their selections. Gifts exchanged and donned, they left the store with satisfaction on their faces and roses trailing in their wake.

Oh, to be young.

“I’m so glad I found something.” Back in her room, Melody admired the gift-wrapped box, already anticipating the day Luciana would open it. “I hope she likes it.”

She slid the box into a drawer for safekeeping until the big day, then undid the brooch on her chest and held it up. An ornate amber flower glinted as it caught the light.

“How pretty.”

The dark reddish-gold of the symmetrical petals reminded her of Lect’s eyes and hair. All the more so in the light of the setting sun.

Melody had to stifle a chuckle as she recalled his face as he presented this gift. The stiffness. The pink in his cheeks. He clearly wasn’t accustomed to gift-giving. It was awfully cute for a man his age to be so demure, but she had sense enough to keep that thought to herself.

“Now, it’s just about dinner time. One of my favorite times of the day. One moment, my lady, and I’ll be at your service!”

She stowed the brooch in the drawer as well, finished changing, and got straight to work.

“You got her a brooch, and she got you…that?” Paula gave Lect’s shirt a firm tug that said more about her frustration than it did about her passion for the task of undressing him. Her attention was fixed on the pair of lapis lazuli cuff links on his sleeves. “The least you could have done was make the gifts match, Master. You said yours matched your eyes, didn’t you?”

Paula sighed. Leave it to Lect to work up the nerve to go on a date and then fumble the landing.

Lect paid her no mind as he removed the cuff links. He gave them one final, fond look. “I’m quite happy with them. More than happy.”

He set them gingerly in a jewelry box, hiding a soft smile as he did.

# Epilogue

**“A** DREAM, YOU SAY?”

Gentle beams of sunlight slipped between the leaves shading the royal palace’s terrace. Christopher, Anna-Marie, and Maxwell were sharing a cup of tea and reviewing the events surrounding the battle in the classroom some days ago. Maxwell was not ignorant of the fact that his friends clearly knew more than him, and the time had come for answers.

But “answers” were a tall order for Christopher and Anna-Marie. The whole truth would mean revealing another world, another reality, another life, and they doubted Maxwell would take such a story as anything but further obfuscations. So they distorted the truth behind a veil of dreams, saying they had seen visions of this tale about the Saint and the Dark One when they were children.

But Maxwell knew them well. They had grown up together, so he was well aware of their way with words. He deduced at once that this was not the entire story.

*I suppose I’ll let them keep their secrets for now,* he thought. The young lord was a smart and tactful man, and he knew when not to press. Clearly there were extenuating circumstances at play.

He would dig out the truth eventually. All in due time.

The story Christopher and Anna-Marie had settled on was by no means an easy one to swallow. Maxwell doubted even this safer retelling. The forces of darkness and the forces of light waged an ancient war with the entire world hanging in the balance? Their kingdom was somehow at the center of it? And *that* had been the driving force behind everything Christopher and Anna-Marie had enacted this past decade? Far-fetched did not do it justice.

“And this ‘dream’ is why you’ve taken the measures you have and implemented so many reforms,” Maxwell mused.

“Partly,” Anna-Marie said. “Averting disaster was something of a happy side effect to bolstering the realm’s stability.”

“An improved economy does make for a stronger military,” Maxwell conceded. “This also explains why you’ve been harsh on corruption. All effective tactics to achieve your ends.”

Once, Anna-Marie had made a sudden visit to an orphanage in the capital. It was a squalid, poorly maintained, and grimy place that a lady had no business entering, but such conditions only served as evidence that they were squandering the palace’s monetary aid. She discovered and brought to light corruption on the administrative level of the orphanage—an impressive feat for her age at the time. It allowed Prince Christopher to take decisive action to set things right.

This exact escapade had solved Micah’s orphanage dilemma long before her time.

“Frankly, I’m amazed you took such drastic action at such a young age,” Maxwell said. “I only regret I couldn’t aid in the good you two did.”

“I’m sorry, friend,” said Christopher. “We didn’t think you would believe us, having not seen the visions yourself.”

“True,” Maxwell admitted with a laugh. “I very well may have dismissed you outright.” He did have a knack for tuning out mad ramblings. He therefore could not fault the decision to hide such things from him. Only now that they had years of trust between them could Maxwell even begin to believe the tale. “I’m assuming recent events were part of your premonitions. Did you know from the start who the culprit would be?”

“The visions are not so detailed, I’m afraid.” Anna-Marie shook her head. “We know things will happen, but not much more. Sometimes the parties involved will change, and sometimes the course of events can shift drastically. We’ve far less to work off of than it sounds.”

An elegant explanation for the discrepancies between video-game and real-world logic.

“I think it’s because the future is still in the making,” Christopher said. “Little actions can cause ripples that turn into waves, and all we can see is where they’ll break, not how they alter the shore.”

“So you’re unable to anticipate changes to the future you expect to see,” Maxwell summarized. The pair nodded. “This does sound rather complicated. Who’s to say this ‘Saint’ or ‘Dark One’ might not be written out of history entirely? How would you know?”

“That would certainly make our lives easier,” Anna-Marie chuckled wearily.

“But we do know,” said Christopher. “About the Dark One at least.”

Maxwell thought. “The assailant at the Spring Ball. The very same who attempted to end fair Luna’s life.”

“He’s just a puppet. With the Saint’s help, however, we might win him over to our side.” Anna-Marie sighed. That was their big, nasty fly in the ointment. They still had no heroine. Without her, they were flying blind against the Dark One.

“At any rate, I take it your visions warned you about complications,” Maxwell said.

“‘Complications’?” the prince and lady echoed.

“The odd behavior of our instructors and peers. Luna and Class A specifically, I suppose.”

“Right, we did foresee that,” Anna-Marie said. “But again, only the vague outline of it. We weren’t blessed with details, unfortunately.”

Christopher crossed his arms. “What I don’t understand is how in the world everyone’s gone on with their lives as if nothing’s happened. How is it possible that Luna and everyone involved forgot about everything?”

In the immediate aftermath of the Jealous Witch Incident, classes resumed without a single peep about any of the chaos of the prior weeks, and the students went about their business as if they hadn’t been calling for Luciana’s head just a day ago. It really was as if nothing had happened. Not even Luna recalled the incident. She believed she and Luciana *had* fallen out, but that they’d recently reconciled. *Without* the need for one-on-one combat, importantly.

“I have to wonder what the pattern is between those who remember and those who don’t,” Maxwell said.

“I’d like to say it correlates with mana levels, but that doesn’t make sense with the administrators having forgotten as well.” Anna-Marie shrugged. “Frankly, I’m at a loss.”

Quietly, she wondered if it had to do with that strange force urging them toward set plot events. If it could decide heroines and villainesses on a whim, surely it could alter inconvenient memories. Maybe it really was that simple.

“And Lady Luciana?” Maxwell asked.

“The way she tells it, she ‘gave her friend a good thwack with a harisen’ and that set her straight,” replied Christopher. “It’s as if something’s replaced her memories with different ones, even though she was a direct witness to everything. How does something like this happen?”

“She certainly didn’t have any ‘harisen’ when we arrived.” Anna-Marie sighed. She knew what a harisen was.

Maxwell frowned. “The plot thickens, as they say.”

“And so does our pile of work,” Christopher said. Just because people remembered things differently didn’t mean the incident never happened, and thus the three of them had to cover up piles of documents and reports on the many investigations that had very much occurred.

“All’s well that ends well. For now, I suppose,” said Maxwell.

“For now. But it won’t last forever, so long as the Saint remains missing.” Anna-Marie stared off into the clear, blue sky.

Maxwell smiled wearily. “Happily ever after never comes easy.”

It was the end of July, the final day of the semester before summer recess, and Melody’s last day as Lect’s assistant.

The two of them busied themselves clearing out his office.

“It’s a good thing they found a permanent Chivalry instructor, isn’t it?” Melody commented idly.

“Yes… Very good.”

“You say that like it’s not.”

“It is. Good, I mean… Very good.” The knight turned away to hide his flushed cheeks.

The meaning of the gesture was lost on the maid. She could never understand the inner machinations of a man in love—a man in love and about to lose his best chance at romance, moreover.

“Are you feverish?” Melody asked.

“No, I… Thank you. For your help today. Much to get done.”

What sympathy Lect might have earned he just as swiftly lost. Here stood not a man but a flailing boy.

“Oh, this is nothing for a maid,” Melody said. “I haven’t even broken a sweat yet!”

“Maybe it’s nothing for you. But then again, you intend to be the most perfect maid in the world, don’t you? It shows.”

“Does it? Well, thank you for noticing.”

Lect snorted. Someone was haughty today. “Made progress toward that goal?”

“Maybe,” the maid teased.

She winked at the knight, smiting the boy’s poor, post-adolescent heart and rendering him silent for the remainder of the day.

After finishing her business in Lect’s office, Melody returned to Luciana’s room.

“My apologies for my lateness, my lady.”

“Welcome back!”

Luggage already sat ready in a corner of the room. They wouldn’t return from the long recess for some time, so they had more luggage to move than usual, and the only items remaining were ones they had to cart out themselves.

“I’m sorry you had to do all that by yourself, Micah,” Luciana said.

“Just doing my job, my lady.” Micah beamed. “And it was no trouble at all with a bit of help.”

Just then, someone knocked on the door. Luciana called a welcome, and a tall man in a valet's uniform entered.

"The carriage is ready to leave," he murmured.

"Thank you, Rook," Luciana replied.

"Having a man around is such a lifesaver," Micah said. "Thanks, Rook!"

"Thank you, Rook, for seeing to things in my absence," said Melody.

Bjork Quichel nodded awkwardly. "Of course..."

But he was not Bjork Quichel anymore; he was Rook, so-named by Micah herself.

The Dark One retained no hold of any kind over him thanks to Melody, but mysteriously—perhaps as a side effect of the cleansing, perhaps on account of his sudden and rapid physical growth—he could remember nothing. A fog obscured everything about his past, down to his very name.

The man bore sins, crimes for which he would pay dearly if anyone discovered his identity. And although his change in appearance made that unlikely, the thought of someone being punished for things they had no memory of nor agency over felt unjust to Micah, especially knowing the man was capable of good. He'd saved her life, and now she wanted to save his.

She'd begged and pleaded for them to take him in, so Melody came up with a plan: Hire the man as a servant. The Rudlebergs sorely needed a valet, after all.

Lect was quick to voice his vehement disapproval. Let a scoundrel whose anatomy his beloved had become *far* too familiar with far too quickly become a permanent installation in her life? Not on his watch. Unfortunately, he didn't wear a watch, and to vocalize his true feelings would be to make a hypocrite of himself after his own anatomy-related crimes.

The knight's protests did not hold up for long.

For better or worse, the Rudlebergs quickly accepted a nameless stranger from nowhere into their estate. Some might have called that risky. Others, magnanimous. Lord Rudleberg certainly preferred magnanimous.

Hughes immediately bonded with their new valet-in-training. At last, he had a reprieve from femininity and a blank slate upon which he could chisel out the valet of his dreams. His enthusiasm began to worry Marianna. Ironic that the appearance of a sharp and handsome young man should concern the wife more than the husband…

Before losing his memories, Bjork would have deplored a life of servitude. Rook, however, seemed not to mind it one bit. In fact, he seemed quite happy with the part where others thanked him. The crimson that dusted his cheeks every time was endlessly endearing.

“Miss Melody, I’m going to wait by the carriage,” Micah said.

“Please do. I’ll take care of the rest of this luggage and be with you shortly. Would you join her, Rook?”

With a stoic nod, the valet-in-training left with the maid-in-training.

“Curt, isn’t he?” Luciana giggled. “Let me guess. You’ll work on it?”

“Yes, I think we should. I’ll prepare a curriculum and see to it that he receives lessons on servanthood once we return to the estate.”

Luciana remembered her own lessons in ladyhood and winced. “Oops. Uh, sorry, Rook.”

“We’re not forgetting anything, are we?” Melody searched the dorm until she was satisfied with her colleagues’ thoroughness.

“This, maybe.” Luciana plucked a sheet of paper off the table and handed it to her maid.

“Ah, your grade report. Of course.”

The report recorded the results of the semester midterms, as well as the recent finals. Third again, same as last time. In fact, the entire top four remained unchanged, but Luna had managed to climb up to seventh. Something had lit a fire in her, something she couldn’t even remember.

Luciana smiled as she recalled her friend’s declaration of war, her promise that next time their positions would be

reversed.

“Something on your mind, my lady?” Melody said.

“Oh, nothing. Hey, Melody? Thank you.”

“Whatever for?”

“For Luna. I’ve been meaning to say it. I wouldn’t have made it out of there without your magic, and it was you who asked Lady Anna-Marie and her cohort for help, wasn’t it? I’d have lost a friend without you. So thank you.” Luciana beamed.

But Melody was conflicted. “My lady, I disobeyed your orders.”

Luciana laughed. “Let’s just say the ends justify the means this time. All is forgiven.”

“My lady…” Intense relief washed over the maid. She’d made the correct choice. “Thank *you*, my lady. You’ve helped me understand what it means to be a perfect maid. A little, at least.”

“Yeah? Then that makes us even.”

The lady and her maid grinned. Together.

*This,* Melody thought. *This is what it means to be the world’s most perfect maid. Protecting this smile.*

A perfect maid must conduct herself with equal parts grace and skill. That much was certain. But grace and skill could only go so far. They could not produce, much less protect, smiles as genuine as these. At last, Melody understood that. And now she knew the path she must walk on her quest to the peak of servitude.

Somewhat, at least.

She laughed.

“Something on your mind, Melody?”

“Oh, nothing, my lady. I just love to see you happy.”

Those words struck Luciana like a lightning bolt out of a clear blue sky. Butterflies battered her stomach. She could not let such an indignity go unanswered.

“I-is that so?” she stammered with red cheeks. “Well, there’s an easy way to go about achieving that!”

*“My lady!”* Melody shrieked. “How many times must I tell you, nobles do not throw themselves at their maids!”

“Just a little! Just a few cuddles, I promise, and then I’ll be the happiest lady in the world! Come on, I’ll be gentle! Just lemme cop a few feels!”

“That is *not* the sort of smile I wanted to see!” Melody howled in terror. “And where in the name of all that is holy do you keep learning these phrases?!”

“There we are.”

Back at the Rudleberg estate, Serena the maid automaton wiped a bit of convincing sweat from her brow as she pinned up the last article of laundry. Bleached by the sun’s glare, the pale white sheets seemed almost to shine.

A smile snuck onto the doll’s lips. “Summer’s only just begun. I hope it’s a memorable one for you, Melody.” The ornament on her neck glinted in the light, and perhaps an oh so faint glow faded. “On to the next task. So much to do before Gentlesister arrives.”

Soft humming echoed down the manor’s humble halls. Beautiful humming. Like a siren call of the season to come.

# Afterword

HI! ATEKICHI HERE, FORGOING A "PLEASED to meet you," as that would be a little strange for the second volume in a series, no?

A heartfelt thank you to you for reading Volume Two of *Heroine? Saint? No, I'm an All-Works Maid (And Proud of It)!* And a heartfelt apology to everyone involved in the production of said book for my less-than-stellar performance. I was writing so slow and breezed past so many deadlines we almost missed printing entirely! Ha ha! Ha…

Not very funny in hindsight, actually. Very sorry.

At the same time, everyone involved has my deepest gratitude for nevertheless putting up with me and seeing this volume through to the end.

Anyway, so Volume Two is finally here, (relatively) safe and sound, and wouldn't you know it, we have a manga now! You'll find chapter one in just a few pages, but maybe you've already skipped ahead and seen it. If I may say so myself, the talented Keiko-sama has truly brought somehow even more life, energy, and cuteness to Yukiko-sama's original designs. To those who haven't had a peek yet, please see for yourselves!

And of course, we wouldn't have a manga to speak of without the support of you, the readers. If I could thank each and every one of you, I would, but I don't think that's very practical. So pretend this is for you: Thank you!

Maybe I should talk about the actual book now. Maybe a bit about the magic system? As you may have noticed by now, the spell names are based in the Italian language, at least for Melody and most of her friends. Anna-Marie and Christopher, however, use English for the spells they've invented themselves.

So the big question: Why Italian? Because the first spell was a light spell, and tell me "luce" doesn't have just such a nice ring to it!

You know, I kinda wish I had more to elaborate on there, but hey, something, something, that's show biz. Er, I mean, we fiction authors have a reason for everything we write! Very

complex reasons! Very profound reasons! Maybe. Don’t quote me on that.

Well, now that you know our deep, dark secret you have a new way to enjoy literature. You’re welcome.

In all seriousness, thank you for reading this volume, and I pray we meet again. Arrivederci! Farewell!

BONUS 4-PANEL STRIP
BY KEIKO, OFFICIAL MANGA ARTIST






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