
Heroine? Saint?
NO, I'M AN All-Works Maid
(And Proud of It)!
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NOVEL
3

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NOVEL 3

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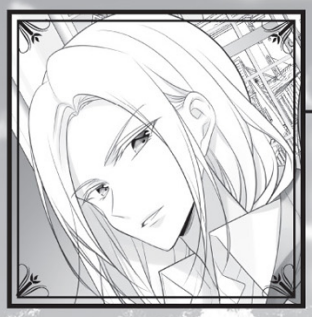
Airship

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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.



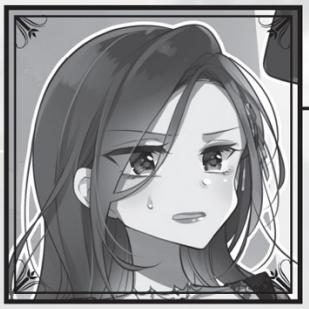
Maxwell

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.

Rook (Bjork)



Love interest number four. Having lost both memory and identity, he now serves as House Rudleberg's sole valet-in-training.

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.



Micah

Christopher's little sister in a past life. Correctly assumes Melody to be the lost heroine. Incorrectly believes herself the world's only actor of extra-diegetic origin.

Serena



Magical maid automaton created by Melody with an uncanny resemblance to her mother, Selena. Currently the acting head maid of the Rudleberg capital estate.

Heroine? Saint? No, I'm an All-Works Maid (And Proud of It)!
(Light Novel) Vol. 3
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Illustrations by Yukiko
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Prologue

MIDSUMMER ARRIVED. THE FIFTH OF August, to be exact.

In north central Theolas, the humble House Rudleberg demesne occupied a modest stretch of land. Said demesne had shrunk quite considerably after a blunderous lordship of historical proportions two generations prior left behind naught but the scraps of past failures. This shameful episode would constitute the eponymous beginning of the infamous Ignobles, a rather artless moniker whose stench seemed impossible to scrub off.

Even years later, with the last of their debts finally remunerated, and at the cusp of freeing themselves from the scorn they had so long endured, fate still seemed intent on keeping the Rudlebergs down. A bad harvest only a year before had forced the count's hand, and what finances they might have otherwise recouped through taxes and the like had to be sacrificed for the well-being of their subjects.

The lord's selfless leadership did not go unnoticed by the crown, however. Thus it was that the current Count Rudleberg secured a position at the prestigious Royal Chancery. How fickle a thing fortune is, that ostensibly minor acts can have sweeping and unknowable consequences upon the shores of an invisible future.

It wasn't long before their capital estate resurfaced after having been forgotten for some years. There waited the spiteful side of fate, as the Rudlebergs ignorantly sent their only daughter to occupy a manor of ghosts and cobwebs. But it was again not long before the

tides turned once more and the mad maid herself entered the scene, working magic and miracles and everything in between.

At that point, even Lady Luck had to wonder how much of anything was her doing.

But those at the Rudlebergs' home estate knew none of this. Not yet. It was the fifth of August, a new day, a long day with many duties to attend and not a moment to spare for the ridiculous black-and-white notions of a fanatical zealot.

"A moment, Dyrule."

"Yes, Lord Hubert?"

In the office sat Hubert Rudleberg, younger brother of Count Hughes, similar in appearance but not at all in build. At thirty-two, he was the current acting bailiff of the house's demesne.

In contrast to Count Hughes's slender-yet-handsome physique, Hubert Rudleberg was a figure of rippling, well-maintained muscle. The overalls dangling over a plain, collared shirt perhaps spoke to what had sculpted such a physique. Indeed, he looked more like a farmhand than an aristocrat.

Two other men occupied the office with him: Ryan, the manservant, and Dyrule, the guard. Both were abandoning their usual duties and instead battling mountains of paperwork atop a pair of impromptu desks. Though the Rudlebergs lorded over only three small villages, managing them all at once was not a task one could handle alone.

Hubert extended a bundle of papers to Dyrule. “Could you see that the mayor of Durnan Village to the southwest receives these?”

“My lord, my duty is to guard you.”

“Making you far more suited to enduring the blazing sun than poor Ryan. The heat’ll do him in like last year’s crops.”

“That’s in poor taste, my lord,” Ryan, the fifty-nine-year-old butler, chided. “I’ve still some fire left in these old bones.”

Ryan was spritely for his age, that was true. Though not spritely enough to sway Hubert from his decision.

Dyrule, for his part, understood this. His misgivings were only performative.

“As you wish,” the guard replied reluctantly. “I would, however, deign to remind you to *not* leave the estate before I return.”

“Your estimations of me run high if you think I’ll be free of this parchment valley by the time you come back.”

“I expect I’ll be back in time for lunch.”

“Understood. Safe travels.”

Dyrule exited the office, disgruntled, and not performatively so. The estate owned no horses, so he would have to make the trek on foot. The journey would take two hours at a comfortable pace, one at a jog. All told, it would be at least a several-hour endeavor.

After watching his companion’s departure through the window, Hubert returned to his work.

For two hours, only the scratching of pens disturbed the silence

in the office. At that point, however, the men began to crack.

"Curse this blighted busywork," Hubert snapped. "What I would give to be out in the fields."

It should have come as little surprise that Hubert belonged to the wilderness. He was a learned man, to be sure, given his proficiency with a pen, but his true love lay out there with the sun and the weeds and the tilled soil.

His passion began some fifteen years ago. Out of love and respect for his brother, Hubert sought a means to aid Hughes in the recovery of their family's countship and thus discovered agriculture. Lacking many notable commodities, the Rudlebergs' lands relied on simple crops like wheat and other vegetables. Hubert's logic was that a lord ought to facilitate the ways of the people as they were, as opposed to forcing innovation on them.

To Hubert, happiness meant straining muscles and physical labor in the sun. It was a straw hat, a sweat-soaked towel, and the sound of a hoe against dirt. He could only stomach the endless hours of pen and parchment if they served that end. But, oh, how he ached to put such work aside so he could see to his garden behind the estate. At times, he was known to tour the villages and assist with other people's farms as well.

I yearn for the earth, he lamented silently. Though the sight of him face down against his desk conveyed the message loudly enough.

"As soon as we finish here, milord, you'll have the entire afternoon," Ryan said.

"*If* we finish…" Hubert groaned.

The work was not comically excessive by any means, but certainly enough to overwhelm just two men. And this was for only three villages. Hubert imagined for a moment how busy things must have been in their house's heyday and shuddered.

A knock came at the door. "It's Aasha. I've brought tea."

"Come in," Hubert said. "Thank you."

"Of course."

One of the estate's three maids entered. An unmarried woman of twenty-eight, Aasha had a willowy figure and red hair tied back cleanly in one big braid.

Pushing the tea cart ahead of her, Aasha searched the room for something but didn't seem to find it. "Has Dyrule gone somewhere?"

"I sent him to Durnan on an errand," Hubert said.

"I see. Just two cups then, milord?"

"That'll be perfect, thank you."

Aasha filled two cups with brown-black tea, setting aside a lonely third. When she was done, she promptly left.

Hubert sipped. "Poor girl tries her best to make this rubbish drinkable. We really ought to look into a better-quality product."

House Rudleberg's tea of choice, Belleschwit, was the lowest of the low as far as teas nobility dared let past their lips went. So low was it that even petty nobility hesitated to stoop to its level. The Rudlebergs, however, despite its objective repulsiveness, had adapted. Through years of trial and error, they had developed a very particular

way of brewing it so as to make even the infamous Belleschwit palatable. Somewhat.

"If there's a single maid out there capable of redeeming these leaves, I'd like to meet her—and then promptly hire her," Ryan joked.

"You'd have my full support," Hubert chuckled.

Little did they know.

The men set about their work yet again, and an hour soon flew by.

Hubert sighed. "I'm beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"Two more hours should do it, I surmise," Ryan said.

"Two? Cutting it a mite close, then."

"Something you intend to…? Ah, yes. Lady Luciana's return."

"I'd been hoping I could greet her without a mountainous paperwork backdrop. And, if I may be so greedy, see to my crops."

Lady Luciana Rudleberg, Hubert's niece, was Hughes's first and only daughter. She currently attended Royal Academy, but August marked the beginning of the school's yearly summer recess. A few days ago, a letter arrived announcing Luciana's planned return. It was about a five-day journey from the academy, and it was now the fifth of the month. Heaven willing, they could expect her that very afternoon.

"Oh, whatever will we do together?" Hubert giggled like a schoolgirl. "Perhaps she'd take to my fields."

"You'll take the good lady to no such place." Ryan's eyes narrowed at Hubert.

"I-I know that." Hubert flinched. "I was only joking, of course."

Ryan sighed.

"Lord Hubert, Master Ryan," a man said as he entered the office. "Lullia says to come to the dining hall. Lunch is almost ready."

"Schue," Ryan scolded, "how many times have I told you to knock? Your etiquette remains wanting."

"Oh, shoot, that's right! So sorry!"

The boy blanched under his sun-kissed skin. Schue was a boy of fifteen, with thick, bright yellow hair that paired beautifully with his golden eyes, but he was very much still in training. His manners notwithstanding, the boy was the epitome of handsomeness: sharp, chiseled features and a lean figure not too slim yet not too bulky. He would have been a born lady-killer.

Would have been.

His expression softened like pudding. "Mira made this super cold pasta! Isn't that nice? Summer's just so hot! We don't have ice, so she chilled the noodles in well water, but it's got to be good! I think so, at least!"



It was a shame that all his sophisticated charms had to go to waste on such simple mannerisms.

It's truly impressive just how poorly he wears that smile of his. A little stoicism would go a long way with the ladies, I think. Hubert recalled telling the boy as much, though Schue had rebuked the idea on the grounds of his "image" or some such. *Granted, I suppose this has its charms as well. Not the kind women would seek out, but charms nonetheless.*

It took some sort of talent to be so handsome yet so simultaneously graceless. At any rate, Hubert found his cheery demeanor endearing. He liked the boy.

It would be an awfully stuffy estate without young folk to liven it up, the bailiff thought. *I'm glad we took him in.*

This last spring, during a survey of their northernmost village, Tenon, Hubert found Schue. Wherever the boy had absconded from, Hubert couldn't very well have left him to the elements on the side of the road, and so he gave the boy a place at the estate as a valet-in-training, a role Schue excelled in. Manners came slowly to him, but he excelled with his hands, including, to his host's joy, farmwork.

There was just one fly in the ointment.

"Lord Hubert, you said your niece is coming home today? I can't wait to meet her! I hope she's as pretty as you say."

Schue was a bit of a flirt.

He meant no harm, to be sure. He just seemed compelled to profess his love for every woman he met who struck his fancy—with

each attempt ending in disaster, of course. The strangest part, though, was how he ended up close friends with all of them even after the rejection.

Over the last four months, Schue had courted just about every girl his age in every village, to no avail. Hubert admired the boy's persistence and mental fortitude. He admired his methods less so, but he had to give credit where it was due.

"I hope you've seen to the silverware as I instructed," the butler chimed in.

"Yes, Master Ryan! It's ready for your review."

"Very good. I'll see to that after lunch."

The Rudlebergs owned very little, having sold off most of their belongings to pay off their generational debts, but they did retain some genuine silverware. Not for use, granted, but for teaching new hires how to polish precious metals. Ryan was a thorough teacher and insisted that a servant who could not maintain a proper shine was no servant at all. This lesson served as the first step on a long journey toward becoming a proper valet.

The gravity of this weighed debatably on the hyperactive boy's mind.

"Smells delicious, Lullia," Hubert said as he entered the dining hall.

"It'll just be a moment, milord. Please, take a seat. Mira, bring Lord Hubert a glass of water."

"Right away, madam!"

A stout woman of forty-nine with plain brown hair tied neatly out of her face toiled busily in the kitchen. She was Lullia, the estate's housekeeper. Meanwhile, a more slender maid with pale green hair hurried over with her lord's beverage. Mira was a few years Lullia's junior at forty-four. Aasha busied herself setting the table.

The men of the household, lacking lunchtime responsibilities, sat quietly at the table, islands of calm amid an otherwise hectic hall.

"My apologies for the wait, milord," the head maid said. "This afternoon's menu is a tad unique, but Schue insisted."

"He did, did he?"

"The boy crowed and crowed about how we ought to have something to stave off the summer heat. He eventually fixed on the idea of cold soup and noodles, but that's an entirely new flavor profile for me. It took some work to figure out the right seasonings, I'll tell you that." Lullia set a plate in front of her lord, evidently satisfied with the end result of this experiment.

The Rudlebergs were unique in many ways, not least of all their dining practices. Servant and master shared a table in their estate, though not for any particularly gregarious reason. Practically speaking, with the meager size of their retinue, it made little sense to go to the trouble of splitting the household and creating extra work. Their capital estate necessitated a higher standard of etiquette, including meals taken in the traditional manner. A certain one-maid-army had more than a little to do with enabling that.

Soon, a plate of chilled pasta sat before every chair at the table. Schue's eyes sparkled with pride for his brainchild.

"This looks amazing, Lullia!" he gushed.

The housekeeper giggled. "I do think I outdid myself. Please, Lord Hubert."

"Should we not wait on Dyrule?" Aasha asked timidly.

"Who knows when he'll be back?" Hubert said. "And it would be an insult to Lullia's efforts to let her creation turn lukewarm, wouldn't it? I say we dig in. Shall we, everyone?"

It was a normal lunch on a normal day. A day fortune happened to set its fickle eyes on.

One can never truly know the tides of fate, which actions will cause which waves. Just as the Rudleberg household could have never known the danger that threatened their lives at that very moment.

Chapter 1:
Micah Want Magic!

IT HAPPENED NOT LONG AFTER THE JEALOUS Witch Incident. Luciana was studying in her dorm room for the semester exams coming up in just three days.

"There. I'd call that a hard day's work," the lady sighed. She wasn't worried. She'd been reviewing every single day and knew the material front to back.

She reached up to stretch, but a shrill, piercing scream interrupted her.

"What in the world?!"

The kitchen, she surmised. *It came from the kitchen.* Melody and Micah would be there preparing dinner by this hour. *That sounded like Micah. Melody's more than capable of keeping her safe, but you don't shout like that unless something's really wrong!*

Luciana trusted Melody deeply and entirely, so whatever had happened, she was certain it had to be dire to produce that sound.

"It's not true! Say it isn't so!" came another glass-shattering howl. That cry came from the soul itself and carried a poignant, vivid kind of pain born only from the bleakest pits of despair.

Luciana gritted her teeth and shouted, "Is everything okay, you two?! What happ…ened."

When she burst into the kitchen, her panic instantly evaporated.

"No! No, no, no, *nooo*!"

"What, um… What happened here?"

Micah leaned over the counter, her head buried against her arms, her whole body trembling. Melody was pacing and flustered and falling into a panic of her own while trying to calm her pupil. Whatever this was, it most certainly did not constitute an emergency. No intruders. No fires. The kitchen was but a kitchen.

"Um, care to explain, Melody?" Luciana asked again.

"Oh, my lady. Yes, well, it's really nothing serious—"

"What about this isn't serious, Miss Melody?!" Micah interjected, her head shooting up. Tears wobbled in her eyes.

Melody tried and failed to answer.

"Could someone maybe fill me in?" Luciana urged.

"It's, er…"

"I'm a failure!" Micah wailed. "A nothing! I can't be magicless! I can't!"

"Yes, that," Melody said.

Luciana's confusion only deepened. "I'm sorry, what?"

Sometime earlier…

"Light the stove, would you, Micah?"

"Yes, madam!"

A pot of water sat waiting on the cookstove. Micah dutifully went to set the stove alight and get the water boiling, but with what? Flint and steel? Friction? As a matter of fact, this world used matches. Plain matches. By some miracle, the Rudlebergs were not so poor as to forgo this particular luxury.

"Let's see, where'd we put those… Hm. Miss Melody, I think we're out of matches."

"Oh? I'll make a note to stock more later."

"But what do we do now? Should I go buy some?"

"No, no, we mustn't delay dinner. Allow me. Kindle—*Acce*."

A little flame flared to life on Melody's fingertip. At her behest, it flickered into the stove, setting it alight. Smoke slithered between the cracks of the smoldering firewood.

"Wow," Micah breathed. "You're like an old witch."

"O-old? Do I look old?"

"Oh, no! I didn't mean like that! You just have an, er, old soul! That's it!"

"I-I see."

Is that a compliment? Melody wondered.

"I meant it in a good way! Really!"

Micah's mind wandered back to Japan, where she'd grown up with a number of cartoon spell casters who were typically depicted as old and wizened. Godmothers, magical fairies on a quest to awaken a sleeping princess, genies trapped in lamps… Which was to say that Micah saw in Melody something extraordinary. Cartoonish, perhaps, in

the way she could make even the most mundane actions appear larger than life, but extraordinary nonetheless.

It was truly frightening, the things she could do. The stuff of nightmares, that teenage girl.

Man, I wish I could use magic like that, Micah mused. *Wait, I can! Magic's a thing in this world!*

Three months had passed in a flash since Micah was reborn. They'd been hectic months filled with adjustment and surprises, not least of all a heroine far too engrossed in playing maid to do her world-saving duties. It was a long time coming, but Micah had at last realized she could live out all her fantastical dreams here.

"Miss Melody!" she blurted.

"Y-yes?" Melody stepped back.

"I want to use magic!"

"Magic? You want to learn to cast spells?"

"Yes, Miss Melody. If something like this ever happens again, I might actually be able to do something about it!"

"Well, I do make an effort to use matches before resorting to magic, but you have a point."

"Wait, you do? You use matches?"

"I'd lose my touch awfully fast if I relied on waving my hand to do everything. A maid must be a master of many techniques, so magic to me is an emergency measure only."

Micah nodded in understanding. In hindsight, she hadn't seen Melody cast anything especially flashy since her first day on the job.

When she did brandish the occasional spell, it was always a modest thing, unlike her material maidly mastery, which was anything but modest.

Miss Melody's not stupid or anything. She's got common sense. So how come she's totally spacey when it comes to magic?

Micah's eye twitched. These were headaches for another day. "Anyway, point is, I want to learn how to use magic!"

"Right, well…" Melody thought for a moment, then glanced at the crackling flames in the stove. She nodded. "A watched pot never boils, as they say. We don't have time for a real lesson, but I suppose I could take a quick measure of your mana."

"Yes! Thank you, thank you, Miss Melody!"

They found chairs and sat facing one another, then took each other's hands. Melody probed for energy just like she'd done with Luciana.

If Anna-oneechan knew I was sitting face-to-face with the actual, real-life heroine right now, bet she'd be crazy jealous.

Micah indulged in the view as Melody shut her eyes and worked. She waited patiently for the results with a big, goofy grin. It wouldn't be long until she, too, would be snapping sparks and lighting stoves all on her own.

I'd settle for little water trickles like Luciana, she thought, *but it would be so cool to be able to throw out spells like Melody does. Not that I'm getting my hopes up. These hopes? Super low. Totally realistic.* She found herself envisioning Rook—the new, grown-up

version of Bjork. His existence was a curious one. Just like in the game, the Dark One's power had been expelled from within him, and yet the man who remained was entirely different from the one in the original story.

People liked him because he was this small, angry hater, but now he's the strong, silent type. Wonder how the fans would react to that. Micah self-corrected, lest her thoughts wander too far. *Ah well. Things worked out. I don't need* that *level of power or anything, but man, it'd be so cool if I could cast fireballs like in the game!*

Her modest hopes began to swell. She'd been reincarnated, after all, and that came with some genre implications. *I never met any gods or anything, but what if I got put in this world with super overpowered skills? Maybe? Possibly? Could've happened! Gosh, what if I end up swooping in and taking the heroine's role? Little ol' me? Yeah, right!*

Micah may have technically lived a long life into her sixties, but mentally she was still a junior high school student. Perhaps there would come a time when her memories returned to her and she looked back on her silly fantasies with regret, but that time was not now. So fantasize she did.

Suddenly, Melody opened her eyes. "I…don't know what to say," she murmured.

Micah sat up straighter. *What? Wait. No way. Is it happening?*

Her time was now. Her star had risen, and her power fantasy would soon begin.

Melody released her hands, sighed, and looked Micah in the eye. "I want you to stay calm when I tell you what I'm about to tell you, Micah."

"O-okay."

This sounds serious. I can't believe it. I'm really gonna be an all-powerful witch just like Melo—

"I didn't sense a trace of magic in you."

"You… What?" Micah's brain stopped working for a moment. "Not… Not a trace? As in nothing? No mana at all?"

"I'm sorry, Micah. There's nothing. I'm afraid you've no aptitude for casting spells whatsoever."

Silence.

"M-Micah?"

More silence. The young maid's mouth hung open like a dead fish's, her eyes deader still.

And then the screaming began, and Luciana, and everyone else, got up to speed.

"Really?" Luciana replied at the end of the story. "Is that all it—er, I'm so sorry to hear that, Micah."

"Oh, my lady!"

Micah, now a sobbing mess, threw herself into her lady's arms. Luciana accepted this, comforting her by gently stroking her hair like a big sister with her younger sibling. Not at all out of guilt for very nearly having made light of her plight.

"D-don't be sad, Micah," Melody joined in. "You don't need magic to be a great maid. I promise I'll teach you everything I know, and by the end you won't even care anymore! Cheer up!"

"Miss Melody…you're not helping," Micah sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Melody. I think she's right," Luciana agreed.

"What?! But why?!"

The academy did not have classes the next day, so the following night, Luciana and her attendants returned to the estate.

It was after dinner, and she really ought to have been in bed, but Melody was instead cleaning in the kitchen. A sigh left her lips.

"Something the matter, Gentlesister?" Serena said as she accompanied her.

"There was a bit of a fuss with Micah yesterday."

"Ah, the reading. When you learned she had no mana?"

"She took it awfully hard, and she still seemed down today. I haven't seen her once since we arrived. I wonder if I've upset her."

Melody couldn't forget the sullen expression on Micah's face or the sad, meager bites of food she'd taken during dinner last night. But then again, she *had* eaten. Asked for seconds, even.

Melody shook her head. She knew sad when she saw it, and this was downright downtrodden!

"She's visiting the orphanage, Gentlesister."

"Huh?"

"Micah has the day off tomorrow, so she and Rook went to visit her orphanage. I've been told they're spending the night."

"O-oh. Oh, I see. Well. That's good then." Melody scratched her quickly reddening cheek. Her underling's state had affected her own more than she'd expected. How could the world's future most perfect maid forget her own colleague's work schedule?

Serena grinned like an old Greek bust, presumably in amusement, but her eyes were cold as marble.

"Serena?"

"I believe *you* were scheduled for a day off as well," she said. "Curious that you're still here."

"I was? O-oh." Melody dropped her gaze. "Are you sure?"

Serena continued boring into her creator. "You're free to do what you will with your leisure time, but I must warn you that overworking yourself makes for an unhealthy environment for those around you. Let's exercise some restraint, shall we?"

"Y-yes. Of course. Sorry. I will."

Serena scares me sometimes, Melody thought. *In a nostalgic sort of way…*

Her mother, Selena, would often smile like that when she ran short on patience, and Serena was her spitting image. She didn't know how the living doll could embody her mother's spirit so perfectly. Perhaps Melody's memories and feelings had had something to do with it. Regardless, there were moments when she could hardly tell the two of them apart.

I could have lived without her taking after that particular quirk.

After memories of her past life returned to her at the tender age of six, Melody assumed her role as the greatest prodigy to ever live, but that did not always translate to being the greatest *child*. Her mother had bequeathed her a healthy number of tongue-lashings for her continued reflection. More than once, Melody had stayed out until the wee hours of the morning training for her dream of becoming a maid. One time, she'd nearly tripped because she couldn't keep her eyes off of a passing maid and played it off with a series of athletic somersaults that resulted in a shower of applause.

Mother did not find it quite as impressive as the townsfolk. Smiled like an angel, but deep down… I'm sensing the same energy from Serena right now.

How was it that such a gentle expression could convey such anger and elicit such fear?

"You will what, *Melody*?"

"E-exercise restraint, ma'am! I'm sorry, ma'am! The warning has been duly noted!"

So shaken was Melody that she lacked the wherewithal to notice the subtle motherliness infusing Serena's tone. Better to bow and admit her wrongdoing than to test her. Of course, such apologies were often insincere, with no intention to follow through on them. Any modern Earthling could have poked holes in Melody's contriteness.

"I'll hold you to that, Gentlesister." Serena shook her head wearily. "Returning to Micah, if her lack of talent is weighing on her,

why not compensate for it with some kind of magical implement?"

"I did consider that." Melody went back to cleaning. Much faster and with a little more urgency this time.

"Only considered?"

"It just seemed a little vapid."

"How so?"

"Well, right now she has to use matches to start fires. If I give her a magic tool that does it for her, I've essentially replaced matches with a lighter."

"I suppose that's true."

Many items, artifacts, implements, and tools in this world relied on magic to function. One such example was the flushable toilets that seemed to rid themselves of and purify waste all on their own without plumbing. But did that make every layman who flushed a toilet a mage? Melody certainly didn't think so, especially since many of these magic items were, to her, things anyone in Japan could buy at a corner shop or hardware store.

"The difference, I think, is intent," Melody said. "What makes magic so wonderful is the act of manifesting your *own* thoughts and feelings through your *own* mana. I still remember the first spell I cast. The thrill and excitement of inventing all kinds of maid magic. Practicing. A tool that does all that for you just doesn't feel the same."

"You make a fair point, Gentlesister. I was born with magic, so you speak from experience I lack."

"Well, you were *made* with magic, so…" Melody trailed off.

"Gentlesister?"

"Made with magic," Melody muttered, too quiet for Serena to make out. "Artificially…"

"Is something wrong?"

"Serena, you can use magic at will, right?"

"Y-yes. As you said, you fashioned me such that I could."

"So you can detect it. You can sense the mana inside you and manipulate it."

"Naturally. I wouldn't be much of a mage if I couldn't."

Wherever is she going with this? the doll wondered.

Melody continued: "You might say you're a kind of magical implement yourself, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose you could. A unique one, given I've free will and a personality, but the logic is sound. Why do you ask all this?"

"Right. You're technically a magic item, but you can sense and use magic like a human. And that must mean… Yes, I think it does!"

Serena flinched as Melody's voice rose in excitement. "What does it mean?"

"No time for dawdling. Let's hurry and finish this up, Serena! We have work to do!"

"What? G-Gentlesister!"

Melody kicked it into high gear, suddenly cleaning at mach speed as if she were the doll and her key had just been wound. And all without magic. Nightmarish.

“What in the world’s gotten into her this time?” Serena said to herself. “Nothing outlandish, I hope.”

The concept of foreshadowing did not seem immediately relevant to her.

After completing her chores, Melody disappeared through an Ovunque Porta door but returned sometime later.

“Serena, I’m back! Sorry for leaving you with the rest of the work.”

“You *are* supposed to be off right now. So where did you go? What were you doing?”

Melody giggled ominously. “I went to get this.” She placed a basket on the kitchen counter and tipped it over to let its contents spill out.

“They’re…stones,” Serena said. “Dull stones. Wait, no. They’re faded, but this is silver.”

Ten palm-sized chunks of metal littered the countertop, dull and unpolished.

“Where did you find these?” Serena asked.

“Remember where you first met Rook? You do, don’t you?”

“In the woods you frequent. But what was refined silver doing in a place like that?”

Such a material constituted the pedestal that had once sheathed the blade that held the Dark One captive. After Melody sapped it of power to use as Serena’s heart, the pedestal, left there by the Saint before Melody, crumbled into rubble.

"I can't believe I didn't notice at the time." Serena cocked her head. "So what do you intend to do with these?"

Melody chuckled and held up one of the chunks of silver. "We're going to make a mage out of Micah!"

Several hours past midnight, moonlight spilled over the estate's courtyard.

Melody walked to the courtyard's center. Ten silver nuggets encircled her at even intervals. Serena watched from a little ways away.

Melody shut her eyes. "*Annerire*—release."

She removed her cap, and her hair tumbled free, long, silky strands of black billowing into silver as if shedding their color. Color that, in truth, did not actually belong to them.

When she opened her eyes, pools of lapis lazuli replaced the usual dark voids.

Delicate work, she thought. *I can't risk other spells interfering.*

"Whenever you're ready, Gentlesister," Serena said.

"Right."

Eyes closed again, Melody focused, and as she did, silver energy emanated from her. She raised her hands, as if in offering to the moon hanging high above. The stones rose and took on the same argent hue as the energy suffusing the courtyard.

And then they began to revolve.

Melody's hands glided down and out to the side, spreading wide. She began to sing, then to dance at the center of that miniature solar system. Gently. Wordless lyrics, a simple yet musical scale, notes ascending and descending with the twinkling of the stars transformed the garden. Her arms did not swing but drifted through the air. Her feet did not step but floated. There, in the light of the moon, stood not a maid but a silver goddess.

The stones turned and spun about her in time, glimmering less and less until the ten nuggets melted away entirely. But the silver remained, and it continued to dance with the star at the center of the courtyard, melting and mingling into one.

Serena gaped, awestruck by the spectacle before her. *Oh, Gentlesister. You beat me in mana, but our abilities should be one and the same, and still I wouldn't dare imagine I could do something like this.*

This ritual was all part of the process. A spell so intricate and complex that simple semantic and somatic elements could not hope to imitate it.

Necessity demanded the song and dance remain abstract. Delicate did not even begin to describe the procedure. Each piece of the puzzle, every interval between every note, every breath, every fluctuation of the voice, each physical movement comprised an essential element. In this way, Melody hoped to invoke heretofore unthinkable complexity and weave finer, more subtle instructions into her magic. And she'd succeeded.

But the task was a monumental one, even for Melody. It required every drop of focus she could muster, with no potential interference from her usual camouflage spells.

Of course, this also meant that the courtyard had become a beacon of incredible silver energy. The very heavens might have descended upon the Rudleberg estate, and any passersby could have seen that, to say nothing of Melody's singing, which she could not afford to quiet in the name of neighborly politeness. Anyone could have spotted them, Luciana not least of all, but no one did. The ritual went on without a whiff of interruption.

Thus the need for Serena's presence. *We're perfectly concealed, Gentlesister. This once, you needn't restrain yourself.*

She had engulfed the courtyard in a privacy spell that contained all light and sound. This, too, afforded Melody the peace of mind she needed to don her natural hair and eyes in the open.

And so the ritual continued, until at last, the singing ended.

Silence swept into the courtyard. Melody again raised her hands to the moon. The amalgamation of the ten silver nuggets, still a formless liquid metal, hovered at her fingertips.

It undulated and shimmered until Melody spoke unto it the final words of the ritual: "Magic emerge—*Crea Immagina*."

The silver mass glimmered.

"We've returned."

"We're back…"

Micah returned to the estate from her stay at the orphanage, Rook in tow. Rook had tagged along mostly because he'd had the day off as well, but he tended to attach himself to Micah's hip regardless. Ever since losing his memories after being freed from the Dark One's grasp, he seemed to prefer Micah's company above all others. "Seemed" because the man was not much of a talker.

Perhaps his fondness was born from the fact that she had given him his name. Perhaps she stirred in him some forgotten memory. Only Rook knew, and he kept it to himself.

"Welcome back," Serena greeted them, taking a break from prepping dinner. "Did you rest well? Er, I take it Rook didn't."

Despite having experienced intense grief over her lack of magical talent just two days ago, Micah was in marginally better spirits after spending some time at (what amounted to) home.

Still wish I could use magic, she admitted, yet the trip had refreshed her.

And then there was Rook. Bjork Quichel, once a young man with the face of a young boy, had grown into his age and become quite strapping thanks (unknowingly) to Melody. As Bjork, his hair had been a messy, shorn mop of purple, but it was well-kept now, all the better to highlight his newly masculine features. His mystifying gray eyes, nearly as bright as silver, left observers wondering at the thoughts trapped behind them. He was about Christopher's height, and though slim, muscle filled out his clothing in all the places that mattered. His shirt clung tightly to his trim waist, highlighting the sort of hourglass figure many women might consider squandered on a man.

Even slumped, his beauty shone through.

"The kids ran him ragged, I think," Micah said.

"I'm going to assume that phrasing is more literal than I'm immediately inclined to believe."

"Let me put it this way: Kids don't like to go to bed at bedtime." Micah giggled.

Serena joined her.

"I don't find it funny," Rook sighed.

There was only one natural conclusion to Micah bringing a handsome young man back home with her, so she and Rook had weathered an avalanche of questions about Micah's new "boyfriend." The more tactile learners among the children had resorted bluntly to pokes and prods instead.

Rook took all of it as Rook took everything—with stoicism. He would quickly come to regret this. His silence came to mean "yes" to the children, which only confirmed their belief that he was the newest member of the "family." And members of the family were safe to badger and pester and play with to your heart's content. Suffering from amnesia, and likely lacking any useful experience to pull from anyway, Rook was woefully unprepared for dealing with children, leaving him at the mercy of every little hand that tugged at him.

It didn't matter that Micah had denied the accusations about his and Micah's relationship. Most young folk, unfortunately, suffered from a chronic condition commonly known as "selective hearing."

Children were a treasure. But they were also wanton little brats.

"I think I'll keep my distance from the orphanage from now on," Rook said.

"You won't have to once the academy lets out for summer recess," Micah said. "We'll be going back home with Lady Luciana, which, come to think of it, I really should let the orphanage know. What do you say? Just one more visit before we leave?"

"Maybe… If it isn't overnight."

"Careful, or she may send you there for good," Serena teased.

"Please don't."

Rook sighed. Micah and Serena giggled. They knew the poor man suffered late-onset growing pains. If he truly detested the idea, it would have been obvious.

He did still humor the kids, after all, when he could have just ignored them, Micah recalled.

He remembered none of it now, but Rook had been robbed of a happy childhood earlier in life. Micah hoped he could find some measure of peace via the orphanage, even if he wasn't aware that he needed it.

"Anyway, we're well rested," Micah said. "I can help with dinner if… Wait, where's Miss Melody?"

Melody was nowhere to be found in the kitchen, which was odd for that particular workaholic. Normally, you couldn't keep her away from her duties.

"I've seen to it that she has the day off," said Serena.

"Miss Melody?! Taking a day off?!"

"And she agreed?" Rook asked. He hadn't been with the Rudlebergs long, and even he was incredulous. One had to wonder just what he'd witnessed to already see the mad maid for what she was.

"I'm amazed," Micah said. "She usually spends her vacation time being a 'maid for fun.' I don't know how you did it, Serena."

She chuckled. "She's especially worn out today. She's been resting in her room since morning."

"Since *morning*? You're sure she isn't sick?"

"Oh, no. It's nothing like that."

Suddenly, the door opened.

"Good morning, Serena," a sleepy maid yawned. "My apologies. I'll get to work on dinner right away."

"Finally awake, I see. Good morning, Gentlesister."

"Or evening, I suppose. Odd, waking up to a sunset."

"Miss Melody," Micah said, "have you been asleep since last night?" She'd been away at the orphanage at the time, and she couldn't hide her shock at this unlikely development.

"Oh, hello, Micah. Welcome back."

"Thank you, but are you okay? You should really get back to bed if you aren't feeling well."

"I'm right as rain. I just used a little too much mana yesterday, that's all. A nice nap was all I needed." Melody smiled reassuringly.

Micah's eyes only widened further. *Miss Melody used "too much mana"?* Her? *With her insane stats? What did she do this time?!*

Being the only one among the Rudlebergs to know the truth of Melody's role in the game, Micah struggled to swallow that claim.

Melody, oblivious to all of this, gasped. "I nearly forgot! I have a present for you, Micah."

"A present? For me?"

"That's right. Here you are." Beaming, she offered Micah a trinket.

"A pendant?"

A small, egg-shaped ornament hung from the silver chain Melody held up. Two small wings extended from either side of the ornament, and a lapis lazuli gemstone cut in the shape of a heart sat embedded in its center.

"It's so pretty," Micah said. "But why?"

"That will help you use magic," Melody said. "I made it last night."

"It… What?"

Micah froze as everything fell into place like dominoes. *This is how she used "too much mana."* This *is what she did!*

Melody continued to beam, satisfied that her surprise gift had done its job. Particularly in the surprise department.

Micah didn't know what to make of the nuclear plot device she now held in her hands. Uncertainty and hesitation danced in her eyes,

but excitement swept in to replace them.

Is it true? she dared to wonder. *Can I really cast spells with this? Really?*

"Thank you, Miss Melody! So all I have to do is wear it?" She slipped her head through the necklace and hung it around her neck. "Like this?"

It was an elegant solution. Inscribe a few basic spells into a piece of jewelry, then have the wearer say the magic words, and voilà! Instant mage. Surely, this was Melody's goal with her latest creation.

Well, I won't really *be a mage, but it'll sure feel like it!*

Micah's heart pounded with excitement.

But Melody was ready to rain on her parade. "No, that's not it at all."

Micah collapsed like a performer doing a pratfall. She didn't come from the birthplace of Kansai humor, Osaka, back in her past life, but she felt they would have admired her act nonetheless.

"Um, are you all right?"

"No, I'm Micah!"

Alas! The landing was always the hardest part to stick. The great Micah, Reincarnated Maid-in-Training and Straight Man Extraordinaire, was getting stale. She risked losing her audience if she didn't develop some new material, and soon. Show biz would chew her up and spit her…

Ahem. Micah was no comedian. But some situations called for a quip.

"Miss Melody, you just told me that this would let me use magic!" Micah said.

"I did, and it will, but it's going to take a little more than just putting it on."

"I don't understand."

"It's a magic item called Uovo del Mago—Egg of the Mage—and it's exactly what it sounds like. It contains the thing that will help you on your spell casting journey."

"Wait, it's an actual egg?!" Micah held it tenderly and examined it closely. "Is it a bird?"

Rook ogled it too, similarly befuddled. Serena only smiled and savored the suspense.

"Whatever hatches will be up to you," Melody replied.

"Up to me?"

"It could be a dog, a cat, a rabbit, or indeed a bird. Maybe a broom, a wand. Even a ring."

"Those aren't even alive!"

"It will be whatever you need most, which may not be a living creature. Rest assured, you'll have the perfect partner, one suited exclusively to you."

"Exclusively to me… But what for?"

"So you can use magic, of course. That's the whole reason I created the Uovo del Mago." When her audience gazed at her stupefied, Melody continued: "Serena inspired the idea, you see."

"Serena?"

Micah glanced at the doll. She smiled back softly from behind Melody. It was easy to forget Serena was an arcane being, a magical maid automaton.

"Serena is, for all intents and purposes, a magic item, but she can perceive and manipulate magic freely. All it takes is mana and the ability to parse it, both of which I designed her with. You, unfortunately, lack the former, which likewise precludes the latter. But then it occurred to me that we can always just supplement what someone lacks."

"Supplement with what?"

"Essentially, all you need is an external source of mana and a catalyst, or focus, through which to cast."

Micah looked down at her pendant. "And that's what's going to hatch from this?"

That sounds more like a beast tamer or a summoner than a mage.

Micah surmised that some kind of Serena Mk. II would hatch from the egg, and *that* being would do all the spell casting. It didn't exactly scream "mage" at her.

Melody saw right through her, though, and grinned. "I understand completely. If you aren't the one doing the casting, then

all you have is a glorified tool. I agonized over how to solve that conundrum, and I assure you, the Uovo del Mago is the solution."

Micah tilted her head, unconvinced.

"In its creation, I used the same methods I used to create Serena," Melody went on, "imbuing personality through the Alter Ego spell. With one difference: I scrubbed all of my knowledge and memories. Aside from the bare essentials as far as spell casting goes, that is."

"What do you mean? Your knowledge and memories?"

"The Uovo del Mago is a blank slate. Keep it on your person at all times, and as you carry it with you, it'll learn from *your* knowledge and memories. Once it's conformed to your mind and ways of thinking, you'll have the perfect partner."

"Conform as in it'll come out exactly like me?"

"It'll use you as a baseline, is what I mean to say. It only learns from you in order to suit your needs, but it'll come out with a personality all its own. Assuming whatever it becomes *can* have a personality."

"The more you explain the more scared I get."

"There's a lot about the egg that's impossible to predict. Of course, it won't do you any harm, no matter what emerges, but as for how intelligent it may be, whether it will understand speech—those aspects we can only wait to discover. It may be nothing more than a pet, or it may be a trinket of some kind, or take any number of practical or impractical forms."

"That's why it's up to her," Rook said for Micah, who was too busy processing to speak.

"Explain, Rook," Micah demanded.

"The egg will shape its mind and body to suit yours. In other words, *you* will shape the identity of whatever emerges. It's up to you. Melody can't possibly predict what will come out of that egg."

Micah groaned. That sounded like a lot of pressure.

Entirely unrelated, it wasn't strange for Rook to refer to Melody without any formal title. He rarely made use of the standard "master" or "madam" honorifics.

"Don't stress over it," Melody said. "As I said, whatever hatches, it'll be the perfect partner and spell casting focus. You two'll get on swimmingly. It's practically a given."

And how am I supposed to "get on swimmingly" if an inanimate object pops out? Micah couldn't help but wonder.

She got halfway to rolling her eyes before resigning herself to Melody's whims. Melody wouldn't steer her wrong. She had to believe that. As much as this sudden responsibility thrust upon her very much did stress her.

There was still one question hanging in the air. "Miss Melody, you said this partner is supposed to help me use magic, but how exactly?"

Even assuming this thing was a copy of Micah, would it not be the one casting the spells instead of Micah herself?

Melody grinned. "*It* won't be the only thing adapting. As you two attune to one another, you'll form a kind of synchronous bond. Your partner's mana and ability to transmute it will be your own."

Micah gasped as Melody's meaning sank in. "S-so you're saying I'd be able to sense magic through it? Maybe 'through it' is the wrong phrasing. If we're attuned to one another, we might even share our thoughts. And if we can share thoughts, then…we'd share everything else, wouldn't we?"

She turned to Serena, living, breathing proof of an artificial, magical apparatus capable of manipulating mana at will. This partner was the manipulator, and Micah was the will. And that meant, so long as they were together…

I could be a mage. A real mage!

All of a sudden, the egg gleamed.

Micah yelped. "Wh-what was that?"

"The egg's begun tuning," Melody explained. "Whatever you just felt, it had a dramatic effect."

"It felt…what I felt?"

Micah tried to revive that brief surge of emotion. Joy. Elation that her dream might really come true. The Uovo del Mago had responded in kind.

Kinda makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

This unborn thing belonged to her now, and it felt what she felt. That was a sobering thought, but not an unsettling one.

"Gentlesister," Serena interjected while Micah admired the egg, "how will it have enough mana to sustain itself?"

That snapped Micah out of her daydreams.

"The material's conductive enough to make that a nonissue," Melody replied. "It should have enough mana stored up to last until it hatches."

"Silver," Rook deduced, eyeing the craftsmanship of the egg.

It was silver down to even its chain. That chain alone would have made the pendant a rather valuable accessory, but everything else about the trinket easily overshadowed that fact. In fairness, that "everything else" likely inflated its price far more than the metal alone.

"Metals are the most magically conductive materials," Melody explained. "I seem to work particularly well with silver for some reason, so I stockpiled a good amount of it."

Gee, I wonder why! Micah had truly been cursed by forbidden knowledge.

"Not as much as I would have liked, granted. It's not quite equal to Serena, unfortunately."

Melody scratched her cheek bashfully, as though this somehow indicated a failure on her part.

Rook hummed and nodded.

Not as much as she would've liked, Micah parroted sarcastically. *What* she *would've liked can't be reasonable!*

Melody's standards ran a tad high, to say the least.

"Anyway, that about covers it," Melody said. "Will you accept it?"

"Absolutely!" Micah shouted. "Thank you so much, Miss Melody!"

One did not turn down a chance at sorcery. Micah did not hesitate for even a heartbeat.

I can be a mage! I really get to be a mage! It'll probably be fine, right? The Jealous Witch Incident got a little hairy, but it worked out. I'm sure this'll be fine!

So spoke every human before many an unwise decision. Tunnel vision was a very real, very dangerous affliction.

"By the way," Rook spoke up, "where did you get the silver for this?"

Precious metals did not come cheap.

"In the forest where I always gather materials," Melody answered. "I'm sure you don't remember it. There was a crumbled pedestal there. I helped myself to a few sizable chunks."

"You helped yourself to *what*?!" Micah blurted.

"What in the world are you shouting for?" Melody said.

All of Micah's wonder and amazement flew out of the kitchen together with her voice. There was only one silver pedestal in those woods. It had technically already served its purpose in helping to redeem Rook, but that didn't change the horrifying truth of the Uovo del Mago.

Micah suddenly possessed a plot device far more destructive than she ever could have imagined. This was no mere plot trinket—it was a plot *destroyer*.

All the poor girl could do now was wonder what in the world that maid was going to get up to next.

Chapter 2:
School's Out!

NOTHING ENCOMPASSED "RISE AND SHINE" quite like the sun that morning.

The first day of August arrived blazing, but classes at Royal Academy had officially ended for the term. Summer vacation had finally arrived to give the students of Theolas some much-needed relief.

Luciana planned to return to her home to the north for the long break. She and her retinue would depart that very day, so Melody made sure to finish her early morning duties quickly. As she changed from her cleaning clothes to her usual uniform, a thought paused her.

"Maybe I'll swap to a summer outfit."

Melody had opinions about the length of maids' skirts and the general lack thereof, but she was less inclined to nitpick sleeves. She could make compromises for the sake of appearances, and what necessitated a change in fashion more than a change of season?

"I really should have thought of this back in June, but things were just so hectic while preparing my lady for the academy. Now's the perfect opportunity to correct that mistake." She stuck her arms out and said, "Rethread—*Ricucitura*."

The sleeves of her blouse unraveled, strands levitating in midair. Melody held her arms aloft, crossed together, then drew them apart in a half circle. The threads obeyed, gathering at her shoulders and

weaving themselves back together. Her sleeves rematerialized, shorter this time and ending at her elbows in a pair of white cuffs.

"Excellent. I'll prepare a spare for myself later."

Beaming, she exited her room at nearly the exact same moment as Serena, who caught her eye. They had done the morning cleaning together, and she had just finished changing as well.

"Look, Serena… Oh."

Before she could show off her own new look, Melody found Serena dressed identically.

"You shortened your sleeves too?" Serena giggled. "Maybe we really are sisters."

The doll had been given life via the Alter Ego spell, a conjuration Melody typically used to make copies of herself, but Serena was special in that Melody had purposefully left her personality to random chance. Serena had free will and none of Melody's memories or experiences, which made coincidences like this uncanny indeed.

"You look lovely, Gentlesister."

"As do you, Serena."

Another of the servant quarters' doors clicked open as they smiled at each other.

"Good morning," the maid-in-training yawned. "Miss Melody. Miss Serena."

Kurita Maika, now known as Micah, had no memory of how she'd arrived in this world. Not all that long ago, she'd suddenly gained awareness in the body of a ten-year-old girl with recollections

of life in Japan up to junior high, but everything beyond that was a blur. She remembered nothing of her twilight years nor of how she'd died in her previous life. Micah was effectively a child again.

She rubbed her eyes, thankful that she didn't have any duties that morning.

"What have I told you about forms of address, young lady?" Serena scolded her. "That habit of yours sticks like a bad stain." She placed a hand on her cheek and sighed in resignation.

Melody, however, expressed no displeasure. She found it endearing and indulged in the sense of seniority it imparted when Micah addressed her that way.

"Wait!" Micah shouted, finally awake. "No one told me we were changing uniforms!"

"It only just occurred to me, so I shortened my sleeves a little," said Melody.

"No fair! I want a new uniform too!"

"Are you uncomfortable? I thought I made your outfit suitable for the heat."

Melody enchanted all the uniforms she made with heat- and cold-resistant spells. No weather would prove too extreme for what essentially amounted to fabric-based air conditioning. She could have made quite the infomercial out of the whole thing.

"Well, no, I feel just fine actually, but that's not the point!" Micah pouted and stomped her feet in childish rage. For a girl her age, it was rather adorable. For a maid, it was utterly unbecoming.

But still mostly adorable.

Melody grinned wearily. “Okay, okay. Hold your arms out. Rethread—*Ricucitura*.”

“Wow! Pretty!”

Micah gaped at the countless dancing threads as she experienced the spell for the first time.

“Now the finishing touches. Do a twirl for me, would you?”

“Yes, madam!”

She twirled, her skirt puffing out and her little pink pigtails fluttering in the air. The threads followed, and by the time she finished the turn, the spell was complete.

Micah admired her new summery aesthetic. “Thank you, Miss Melody!”

“You look cute. Now, we have work to do, girls.”

“Yes, madam!”

“Right away, Gentlesister.”

They made for the kitchen. Rook, the valet-in-training, was already waiting there for them.

“Good morning, Rook,” Micah said.

“Good morning,” he replied tersely.

Rook, the forth love interest of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* and known as Bjork Quichel before he lost his memories, now served House Rudleberg as its only manservant. Before, he’d looked like a small boy years younger than he actually was, but a dose of

maid magic produced the unexpected side effect of maturing him into a handsome and strapping young man. He cut his former mop of purple hair short, as was befitting a servant of nobility. In fact, he retained practically nothing of his old appearance from the game. Anyone who knew him from it would never assume that *this* was Bjork Quichel.

He wasn't, really. He was Rook now, and he was presently doing the dishes.

"Good morning," Melody said. "Thank you for polishing the tableware. As best you can when most of it is wood, I suppose. Maybe one day we can find some silver for you."

"It's nothing."

On paper, Rook served as a valet, but given his complete lack of experience in any domestic tasks whatsoever, he really acted as more of a generic manservant while he learned his duties.

Traditionally, a footman would maintain the silverware, and footmen shared many duties with valets. They also answered directly to the household butler, who typically began their careers as footmen themselves.

Rook had a long way to go until he could call himself a butler, and so was beginning at the bottom.

"Serena, Micah, please see to breakfast," Melody said. "Rook, prepare His Lordship and Her Ladyship's morning tea. I'll prepare Lady Luciana's. Wait for me when you finish, Rook. You still need to practice your pouring technique, so I'll accompany you to His Lordship's chamber."

All three replied in the affirmative. Truthfully, Melody desperately wanted their tasks for herself, but she'd learned her lesson about teamwork. Besides, this was nice in its own way. A proper retinue knew how to divide labor. Melody felt like she was part of a well-oiled machine.

"Now let's get to work!" she said.

"Yes, madam," her staff responded.

Dishes clattered and kettles boiled. Melody was in her element.

"I suppose I'll be by myself after today," Serena muttered. "It'll be lonely."

Serena alone would see to the Rudlebergs' capital estate while everyone else journeyed to Luciana's girlhood home: Melody as her personal attendant, Micah as her assistant, and Rook to train under the estate's butler. The lord and lady would not join them, as work and social obligations kept them firmly tied to the capital, so Melody could not simply leave the estate empty. Serena, being created explicitly for scenarios such as this, was the obvious choice to remain.

She and her sister-creator had never been so far apart before. Despite being a magical maid automaton of her caliber, Serena had to suffer the unfortunate fate of a benchwarmer all the same.

"It'll only be for three weeks," Melody consoled her. "We have to return by the end of the month at the latest."

"Is summer recess all of August?" Micah asked.

"It is. And the very last day is the Summer Ball at the palace, so we really ought to be back a week early to prepare our lady."

"Meaning if it takes five days to get there by carriage, ten for the full trip, and August is thirty-one days, and we want to be back a week before the 31st, we'll be there for…"

"About two weeks," Rook calculated.

"I was going to say that," Micah said. "Right, two whole weeks. Or *only* two weeks?"

"It will fly by, I'm sure," said Serena.

"And then we'll be back and livening things up again before you know it," said Melody. "We'll be sure to bring souvenirs."

Serena tittered. "Now you've gone and gotten my hopes up."

Melody smiled before pushing her tea cart to its destination.

"Good morning, my lady."

"Morning…" Luciana grumbled groggily. The maid's mistress was not yet fully with the living, but her drowsiness vanished when she took a better look at Melody. "Oh! Melody, your clothes are different!" The sight of her favorite maid's new outfit woke her right up. "I like the short sleeves."

"You're too kind, my lady. I've prepared your favorite brew of royal milk tea this morning."

Luciana sat up and accepted the cup, sipping gracefully from it. No one would have believed that this was the sordid daughter of the Ignobles. Melody watched her lady with pride. It was her greatest joy to witness moments like these.

"Thank you, Melody. Delicious as always."

"You honor me, my lady. I was considering changing to a summer wardrobe starting today. What are your thoughts?"

"Would you do that? I suppose we might as well, not that I'm ever hot in the dresses you make. Short sleeves are part of the season, after all!"

And so it was that the Rudlebergs' wardrobes transformed.

"How do you like it, my lady?" Melody asked.

"I love it! It's not just nice and breezy, but it feels lighter too."

Melody rethreaded Luciana's favorite blue dress into a sleeveless, summery style. Less fabric, more subdued, but not without the tasteful embellishments no noble could go without. The beautiful garment suited her perfectly.

"This'll be so fun to wear," Luciana said. "Thanks, Melody!"

"Your praise is wasted on me, my lady."

"While we're at it, I was actually thinking maybe we could change my hair too?"

"Very good, my lady. How does a ponytail sound? Have a seat and I'll see to it at once."

"Sitting!" the lady sang. She was almost cartoonishly giddy as she bounced on her seat.

"You're in good spirits, I see," Melody said.

"We're going on a trip! I could hardly sleep last night!"

Melody failed to hide a smirk as she fiddled with her lady's hair. She could be so childish sometimes. "Your parents won't be joining

us, and you've already been there before."

"Still. I have yet to fully acquaint myself with some of our new faces, and a trip's the perfect opportunity to do that."

"Very true," Melody said. "There. Done."

"Cute! I love it! Thank you, Melody!"

Melody did up Luciana's hair high and loose. She'd left her bangs alone, allowing tufts of hair to frame Luciana's face in a youthful style. A ribbon the same color as her dress crowned the ensemble.

"Can you do my hair like this on my birthday too?" Luciana asked.

"On August 7th, it will be so."

Luciana's birthday was coming up soon. Last year, she'd celebrated with her family at home, but she couldn't do that this time. Luciana wasn't disappointed. She'd known it would be like this for a good while, and her parents had already held a miniature celebration for her while they could.

Melody was straightening the vanity when she remembered something. "Speaking of your birthday, my lady, I have an update regarding the present you requested."

"Hm? Oh, my birthday gift! Is it ready?!"

"Completed just last night."

"Oh, yay! Can I have it now?"

"Well, it's, er, not technically your birthday yet, my lady."

“Please! We already celebrated, so what difference does it make? Can I, please?” Luciana clasped her hands pleadingly.

The maid half grimaced, half smiled. “Oh, I suppose. Very well. I’ll give it to you before we depart.”

“Yay! Thank you!”

Luciana dove for Melody, who skillfully sidestepped the attack.

“Nobles do not throw themselves at their maids, my lady.”

“All right, that was impressive. Anyway, I suppose I’ll have to find some way to make this up to you, won’t I?”

“You needn’t do such a thing.”

“But I want to. Just wait. I’ll find you the best birthday present you’ve ever seen!” Luciana grinned from ear to ear. “So tell me. When is—”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Melody interjected with a chuckle. “Next year, that is.”

“…it? What?”

The lady’s face turned to stone.

“My lady?” Melody said.

“Wh-when is it, Melody? Your birthday.”

“June 15th.”

“June 15th. The 15th. Of June? June 15th.”

“June 15th,” Melody confirmed.

Silence reigned as the immense complexity of that statement fully sank in. Melody was left confounded, but Luciana required this

incubation period for all the feelings brewing inside her.

And then they exited her through her mouth. Loudly.

The Rudleberg estate suffered far more screaming these days than during its era as a haunted house.

"M-my lady, there's no need to torment yourself," Melody said.

"This is it," Luciana rasped. "This is rock bottom."

"That's, er, your bed actually. Please, my lady, you'll wrinkle your dress lying there."

This was, in fact, the calmest Luciana had been in the past several minutes since her discovery. Previously, she'd thrashed and wailed and engaged in hyperbole of the highest degree. Melody could not fathom why the matter of her birthday had sent her lady into such a state.

"Why, why, *why* didn't you tell me earlier?!" Luciana fumed.

"My lady, it's not a maid's place to inform her lady of something so superfluous."

"*Superfluous?!* It should have been priority number one!"

Was it immature to so lament something as trivial as a maid's birthday? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps Luciana burying her face in her pillow, huffing, and throwing a tantrum might have tilted the scales a little. Regardless, Melody had to do something, however ridiculous a situation this was.

She racked her brain. *I'm at a loss. How do I…? Wait. That's it!*

Melody slipped her hand into her dress and produced a narrow box that was far too big for the pocket it emerged from. Such was the

way of things whenever Melody was involved.

"Please, my lady. Collect yourself."

No answer. Luciana refused to so much as raise her head.

"My lady?"

Still nothing.

"If that's how you want it to be, I suppose I'll have to wait to give you this present," Melody said.

Luciana shot straight up. "Present!"

She trotted over to Melody like she hadn't been pouting and languishing on the bed only moments earlier. How very convenient.

"The thing I asked for! Thank you so much, Melody!"

The maid giggled. "I'm pleased you like it."

Luciana admired her gift of a wooden folding fan while Melody saw to fixing the hair Luciana had ruined in the name of drama. Luciana splayed the fan out, revealing a bright, pale turquoise material with rippling golden embellishments.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"Like the hair that inspired it," Melody said.

Melody ran the comb through those rippling golden locks as red spread from Luciana's neck to her ears.

"W-well now I'm going to be too embarrassed to use it!" Luciana blurted, snapping the fan shut. "I swear…"

Her maid muttered a half-hearted apology that lacked any sincerity.

"A-anyway," Luciana said, "I'm still upset you hid your birthday. Why didn't you tell me?" It was as good a subject change as any while her face cooled. "I could have asked, I suppose, but I wish I could have prepared some kind of celebration."

Melody bit back a comment on unladylike behavior as Luciana puffed up her cheeks. She settled for pressing her lips together firmly instead. "You have my apologies, my lady. You were beginning your first semester at the academy and acclimating to dormitory life. You had larger concerns, and my birthday didn't seem pertinent."

Luciana grumbled. "I hate when you use logic."

June 15th was right around when Luciana was establishing herself at Royal Academy. Even had she known in advance, she probably couldn't have done much about it. But it was the principle of the matter.

"I just wish we could have done something," Luciana said. "Anything. Even if it was small."

"My lady…" Melody's hands stopped.

Luciana turned in her seat, cheeks rosy and lips stretched in a wide smile. "Happy late birthday, Melody! I won't miss the next one!"

"Oh, my lady. Thank you. I'll look forward to it."

It occurred to Melody that this was the first time since her mother's passing that someone had spoken those words to her. She'd grown unaccustomed to them. Soon, Luciana's blush spread to her.

"I'll work out something for your present later," Luciana said. "So the fan you made for me, it does what I asked for?" She stood, hair

straight again, and spread the fan out.

"Exactly as you specified. Allow me to show you."

The fan was no mere bauble but a magical implement. Melody proceeded to instruct her lady on its use, which Luciana tested at once.

Satisfied, Luciana nodded. "Perfect!"

"I'm happy to be of service, but what, may I ask, did you need such a feature for?"

Melody cocked her head. Her lady had requested this, so she'd acquiesced, of course, without question.

Luciana snapped the fan out and sneered. "For fools and nuisances."

Had Anna-Marie or Micah been there to witness Luciana's face in that moment, they would have glimpsed a prime suspect for the role of next villainess.

Chapter 3:
A Surprise Visitor

"GOODNESS, LUCIANA, YOUR HAIR LOOKS lovely!" Beatrice complimented.

"Doesn't it? I can actually feel the breeze on my neck," Luciana said.

"And that dress is so pretty on you, though the bare shoulders are awfully bold," Milliaria noted.

"Don't worry," Luciana assured. "I have a shawl for when I'm out in public."

"I think you look beautiful," Luna added.

Luciana giggled. "Thanks, Luna."

It was after breakfast at the Rudleberg estate. Preparations for departure proceeded, and Luciana's three closest friends were here to see her off.

Beatrice, daughter of Viscount Lillertcruz, and Milliaria, daughter of Baron Faronkalt, were new nobility, their families having come into the Rudlebergs' old territory in recent generations. They had grown up practically as neighbors and were Luciana's childhood friends.

Luna Invidia was a Noble of the Robe, her family technically holding a rank equal to a countship but owning no actual land. They instead held permanent residence in the capital. She sat beside

Luciana in class and occupied the dorm room next to hers at the academy. She was also Luciana's newest friend.

They sat gathered around a table in Luciana's room, chatting idly.

"It's sad you're the only one leaving," Beatrice said. "You should have stayed behind with us."

"It would have been nice to explore the capital together," Milliaria agreed.

Neither were returning home for the break. Their families had lived in the royal capital since the Spring Ball, so they had no reason to go home, even if they wanted to make the journey.

The same technically went for Luciana, but she felt a little differently. "My father has some documents he wants taken home." Her voice dropped to a shy whisper. "Also, I miss everyone."

Beatrice didn't let that bashful comment go unremarked. "Leave it to Luciana to feel homesick around her own parents."

"I-it's not that! I'm not homesick!" Luciana protested.

"It was sweet of your father to make up an excuse for you," Milliaria said.

"But they're important documents! Really, they are!"

"We're all friends here," said Luna. "There's no reason to be shy about it."

"Not you too! This isn't about my uncle! He's the *last* reason I want to go home, okay?!"

"She's done it again, Milliaria," Beatrice said, leaning in like she was sharing a secret. "She's sold herself out and doesn't even realize it."

"I know," Milliaria replied in similar fashion. "Isn't it adorable?"

"I can hear you!" the accused snapped.

There were no secrets at this table.

"You shouldn't be ashamed of caring for your family, Luciana," said Luna. "Don't hide it. You should be honest with yourself."

"But I am! It's not about my uncle because I also want to see all the villagers again too! You've got the wrong idea!"

"I'm…beginning to wonder what exactly it is you even think you're hiding." Luna gave up trying to make sense of her friend's ramblings.

If three was a crowd, and women were clucking hens, then Luciana's room was an overpopulated coop. Even this early in the morning, the room housed an impressive array of chaos so far.

Luciana eventually regained enough composure to remember her other classmates. "It's a shame Lucif and Perriand couldn't come. At least I got to say goodbye."

Luna grimaced. "They're commoners. It's understandable that they may not want to roam the Upper District."

"And Lucif is a boy," Milliaria added. "He can't be in your room in the first place."

"Ah, but you forgot about an important loophole," said Beatrice.

"Oh? What's that?"

"Luciana is her family's only daughter. She'll have to find a husband someday, so all Lucif has to do is marry in. Then he can come and go as he pleases."

Luna's eyes sparkled. "Goodness, I had no idea you saw him that way, Luciana."

"Saw him what way?" Luciana huffed. "We're friends, that's all. Nothing more, nothing less. Beatrice, stop planting funny ideas in people's heads. If we weren't in my room, someone might overhear and start spreading rumors."

"I know, I know. Sorry," Beatrice said. "Just a flight of fancy."

"It makes you wonder who Luciana will actually marry, doesn't it?" Milliaria pondered.

Luciana sputtered. "Where are you going with this?"

Milliaria clasped her hands and looked up innocently from under her lashes. "As your childhood friend, it's only natural I should be concerned. Who wouldn't want to meet the man who eventually wins the heart of the Fae Princess?"

"Are people still calling me that?" Luciana deflated. She'd had enough of that embarrassing moniker.

"They prefer Hero Princess in my class," Beatrice said. "Everyone saw what you did at the ball. They're not likely to forget it anytime soon."

"I wish they would." Her Highness collapsed onto the table as her friends broke out into laughter at her expense.

"Speaking of," Luna said, "I know 'Fae Princess' started at the Spring Ball, but where did 'Hero Princess' come from?"

"The lord chancellor, according to my father," Luciana mumbled into the table. Her mind flashed back to the conversation with Hughes in the carriage the day after the attack.

Luna's eyes widened like saucers. "The lord chancellor? A man as pragmatic and stoic as *he* thought to give you a nickname? My goodness…"

A knock came at the door. "May I come in, my lady?"

"Serena?" Luciana answered. "Yes, come in."

Serena bowed as she entered. "Lord Maxwell of House Reclentos has come to visit. He asked to see you."

Stunned silence crashed through the room, and for some time, Luciana could not respond.

But before that shocking announcement, Melody, Micah, and Rook busily loaded the carriage that awaited to the side of the manor's front entrance. They had borrowed a one-horse coach from the city that had room for four passengers, and were using the railed roof as cargo space. Rook would serve as coachman and guard both, while the women—Luciana, Melody, and Micah—occupied the interior seats. Thanks to some muscle memory from his time as Bjork Quichel, Rook found a while ago that he knew his way around a sword decently well, hence his secondary role as guard. He similarly seemed to take to beasts well and became the designated driver as a result.

No one dared mention that they needed neither driver nor guard with Melody present. A man was a necessity for any long journey, anyway.

"Rook," Micah panted. "This…please."

"Right."

Rook relieved the minuscule maid of her bag, hoisted himself up, and secured the luggage on the carriage's roof without breaking a sweat.

"Man am I glad we have a boy now." Micah stared up at that towering figure of masculinity.

"It's certainly a big help having a strong pair of hands around," Melody cheerfully agreed as she double-checked her list.

In this world, a five-day journey was not overly long, relatively speaking, but it was by no means brief. They could not turn the coach around for any forgotten items, aside from Melody's Ovunque Porta spell, but where was the pride in relying on last resorts? Melody had more dignity than that. There would be *no* turning back, for more than just practical reasons.

The most perfect maid does not forget her lady's things before a long trip, she reminded herself.

She had made a vow to her mother that she would become the world's most perfect maid. That vow marked the genesis of the entire maid magic branch of sorcery she'd invented. Now, after everything she had been through over the last semester at the academy, she had a much firmer grasp on what that actually meant.

The most perfect maid was there for her lady, no matter what. So that was what Melody would do. So long as Luciana was smiling, she was doing her job.

"Done," the young valet grunted.

"Thank you, Rook. That should be everything." Melody marked off the last item on her list.

Rook nodded, then descended from the coach.

"Thanks, Rook," Micah said.

He hesitated briefly. "Sure."

The maids smirked. Melody hadn't known Rook before his identity change, but he was a very reticent man now and never forthcoming about his feelings. He rarely spoke without being spoken to, and tended to reply in only a word or two. His demeanor didn't interfere with his work, granted, but the man was anything but talkative.

Still, he did reach out in his own way, and that wasn't lost on the girls. Melody acknowledged that his amnesia likely handicapped his expressiveness and he was relearning proper communication.

In any case, Rook's brusqueness was not a matter of contention.

"So all that's left is to leave, then, Miss Melody?" Micah said.

"That's right. We can depart as soon as Lady Luciana's tea party finishes."

"*If* it finishes. Should we expect to leave late?"

"Fair point. Perhaps we ought to let her know we've finished

preparations," Melody said.

"Speaking as a woman, girls sure do like to talk," Micah said.

"That they do. Why, get me on the topic of maids, and I'll chat your ear right off."

Micah did not say that chats had to be at least two-sided to count, but she certainly thought it.

Rook stood off to the side, not quite knowing what to do with himself. "Melody, what next?"

"Hm?" That yanked her out of memory lane. "Oh, yes. Well…"

But before she could answer, neighs and clopping disturbed the serene scene outside the estate. The three servants turned toward the noise just in time to watch a carriage pull up to the manor.

"Another guest? I thought Lady Luciana's friends were all here," Micah said.

"Yes, and I don't believe we were expecting any other visitors." Melody studied the newcomer. "Let's go and greet them."

Two fine horses drew the extravagant, lavishly decorated carriage. Its passenger alighted before the servants.

"Greetings, Melody. Long time no see."

Honey-blond hair tied up in a ponytail and emerald green eyes meant this handsome effigy belonged to none other than Maxwell Reclentos, second love interest of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*.

The coachman who'd opened the carriage door stood aside as Melody returned her friend's genial smile with a maidly one of her own. "Our most humble welcome, Lord Reclentos."

She offered him a perfect curtsy, a spectacle that left even the coachman awestruck.

Inwardly, Melody was aghast at the sudden deviation in their plans. *What in the world is Max doing here?!*

Outwardly, however, she presented the picture-perfect maid.

"I do apologize for the suddenness of my visit," the marquess's son said, "but when I heard Lady Luciana would be leaving today, I rushed over."

"I understand. We'll inform her of your arrival at once. If you'll follow me, I will show you to the parlor where you can wait for her, if it pleases you."

"I'd be much obliged. I expect I won't intrude long, if it's no trouble to leave the carriage here for a short while."

"As you wish, my lord. Please, follow me. Rook, inform His Lordship of our visitor. Micah, do the same for Serena, and have her bring along Lady Luciana. Prepare some tea as well. I'll attend to Lord Reclentos."

Her underlings responded at once. Melody had a much sterner air about her in front of such esteemed company, and it rubbed off on her two trainees. They bowed just as they'd been taught and departed.

Leaving the coachman with the carriage, Melody saw Maxwell into the estate. They walked in silence, but Maxwell kept his eyes trained on the maid, his smile never faltering. When they arrived at the parlor, he took a seat on the couch at Melody's suggestion.

"We'll have tea ready shortly," Melody said. "Please make yourself comfortable until our lady arrives."

Maxwell winced. "Even now? Won't my friend return to me, at least while we're alone?"

His regal air dissipated. Noticing this, Melody shut her eyes and let out a breath. Her professional bearing softened into a friendly grin.

"What in the world are you doing here, Max?"

"My own rudeness isn't lost on me, rest assured."

They had met months ago in the stagecoach that brought Melody here from her hometown. They became friends on that journey, a decidedly rare relationship for a maid to have with nobility. But Maxwell cherished Melody for seeing him for who he was beyond his beautiful exterior, a rare trait indeed, at least in Max's experience. Very few had the privilege of calling him "Max," but she'd earned it.

"Sit, will you?" he said. "Let's talk a while."

"That's very kind of you," Melody said, "but I'm afraid that's impossible. A maid *never* takes a seat in front of a guest."

Maxwell snorted, entirely unsurprised by her response. "I thought you'd say that. Then stand, but we can still talk, can't we? We don't get many chances to."

"I…suppose." Melody listened for approaching footsteps before letting her guard down. "I suppose we can do that."

And then they talked. About recent events. About nothing, mostly. In an entirely platonic manner. The complete absence of any sort of spark was uncanny, frankly.

Before long, Micah interrupted them with tea. Melody took over for her, poured a cup, and offered it to Maxwell.

"Here you are."

"Thank you."

Melody returned to the humble role of maid, and Maxwell to a noble, though he a little more reluctantly. The maids excused themselves to either side of the door, where they waited for their lady.

A knock came.

"His Lordship and Her Ladyship have arrived," Rook announced.

Melody opened the door, and the count and countess entered.

Hughes looked far from relaxed. "W-welcome to our humble abode, Lord Reclentos."

"Your visits are always an honor, my lord," his wife, Marianna, added. She carried herself with far more composure than her fidgety husband, and with far fewer twitches of the cheek.

Maxwell rose and bowed. "My intrusion is hardly deserving of your hospitality, but I thank you nonetheless."

"H-how can we help you on this fine day?" Hughes stammered.

"My business is with Lady Luciana, as it happens. I've something to ask her."

"Luciana?" Marianna repeated. "My, whatever do you have to ask her about?"

"I'd prefer to divulge that in her presence, if I may."

"Oh, I'm so curious. Aren't you, dear?"

"I-indeed," croaked her husband.

The three sat and conversed amiably. Mostly Maxwell and Marianna talked while Hughes performed a riveting impersonation of a statue. He worked at the Royal Chancery, headed of course by the esteemed lord chancellor, and here before him sat his superior's own son and heir.

Oh dear, Melody thought. *His Lordship looks ill.*

Stomping echoed down the hallway beyond the door. Then a distinct *lack* of stomping, followed by a thud.

A yelp pierced the placid air of the parlor.

"Calm yourself, my lady," Serena said, muffled.

Luciana, in all her grace, had evidently taken a tumble just outside the parlor.

"S-sorry," she said.

"A moment to fix your hair before you enter, my lady."

Luciana fussed and sputtered, but her stumble was clear as day to everyone who awaited her. Maxwell grinned, endeared, while her parents' faces turned ashen. It was all Melody could do to keep from rubbing her hand down her face. That she managed to keep smiling was a great point of pride for her.

Chapter 4:
Safe Travels

SERENA HERALDED LUCIANA'S ARRIVAL. She entered the parlor carrying herself as a lady ought. That was, without any indication that she may or may not have tripped just moments earlier.

She curtsied beautifully. "My apologies for making you wait, Lord Maxwell. To what do we owe the pleasure of—"

"Such beauty…"

Luciana stood straight again and blinked at Maxwell. "Pardon?" It sounded like he'd said something. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"It's, er, nothing." Maxwell cleared his throat. "Pardon me."

A blush stole into his cheeks, so faint Luciana wondered if she was imagining it. Everyone else wore similar expressions of confusion. Much to his relief, it seemed Maxwell's comment had gone unheard.

"In that case, er, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?" Luciana sat opposite him, sandwiched between her parents.

Recomposing himself, Maxwell reached into his breast pocket and produced a wax-sealed letter. He offered it to her.

"What is this?" Luciana asked.

The count and countess eyed the letter curiously. It bore the seal of House Reclentos, so whatever it was, it was official.

"It's a proposal," Maxwell said. "From me."

"A proposal?"

He cracked a smirk at her bemusement. “Will you, Lady Luciana, do me the honor of attending the Summer Ball with me at the end of this month?”

“The Summer Ball?” Marianna parroted, mirroring her daughter’s bewilderment.

“With you?” Hughes followed up.

“You want me,” Luciana said slowly, “to attend the Summer Ball. With you?”

Luciana’s statue impersonation was not quite as skillful as her father’s because moments later—

“Whaaaaat?!”

The second scream of the morning rang out.

Whaaaaat?!

Not even Melody was immune. Inwardly, at least. Outwardly, she maintained the composure of a perfect maid.

Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. What do I do? What do I say? Luciana panicked. She scoured her surroundings for an escape route before remembering this wasn’t that kind of emergency. She looked down at the letter, then at Maxwell, then at the letter again, and then back at Maxwell.

Count and Countess Rudleberg manifested their bewilderment in the exact same way.

The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, Maxwell found himself noting with amusement. It was a rare thing indeed to meet such a candid family of nobles.

"How do I, um, interpret this exactly, Lord Maxwell?" Luciana asked when she'd calmed somewhat.

Maxwell Reclentos was quite the man. Son of Lord Chancellor Marquess Georic Reclentos, confidant of Crown Prince Christopher, and next in line for the chancellorship by his own merits. A man who, infamously, had attended every formal ball by his lonesome.

Until, that was, the Spring Ball.

Luciana had been his first partner ever, but the Spring Ball was special. He'd only been an obligatory escort doing a favor for his friend Melody. It had been a fluke. Luciana never considered that he would choose her again.

She had but one question on her mind: *Why is this happening?!*

"Would you believe me if I told you," Maxwell said, "that I would simply like to dance with you again?"

"You… Y-y-y-you…"

Luciana's face burned. Words failed her.

Maxwell, reading the tension in the room, stood slowly. "I won't press you for an answer right this second. I'll come again when you've returned to the capital, so please, think on it until then. If you'll excuse me."

"Oh, um, yes. Of course." The pressure mercifully alleviated, Luciana attempted to rise. "Allow me to—" And promptly failed.

She yelped as she tumbled. The shock of this fall jolted the count and countess to their senses. They scrambled to catch her and prevent a repeat of a previous tragedy.

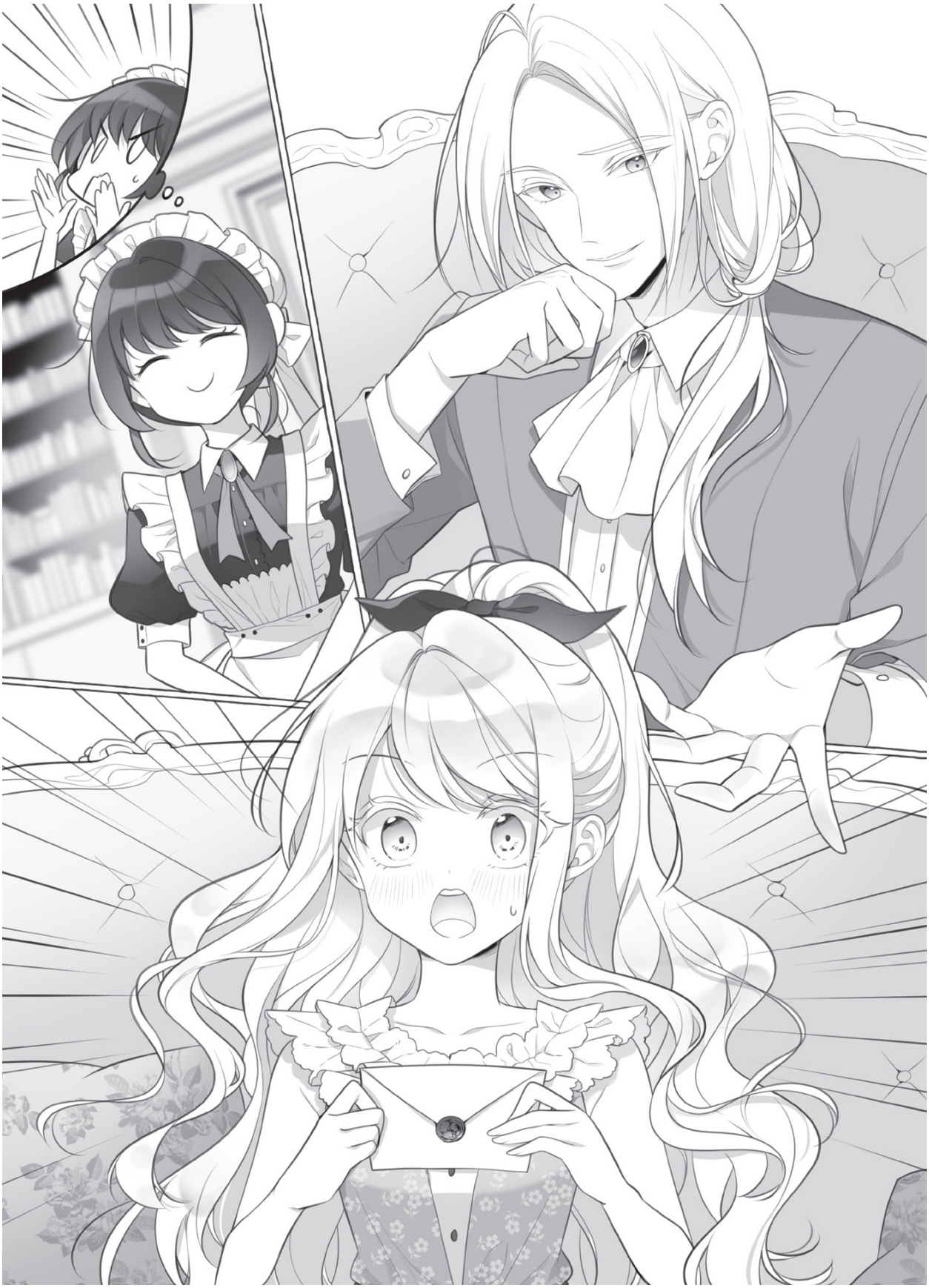
Perhaps Luciana was not as composed as she'd thought.

"Are you all right, Lady Luciana?" Maxwell asked.

"Y-yes," she replied.

Her parents gently lowered her back down onto the sofa.

"I apologize."



"I've troubled you," Maxwell said. "Please, allow me to see myself out."

"B-but…"

"My lady," Melody said, "I will walk our guest back to his carriage. Take a moment to collect yourself."

Luciana groaned. "Okay. Thanks, Melody."

"It's my pleasure, my lady. Shall we, Lord Reclentos?"

"Let's," Maxwell said. He bowed to the family. "I apologize again for my intrusion, and thank you for the time you've spared me."

And then they departed.

They walked in silence. Occasionally, Melody sent furtive glances at the lord behind her.

What exactly is the meaning of this, Max?

Formal invitations to balls carried many connotations, not least of all affection. Many considered them a precursor to an eventual marriage proposal. They weren't binding, of course, but dance partners often did become life partners. Count and Countess Rudleberg could speak to that phenomenon themselves.

But Max made no mention of a betrothal. If that truly is what this was about, their houses should be deep into negotiations by now. I just can't make sense of this.

Melody could not claim to know him well, but he didn't seem the frivolous type, which only made his intentions more perplexing.

"Curious?"

"A little." Melody jumped, whipping around to face him. "I-I mean, no! Not at all!"

Maxwell smirked, but not in an unkind manner.

Melody hesitated. "Why…did you invite my lady, Max?"

"I told no lie when I said I wanted to dance with her again."

But it's not the whole truth?

Melody waited for her friend to continue, but he didn't. They stood face-to-face in the foyer for some time.

She sighed when her patience finally broke. "Very well. I'll ask no more questions. I trust you, Max. You're my friend."

"Thank you, Melody."

"However…"

Melody's demeanor began to shift from friendly to maidly. It was an intimidating transformation.

"M-Melody?"

"I am also a maid, and should you do *anything* to hurt or sadden my lady, I will be forced to react accordingly. So do bear in mind how you conduct yourself, *Lord Reclentos*."

Maxwell laughed. "Duly noted."

Melody laughed too, but Maxwell did not trust that sound for a moment.

"Until we meet again, my lord."

He was off. And Melody did not stop smiling.

"You'd best fill us in when you get back!" Beatrice exclaimed.

"What Beatrice said! We'll have no more of these secrets, Luciana!" Milliaria added.

"Y-you've made your point," Luciana said. "I hardly know what happened myself!"

Unsurprisingly, Maxwell's shocking visit set the whole operation three hours behind schedule. Of course, it didn't help that Luciana's friends interrogated her relentlessly while her head was still spinning.

"You've got to sweep him off his feet when you get back," Luna said. "I'll help brainstorm ideas."

"I-I haven't even decided to be his partner yet! But wait, Luna, are you sure?"

"Sure? Sure about what?"

"Well, me going to the ball with Lord Maxwell."

Luna tilted her head. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You said you admired him, didn't you? I thought that you might, well…"

"I said that? When?"

Another thing she's forgotten, Luciana thought. *I wonder why she doesn't remember.*

Luna had said many things during her confrontation with Luciana, back when that meager remnant of the Dark One had possessed her, things born out of jealousy. *"Oh, Lord Maxwell. I've always admired him,"* she'd confessed. *"But he invited you to the student council."*

She might not remember, but Luciana did. What if his advances came between them?

"He is an admirable man, but I'd hardly go so far as to say I have romantic feelings for him," Luna said. "If you do, all the more reason to support you!"

"I-I never said I had feelings for him! I don't think."

"You don't 'think.'"

"Well, what even *are* romantic feelings?" Luciana grumbled. "It's a complicated question."

Luna giggled. "Yes, it is. So it's a good thing you've a long journey ahead to think it over. Do let me know what you decide when you get back, won't you?"

"S-sure. I'll do that."

"Don't forget me!" Beatrice interjected.

"And me!" Milliaria added.

"All right, all right, I get it!" snapped Luciana.

Melody observed all this while seeing to the final checks on their coach. *Horse in good health. Wheels, axle, seating, hinges, harness, reins, all good. Next… Ah, the spell. Of course.*

"Steady—*Orizzontale*."

Orizzontale would absorb every bump and shock the carriage might experience en route, sparing the luggage as much as the passengers. A world without vehicle suspension was a world of motion sickness. Melody could attest to that unfortunate truth. If she hadn't used this same spell on the carriage that first delivered her to the

capital, she might have lost her dignity—and her lunch—along the way.

"My lady," she said, "we're ready to depart."

"Coming!"

Melody helped her lady into the carriage. Micah followed, then Melody filed in last. Sword affixed to his hip, Rook hoisted himself into the box seat at the front of the carriage and took the reins.

Luciana opened the window and poked her head out. "Goodbye, Father! Goodbye, Mother!"

"You be safe," Hughes called back.

"Pass along our regards to everyone," said Marianna.

"Will do! Beatrice, Milliaria, Luna, thank you so much for coming to see me off! We'll do this again as soon as we can. Serena, keep Mother and Father out of trouble!"

Serena curtsied gracefully. "Of course, my lady."

Rook snapped the reins, and they were off.

"Bye, everyone!" Luciana shouted one last time.

"Safe travels!" they shouted back in unison.

And so the journey home to the Rudleberg demesne began.

Once they'd put some distance between themselves and the estate, Luciana settled into her seat and sighed.

"Is all well, my lady?" Melody asked.

"Yeah, it was just a busy morning. I'm a little exhausted."

"We've only just left and it already feels like a full day's passed," Micah agreed. "By the way, my lady, what were your thoughts about the ball?"

With Micah's knowledge of the game all these people came from, she couldn't help asking Luciana about this truly unexpected pairing.

Luciana, however, could not know the source of Micah's not-so-innocent curiosity, and her blush returned with a vengeance. "I'm still not really sure. Melody, what do you think I should do?"

She looked to her maid for help, but unfortunately, she would find no salvation there. In lives both past and present, Melody had lived a decidedly chaste existence. Duty over pleasure and all that.

Thus, Melody had only one answer for her lady. "I believe your friends were wise when they advised you to think it over, my lady."

Chapter 5:
Forum of Foreboding

WHILE LUCIANA'S TRIP WAS JUST GETTING underway, Anna-Marie and Christopher were dutifully strategizing in the prince's room in the royal palace. Dutifully indeed, this early in the morning.

Christopher examined the documents on the table before him. "Still think this is the biggest thorn in our side right now. What about you, Anna-Marie? Anna?"

The prince looked up at his companion sitting across the table from him, but the marquess's daughter seemed to be elsewhere, her eyes lingering on the balcony rather than studying the papers in her hand.

She sighed. "Do you think Lord Maxwell's done it?"

"What?" Christopher raised an eyebrow. "What's gotten into you? You've been out of it all day."

"Huh? Oh. Sorry. It's just, well, August, you know?"

Christopher stared at her dumbly. Anna-Marie's eyebrows shot up.

"August. You know what that means, don't you?" she said.

"Wouldn't be making this face if I did."

"*Please* don't tell me you forgot."

"Forgot what?"

Anna-Marie slammed her hands on the table and shot to her feet. The prince flinched.

"Are you *kidding* me?! How do you not remember *August*?! It's not like it's Romance Fluff Month or anything!"

"Romance what month?"

Fans of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* colloquially called the month of August "Romance Fluff Month." During the three years in which the game took place, summer recess served as the player's only respite from the main plot, containing no major developments in the battle between the Saint and the Dark One and offering a free period for romantic side quests.

"And that's, like, all of August?" Christopher asked.

"It's meant as a sort of fail-safe for players who get stuck and need an extra few days to boost their affection with the characters. August is all about romance. The main plot takes a back seat during the entire month."

"Oh, I get it. So you're off in La-La Land now just because it's summer break."

"Wh-what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means *I'm* sitting here reading till my brain oozes out my ears and you're totally spacing out," Christopher said. "We gotta have that whole butterfly effect conversation again? Here's the CliffsNotes version, in case you forgot: This ain't a game. It's the real world. We can't count on important stuff pausing for us because it's supposed to be 'fluff month' or whatever."

Anna-Marie grunted. “I hate when you’re right.” She hung her head. As an otome gamer herself, she tended to get swept up in the world she’d so loved before all this. Frustrated, she threw her head back, clutching her hair as she did. “And I hate that I *let* you be right!”

“I can’t just be right on my own?” Christopher’s blood pressure spiked, but he decided to leave it at that. He knew better than to push his luck with this girl. Too scary.

Anna-Marie agonized for several minutes.

“Okay, I’m better,” she announced eventually.

“Happy for you. Can we move on now? Great. So the main plot’s not supposed to progress at all in August. That’s what happens in the game?”

“Right. The heroine will trigger pretty much every romantic subplot she hasn’t already triggered by that time. Basically every day. There’s practically no time to focus on the story, even if the game let you.”

“Every day? That sounds like literal hell in real life. Well, for whoever the heroine is. Not that any of that matters if she stays missing.”

“Exactly. No heroine, no events *period*.” Anna-Marie collapsed onto the table.

Christopher watched. Disappointed. Very disappointed. Was this really the world’s first line of defense against evil?

"And our substitute heroine, Luciana, is going home for the summer, so *she* definitely won't be triggering anything with any love interests," Anna-Marie said with a sigh. "Forget it! Back on topic!"

"You are incomprehensible today, y'know that?"

Thus, they resumed a more productive discussion. After they scrounged through the many lore documents they'd assembled, Maxwell appeared.

"Hard at work, I see," he said.

"Max, just the man I wanted to see," Christopher said.

"How did it go?" Anna-Marie asked.

"The offer is on the table, at the expense of the good lady's well-being, I fear," Maxwell said. "She seemed a touch taken aback. I'm expecting her answer upon her return." Maxwell dropped into an empty chair with a sigh.

Anna-Marie gave him a worried glance. "Are you tired?"

"Here. Have some tea," Christopher said. "Drink."

"Thank you. Both of you," said Maxwell. "Tired, yes. Mentally tired. Duplicity doesn't seem to come easily to me."

"I'm sorry, Lord Maxwell. It's our fault for putting you up to it," Anna-Marie said.

"No, I share some of the blame. You made a request, and I accepted."

It had not been his idea to invite Luciana to the Summer Ball—it had been the royal couple's. Luciana bore the highest risk of becoming the substitute heroine and thus needed watching. Potentially

guarding. That role fell to Maxwell at Christopher and Anna-Marie's request. August was a quiet month, but that only got them to the Summer Ball, where they expected to encounter a few crucial plot beats.

Conveniently, however, Maxwell happened to be the heroine's canonical dance partner.

"We can only hope she accepts, but as you said, your visions haven't divulged any information quite that specific," Maxwell said.

"Unfortunately not," Anna-Marie said. "It wasn't even meant to be Luciana whom you escort but the Saint. It's difficult to say how events will develop from here."

"And I appreciate your being forthcoming about that fact."

Anna-Marie and Christopher had explained much of their plight regarding the Saint and the Dark One to Maxwell, though in terms he could understand. Instead of overloading their friend's mental faculties with concepts like parallel worlds and video games, they claimed they'd seen visions in their dreams. The one rub, they explained, was that dream and reality had a habit of dissociating. To compensate for the resulting discrepancies, Luciana had to stand in as Saint for the one who was missing. Plus, no one could say how reliable their "visions" were anymore.

Regardless, the lady might have been in danger. Maxwell didn't like the sound of acting as her secret monitor at first but quickly acquiesced for the sake of her safety. So quickly, in fact, that Anna-Marie's head had nearly spun.

"I must confess my doubts," he had said at the time, "but I cannot deny the existence of this so-called Dark One. I will go to Lady Luciana and propose she and I attend the ball together."

And Maxwell had done just that—and in such a hurry he hadn't even noticed the smile he wore as he departed.

Now we just need her to accept, Anna-Marie thought.

According to Maxwell's description, their chances seemed favorable. Luciana was likely flustered due to shock and bashfulness rather than aversion.

They couldn't take their eyes off her, however. Not while she was the closest thing to a heroine they could find. Anna-Marie still deeply regretted the easily avoidable events of the previous semester. Though no one had been hurt, the next event, or the one after that, could be more dangerous. Luciana wasn't the Saint, after all, so even a mere mini-boss in the original game could prove a lethally dangerous foe for a girl like her who lacked the powers to face it.

And this was only the first act. What of the others? What if future events demanded feats she simply could not accomplish?

That's where Lord Maxwell is supposed to come in, but still…

Only time would tell if this gamble would make or break them. Anna-Marie personally hoped for the former.

"In any case, here's hoping your Summer Ball turns out for the better," she said.

"I assure you, I intend to make it a memorable one should she reply favorably."

"Maybe you could make it official if things go well," Christopher teased.

Maxwell chortled. "Please. That may be the most outlandish claim you've made yet."

Anna-Marie quite approved of his unwillingness to put up with Christopher's nonsense. "Still, you'd make quite the fetching couple, I think."

"Please, Lady Anna-Marie. Not you too."

She giggled. "My apologies. I do mean what I say, for what it's worth, but I can appreciate that things may not be so simple."

Maxwell's face turned to stone. "How is that?"

"Luciana is House Rudleberg's firstborn daughter," she said, unperturbed by Maxwell's reaction. "Her husband will have to marry into the family. You, Lord Maxwell, are the firstborn and heir to Marquess Reclentos, and are thus obligated to adopt a wife into *your* family. Your circumstances are simply incompatible."

"Wow," Christopher said. "A little cold, don't you think?"

In hindsight, Anna-Marie reluctantly agreed. *I did like the ship, but I guess real life isn't as permissive as visual novels.*

Maxwell simply laughed and agreed. Their time together at the Spring Ball had mostly been performative anyway. They didn't have the type of relationship that made this sort of revelation painful to absorb. The tightness in his chest would pass in time.

And it did. By the time Christopher spoke next, the discomfort had all but vanished. "Do you think we'll see the blonde girl again?

Lady Cecilia?" he asked.

Right, Anna-Marie recalled. *I nearly forgot about her.*

That celestial being. Cecilia. There and gone in a blink, leaving behind neither a trace of herself nor a hint to her identity. The only clue was her escort: Lectias Froude, the third love interest. According to him, she was his maid's relative, but that was all the water anyone could squeeze from that stone. No one else had any further information. They didn't know a thing about the one called Cecilia. She'd simply descended upon the world, then ascended just as quickly. Quite like an angel. She'd danced with Luciana during her brief appearance, and all who'd witnessed it claimed they saw paradise.

The sudden and deadly appearance of the forth love interest, Bjork Quichel, had prevented Anna-Marie from inquiring into the mystery girl, but everyone who remembered her seemed to do so perfectly, in great detail, and with words positively dripping with awe and ardor.

I cannot *believe I missed her!* she lamented.

Anna-Marie, connoisseur of women, didn't care quite as much about Cecilia's identity as she did about never having actually seen her.

The girl bore the heroine's name, but she hadn't been introduced as Count Leginbarth's daughter, hadn't been there when the assailant attacked, and wasn't even a Royal Academy student. So who was she? Who was this girl who seemingly had no place in the

narrative? Perhaps the sheer amount of unanswerable mysteries surrounding her dissuaded Anna-Marie from taking an interest in her.

She considered pressing Lect, but her social circle wasn't acquainted with him well enough for something so brazen, to say nothing of what others might think about nobility prying into the affairs of someone Lect claimed was a commoner. Of course, the dreaded butterfly effect loomed always over their heads anytime the prospect of meddling occurred to them.

Cecilia needed investigating regardless, and they intended to do so, but Anna-Marie did not revel in the prospect. She theorized Cecilia was just another candidate for sub-heroineism, appearing at the ball merely to fill the gap in the story.

Maybe whatever forces compel the narrative also created several potential reserve heroines when it became apparent the real one was missing?

Cecilia: Lect's partner for the Spring Ball.

Luciana: the debutante who would make a splash and daughter to a count.

The deciding factor: Luciana had stepped in to take a potentially killing blow for the prince, cementing her as the more appropriate heroine for the plot in that moment. She would then go on to face Bjork Quichel and the Dark One's machinations during the academy's first semester.

The conclusion was obvious. Luciana was on the heroine path, and Cecilia was not. Cecilia bore the heroine's name. That was her only connection. But her potential role as heroine began with her

sudden appearance and ended just as abruptly with her departure after the ball.

Like the date Melody and I went on in the city before, Anna-Marie remembered.

Melody Wave appeared as a direct result of the staging service Anna-Marie and Christopher had put into place years ago. Without it, Melody would have never arrived in the capital to serve under Luciana, and Anna-Marie would never have stumbled upon her during one of her strolls, disguised as Anna, the plain commoner girl. Anna and Melody had spent a long while together that day, much like the heroine might have with Prince Christopher. In fact, their outing had mirrored the event perfectly, but as far as Anna-Marie saw, Melody displayed zero traits that might mark her as the true heroine.

This was one of several events that gave rise to Anna-Marie's substitute heroine theory. Which was, of course, developed in blissful ignorance of the actual identity of the maid who'd inspired it. Oh, the dramatic irony.

"Max, you saw her, didn't you?" Christopher said. "We'd just missed her. What was Cecilia like?"

"Well, yes, I did see her in the most literal sense, but only briefly while she was resting. I'm afraid I can't speak to her person beyond a cursory glance."

"You danced near her during the same-sex dance, didn't you? Didn't you catch her face?" Christopher asked.

Maxwell smiled crookedly. "I was unfortunately battling against muscle memory at the time while dancing the lady's part. I remember

very little about the girl, really."

"You didn't even *try* to check her out?" Christopher shook his head. "What kind of a man are you, Max?"

Anna-Marie fixed Christopher with an icy glare. "What kind indeed? You must tell me all about your views on masculinity later, Your Highness. In private."

"Huh? Er, no, that's quite all right."

"I was not asking."

"I-I wouldn't worry about it, Anna-Marie. Really. It's not important. Put it out of your mind."

"Now, Lady Anna-Marie," Maxwell said, "be careful your jealousy doesn't turn from endearing to overbearing."

"It is not jealousy," Christopher and Anna-Marie said as one.

On the surface, one might be inclined to believe that this was an incredibly in-sync couple.

Me? Jealous? Over him*? Get real. Get actually so real.*

Internally, however, they were certainly on very different wavelengths.

Her? Jealous? Over me*? Get real. Like she's that cute.*

A shame that onlookers could only base their assumptions on what they observed on the surface. Otherwise, the entire kingdom would surely *never* draw the conclusion that these two were practically betrothed.

Such a lovely couple they make, Maxwell thought most erroneously.

Perhaps they were simply too good at their roles and had oversold the act. Perhaps they were just eternally unlucky. In any case, it did not seem they'd free themselves from this uncomfortable misunderstanding anytime soon.

Maxwell's presence quickly derailed the strategy meeting.

"My personal affairs aside," he said, "we'll have to wait for her return before we do anything. What were you two discussing earlier?"

"Our visions tell us there's a high probability that our enemies will stay quiet throughout August," Anna-Marie said, "but at the end of the month, at the Summer Ball, we anticipate the arrival of a certain individual who will be instrumental in defeating the Dark One for good."

"Defeating it? Does a man capable of such a feat exist in this realm?"

"Not in our realm," said Christopher. "He'll make his first appearance at the ball, then join Royal Academy as a transfer student."

"He's a foreigner then? But from where?"

"His name is Schroden. Schroden van Rordpier," Anna-Marie said. "He is the second son to the emperor of our northern neighbors."

"The Rordpier Empire?! An imperial prince is coming to Royal Academy? How is that possible? We're—"

"On less than friendly terms, yes," Christopher sighed.

Two countries bordered the Kingdom of Theolas, one to the north and one to the west. Theolas enjoyed amicable relations with their westerly neighbor, but not so with the northern Rordpier Empire. The war that raged between the two kingdoms over a century ago left relations strained to this day. A tentative nonaggression pact maintained a fragile peace, but it was only a matter of time before the Rordpiers lost their patience.

Only at the emperor's request could the first true steps toward political reparations begin. So for the sake of future relations, the second prince of Rordpier would attend Royal Academy as a show of good faith.

Christopher relayed all of this to his companion.

"How I hope you're right, but it sounds too good to be true." Maxwell furrowed his brow. He glanced at Anna-Marie.

She shook her head. "It is true. Our dreams told us the imperial court intends to use him as a plant, of sorts. An advance party to prepare for an eventual invasion."

"His primary role is to use me to gather information," Christopher said. "You can never have too much information, especially from a royal whom you're planning to oust."

Maxwell swallowed hard. This time, he hoped they were wrong. This would cause turmoil for the kingdom, perhaps even all-out war. Sweat prickled the back of his neck. "This 'Schroden.' I don't know much about him. Who is he?"

"A very handsome man," Anna-Marie said. "Porcelain skin as pure and white as fallen snow, hair as bright as the sun, a muscular

build which I'm sure his hawkish relatives hold in high esteem, piercing, golden eyes that see through everything. He is a man as cold as the land he calls home."

"And sharp as a knife. Cunning. Strategy is his forte," Christopher added. "Honestly, I'm no match for him."

"That you of all people should say so," said Maxwell. "He sounds like a dangerous man."

"You'd be correct."

"It's entirely possible that one slipup could turn our greatest asset into our greatest enemy," said Anna-Marie. "That's the kind of man we're dealing with."

Schroden van Rordpier, she thought. *The fifth and final love interest of* The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*!*

A beat of silence descended. The quiet fueled the anxiety bubbling up in Maxwell.

"If what you say is true, and this month will pass uneventfully, then it seems to me like we should focus our efforts on preparing countermeasures for the worst-case scenario," he said.

"I think you're right," Christopher said. "Or *would* be right, rather." He crossed his arms over his chest and grunted.

Anna-Marie rested her cheek in her hand and frowned.

The tension crackling in the air had vanished in an instant, and Maxwell was left wondering where it had gone. He looked between the pair before him. "What? What's the problem?"

"*Is* it a problem?" Christopher wondered aloud.

"That is a good question," Anna-Marie said.

"What does that mean? Would one of you be so kind as to talk plainly?" Maxwell said.

The knowers exchanged a glance and sighed. Then Christopher explained. "We haven't received any notice of intent yet regarding the transfer."

"The prince's? The prince's transfer to the academy?"

"His stay is set to begin next month, so the fact that we've heard nothing is concerning," Anna-Marie said. "The kingdom hasn't received even a single word about it."

They sighed again.

I was on tenterhooks just earlier, Maxwell thought. *Wasn't I?*

He faced them dead-on. He could hold his tongue no longer. "Lest you misunderstand, I trust the both of you wholeheartedly, but these visions of yours, they're not very helpful, are they?"

"You're not supposed to say that part out loud!" Christopher and Anna-Marie snapped as one.

"When did I agree to that?"

Another harmonized sigh.

First the heroine, Anna-Marie thought, *now the fifth love interest? Hasn't the butterfly effect had its fill of us yet?*

It was a funny thing, lamenting the loss of a foreign prince and a spy from a nation of warmongers who had their eyes set on conquest. A little silly, maybe. But the further from the original

narrative they deviated, the less Anna-Marie and Christopher could anticipate events.

And the more they sighed.

Chapter 6:
Shaking Shell, Shaking Tail

"SO THIS IS HOW IT LOOKS OUTSIDE THE kingdom!"

Micah couldn't take her eyes off the scenery rolling past them. It was a far cry from the slums she'd found herself in months ago, that was for sure.

"Is this your first time leaving the city?" Luciana asked.

"It is! I've never seen anything like this. It's breathtaking."

"I-I see. Is it?"

"Yes! It is!"

Wide open fields stretched as far as the eye could see. The road ahead of them extended all the way to the horizon with sprawling oceans of golden wheat stalks flanking it on either side, rippling like waves with the breeze. This particular variety, planted in autumn, grew throughout winter. It was just about harvest season.

Beyond, the gold gave way to the green of grassland. Beyond that, a verdant woodland sprang up. And farther still, the hazy blue peaks of distant mountains loomed. Growing up in modern Japan, Micah had rarely witnessed such abundant nature, mostly experiencing such things via a monitor. This unfiltered, unspoiled sight moved her beyond words, much to the confusion of native-born Luciana.

The wonder in her underling's eyes warmed Melody's heart. She, too, hailed from Japan, but after being reborn into this world, she'd grown up in a rural village far from Paltescia, the royal capital. She managed to contain herself, though she understood the urge to gush. Mostly.

"Micah, your manners," Melody reminded her. She was a maid first, always.

"S-sorry. Whoa!" Just as Micah sat properly back down in her seat, a flash gleamed from her chest. "Wh-what was that?"

She fished the pendant out of her shirt. The little winged egg glowed with a faint, silver light. The Uovo del Mago, her ticket to sorcery.

"That scared me. Miss Melody, what happened?" she asked.

"It reacted to you. Whatever you felt, it was intense enough for the egg to respond."

"I wish it would learn to stop doing that in front of people. It's embarrassing."

As the light slowly faded, Micah scrunched her nose at the ornament. At least they were in the carriage. She didn't want to think about this thing someday going off in town.

"I'd really like to leave it alone at this stage, but I do understand the concern," Melody said. "I suppose I can have a look at it."

She touched a finger to the egg, drawing a silvery magic circle. The trinket changed as she traced it from top to bottom. Then, when she closed the circle, the whole ornament vanished.

“Wow, that looked so cool and…magicy!” Micah said. Whatever Melody had done, the result shocked her out of her wonderment. “What did you just—” Micah gasped. “It shook! The pendant shook!” The Uovo del Mago trembled as if in response. “What did you do, Miss Melody?”

“I can’t completely stop it from reacting, but I set it to manifest those reactions as movement rather than light. I felt you’d prefer that to noise.”

“Y-you felt right. This is much better than either of those. Thank you.”

Melody smiled, contented.

The words “Silent Mode” sprang to Micah’s mind. The egg shook at that. Cheeky little thing.

“Oh, is that the magic item you gave her, Melody?” Luciana leaned in to get a better look. “Something’s supposed to hatch from it, right? I can’t wait to see what.”

“I’m just hoping it’s something decently presentable,” Micah said, mouth twisting with anxiety.

“That is the one thing I can’t know until it’s born, I’m afraid.” Melody grinned apologetically.

“What I’d really like is maybe a cute puppy like Grail!”

“Oh, I can get behind that!” Luciana said. “Grail would love a friend to play with, I’m sure.”

The lady and the maid-in-training saw it in their mind’s eyes. Two little pups yipping and barking and dashing through the estate’s

garden.

"Or what if this one were bigger? Then Grail could ride around on its back!" Micah said.

"I like that idea. Hugging both at once would be just perfect. I know it," Luciana said.

"But then again, a cat would make for a great pair too!"

"That it would. Melody, how long until Micah's egg hatches?"

"It's hardly been ten days," the maid said. "I wouldn't expect it until next month at the very earliest."

The overgrown children moaned in disappointment.

Melody couldn't help smiling at their antics. "Patience, everyone. I'm sure Grail could use the attention… Speaking of, where is he?"

No one had thought to remember him at all that morning, even though he should have been taking this trip home with them.

How sad an existence Grail was. Originally the all-powerful and intimidating antagonist of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, now he lived as a domesticated pup, purified by Melody's holy magics—neutered, if you will. Luciana had insisted on taking him in so she could brag to everyone back home about their new pet.

"Grail? He's with Rook," Micah said.

"In the box?"

Melody twisted to see behind her, where Rook sat in the driver's seat. Micah sat beside her, and Luciana occupied her own seat across from them. A small window was set in the space dividing the interior of the carriage from the coachman's seat to allow communication

between the sections. Melody peered through it and spied a shaking silver tail tipped with black.

"Oh. Well, there he is," she said. "But why out there? He'd be far more comfortable inside where the spell can soften the bumps in the road."

"It *has* been a smooth trip so far," Micah commented absently.

"Very smooth. The highways near the capital are well maintained, but still, you wouldn't know we were moving if you didn't look out the window." Luciana's eyes glazed over. "Smooth indeed."

She and the maid-in-training were of one mind. Grateful, but not without the prerequisite amount of incredulity Melody's displays of magic always necessitated.

I've known dogs to get carsick rather easily, Melody thought. *Maybe he prefers the fresh air.*

The stub of tail shook some more.

While Melody was off in her own world, Micah said, "Rook grabbed him. He was sound asleep in his basket after breakfast."

"I'd completely forgotten about him in all the commotion," said Luciana.

"Me too. Grail apparently slept with Rook last night, so I suppose that helped him remember."

"He's sleeping in Rook's room these days? I thought he'd settled on yours."

"That was the original arrangement, but it seems he's taken more to Rook."

"Has he?"

"So it seems. Rook's practically the only one he lets near him anymore." Micah sighed, disillusioned by the fickleness of puppy love.

Luciana giggled. "He's just a baby. I'm sure it's only a matter of him being curious about new people."

"I guess," Micah groaned.

Her lady giggled again. The tail outside the little window shook. And Melody smiled.

The coach rolled leisurely along the highway. The road was relatively empty for the area, likely on account of the late hour. Nature dominated the expanse that lay ahead. Tittering and high-pitched chatter in the back of the carriage slipped out to reach the box seat.

Had it been human, this might have been a soothing experience. A shame that Grail had to soak in the scenery with a furry scowl.

Preposterous, the Dark One spat from within its puppy-shaped prison. *Preposterous! That I should accompany these people on their foolish little trip!*

The puppy hadn't had a say in the matter. One moment he was asleep, the next, blue skies trundled overhead. No one extended Grail the courtesy of forewarning. A shame that none of the Rudlebergs were the type to inform animals of their plans for the day. Not that Grail would have known beforehand. He did little other than sleep when he wasn't eating.

What is the meaning of this indignity?!

Grail sat in his little basket, wagging his tail in a fuming rage while the Dark One lurking inside him contemplated how things could have possibly come to this. Things had been going quite well up until a certain point. The Dark One had escaped its centuries-long internment, a parting gift from the previous Saint, and found a vessel to do its bidding. Then, suddenly, it lived as a mangy pup living in a dog-eat-dog world. It enjoyed free, tasty meals, ample attention and entertainment, shelter, and a comfortable bed. Oh, the horror!

That was the problem, though. The comfort. It was a silken rope around its neck, slowly killing everything the Dark One had once been. Grail, curse his natural adorableness, spat on the Dark One's pride every time he did normal puppy things and thus endeared himself to the filthy humans!

Despicable. Degrading. It must be part of that Saint's scheme!

With how little of its dark power remained, the Dark One could not fight the urges and feelings of its cutesy vessel. It was in control now, but the smallest shift could tilt the scales, leaving the ancient evil powerless to keep the damned beast from taking over again.

I can't be around her or her lackeys, but damn it all…

Melody was a given. It could not risk being near her. And that went for her doll Serena as well. And then there were the Rudlebergs. The Dark One had not had good experiences with them either at the Spring Ball. So that left the Dark One with only one bastion of hope: the new girl Micah, the maid-in-training.

Damn it all, why did she have to don that silver rubbish filled with the Saint's power?! Micah, you have betrayed me!

Grail angrily rubbed his face with his itty-bitty paws.

That accursed Saint had gone too far. She'd stolen away the Dark One's sole bastion of respite. No one could understand its pain but itself. The Dark One's last hope lay with the man in the driver's seat, Rook.

If the Saint somehow gets her dastardly talons into him as well…I may not be long for this world.

A dramatic choice of words. The true risk was in Grail regaining the mental reins to his own body, while the Dark One hibernated. But it might never wake up again if its pride were so thoroughly shattered, and it would take a pillar of Grail's mind with it in the process.

The pup whined. *Pathetic.*

A great big warm hand descended on the puppy. Rook stroked Grail's back, and Grail did not resist. He yielded to it.

Strange that this body finds something so mundane so…nice.

This was not the mad delight the Dark One generally experienced while wielding its human puppets. This was comfortable, if strange. Both were positive emotions, however, were they not? So why was it that this sensation, in the body of a pup, proved so preferable to the human version?

The Dark One looked up and met the eyes of the man stroking it. Rook wore no emotion on his face, but the gentleness of his touch conveyed plenty.

In that instant, even with what little power remained to it, the Dark One understood this man had been one of its puppets.

If he knew… If this man knew who I was, would he still stroke me so?

Its mind faded. The host's body demanded sleep. Grail drooped, falling swiftly asleep and taking with him the Dark One and all the thoughts clawing at its mind. Thoughts it could not yet comprehend—not while Grail provided such a convenient escape from the changes occurring within the Dark One itself.

Not yet.

Chapter 7:
And Rook, You Shall Be

I *EXPECTED MORE OF A FUSS,* ROOK THOUGHT, brushing his hand through the sleeping Grail's fur. *But he's awfully calm.*

The pup slept all through the first leg of the journey. When he awoke, he did so with twitchy eyes and a big stretch before apparently realizing where he was. Rather, where he was *not*. The pup seemed confused for a moment, if the dramatic thrashing and rolling around in his basket were anything to judge by.

Interesting little guy.

The thrashing lasted only a short time before the puppy calmed and started wagging his tail and leering at the scenery. Tail wags were supposed to be signs of trust or contentedness, but Rook found himself doubting that common knowledge when it came to this particular pup. He could not imagine what burdened the poor fellow's mind, so he settled for petting him and hoping for the best. It wasn't long before Grail went right back to sleep.

Rook patted him twice, then faced forward again. He gripped the reins and squinted, scanning the surroundings. It took him only a moment to assess their safety.

His mind was free to wander, and so it did. *Who am I, I wonder, to have these abilities?*

He'd performed far more than a cursory survey just now. He'd concentrated mana in his eyes, amplifying his sight and allowing him

to discern minor objects he might otherwise miss. According to Micah, this ability was special. But then, Melody had done it herself with relative ease, so maybe Micah wasn't a trustworthy source.

Rook glanced at the sword on his hip. He'd never wielded a weapon before—to his knowledge, at least—but the blade felt like a natural extension of his arm. Magic was similarly foreign to him, but under Melody's instruction, he'd picked up on the basics almost instantly. He could do little more than suffuse mana into various objects, such as a blade, or move it to different places in his body, such as his eyes or muscles, but something told him spell casting would come to him before long.

Rook must not have been as unfamiliar with these things as he'd initially thought. Sword and sorcery were in his past. Somewhere. The mind could forget, but the body remembered. And that left him wondering.

I may be "Rook" now, but for how long?

One of the few things he remembered was the birth of that man—Rook, the valet-in-training. It was his oldest memory. And it was from just two weeks ago.

He blinked his eyes open. It took several tries to bring the world into focus, but that did not reveal much about his location.

Where am I? His thoughts arrived sluggish and slow. The ceiling, the walls, the bed—the girl resting next to it. He recognized none of it. *Who is this? Who…am* I*?*

Was this amnesia a side effect of whatever had happened to him to place him in this bed? Humorous that he could conjure a word for his condition but not his own name.

Ceiling. Window. Wall, he recited. *Sky. Sun. Bed. Blanket. Table. Chair… I know these words.*

Language and recognition came to him without trouble. So what *didn't* he know? The economy. He knew the word but not the concept. The country he was in? Its currency? The relative value of different coins? He did not know those things either.

He sat up, a curtain of hair obscuring his vision. *Well, that's annoying. I didn't always keep it like this, did I?*

He couldn't say. But neither did he possess a memory of short hair to use as a point of comparison.

The man brushed his hair back and swung his feet to the floor, careful not to disturb the girl resting her head on the bed. Instantly, a sense of wrongness itched at him. But why? Nothing seemed immediately out of the ordinary.

He ignored the feeling and stood. "What—"

With a heavy thud, he toppled to the ground. Pain. Not in his knees, thankfully, as he'd caught himself just in time, but pain nonetheless.

What had just happened? All he'd done was try to stand.

L-let's try this again.

He reached out to support himself against the frame of the bed, but he dashed past it and grabbed the blanket instead. Realizing this

too late, he collapsed back to the floor, taking the blanket with him. Again, he managed to avoid any serious damage, tucking his chin to protect his head from the impact, but yet more pain shot through him.

As the blanket slid away, the girl bolted awake. "Huwha?! Wh-what—huh?" She gaped down at him while he lay flat on his back on the floor. An awkward silence stretched between them. "What are you doing?"

"Falling, mostly."

"Uh, okay?"

"I tried to stand but lost my balance. I tried again, but my hand went past the frame and I grabbed the blanket instead. So I fell again."

"Oh. I think I get the picture. Let's get you *back* in bed, shall we?"

The man did not refuse, though the simple task took a great deal of doing. Just getting him to his feet without toppling over again was an achievement.

"Am I sick?" he asked.

The girl chuckled. "In a manner of speaking, maybe."

The man didn't understand. He could not possibly intuit that a sudden growth spurt had thrown off all of his muscle memory and kinesthetic sense.

When he made it to the edge of the bed, the man sat and appraised the girl in the chair in front of him. She didn't look older

than ten. She wore her pink hair in little tufts and dressed in a maid uniform.

I don't know her.

He didn't remember her, at least. Of that, he was certain. Inexplicably, though, his eyes fell to her hand as though drawn there by some force.

"Are you okay?"

"Your hand," he mumbled.

"My hand?"

She extended it, so he took it. His own engulfed hers. *I thought maybe I did know her. Maybe I don't. I don't remember this hand being so small.*

The connection eluded him. He could not know that her hand only felt so small because his had gotten larger.

"You're, um, embarrassing me," the girl said.

"Oh. Sorry."

He released her, then stared at his palm. Another thing he didn't recognize.

Has it always been like this? I don't remember. I just can't recall.

"Are you okay?" the girl asked.

"Yes. Fine."

"Good. Are you in any pain?"

"None."

"Does anything feel funny or different?"

"Different, yes."

"Oh! D-does it hurt?"

"No. No pain. Just off."

"Oh. Off?"

"You. I don't recognize you. Who are you?"

The girl's eyes went wide. "You're kidding! You forgot me?! Er, wait, did I ever even tell you my name?"

"I don't remember myself either. Neither my face nor my name. Who am I?"

"You didn't lead with that?! That's a little more important! Miss Melody!" The girl shot to her feet and scurried out of the room.

"A fussy one."

That was perhaps his one definite impression of the girl. But something about her left him smirking as she exited, leaving the door ajar.

The one called Melody, presumably her superior, appeared a short while later and conducted a thorough examination. Other than his memories, she declared him in good health but said she did not know if those memories would ever return. He found the entire performance fairly redundant.

"My name's Micah!" the girl from before said. "And don't forget me this time."

The man found himself at an impasse. He couldn't very well introduce himself without an identity. Without a name.

"True," said Melody. "That could get inconvenient." She rested her cheek against her hand and cocked her head to the side.

"Let's make an identity for him! How's, uh, Buh… Bor… Rook. Rook!" Micah said.

"Rook. That sounds like a fine name to me, but where did you come up with it?" Melody asked.

"Nowhere. I made it up!"

"I-I see. You made it up."

The man tested it out on his own tongue. "Rook."

The girl's methodology could use some work. Names did not seem to him the kinds of things one simply "made up" on the spot. But this one didn't offend him. He found that he quite liked it.

Maybe I've imprinted. Like beasts do.

Micah was the first person he saw upon waking up. Somehow, it felt fitting that she should be the one to christen him with identity.

"That work for you, Rook?" she said.

I suppose it'll have to.

The man sighed. She had taken to it before he had a chance to settle his own feelings on the matter. "All right. Fine. I will be—"

"Rook."

He jumped. Rook turned toward the window behind him, where Micah was poking her head out from inside the carriage.

"What?"

"Miss Melody wants to have lunch soon, so stop us at the next clearing."

Open rest areas dotted busy highways like this one, providing a place for travelers to stop and rest. Micah must have meant for them to stop at one.

"Understood, but couldn't she tell me that herself?"

"No, because I wanted to try the little window." Micah snickered.

Melody chuckled somewhere inside the carriage, and Rook sighed. "Next clearing. Noted."

"Thanks!"

Micah shut the window, and muffled conversation soon resumed within the carriage.

That childish girl is the one who gave me my name. Well, children do tend to be childish.

Rook had quite the young godmother. He could only laugh at the absurdity of it all.

Chapter 8:
Camping with the Works

THE KINGDOM OF THEOLAS'S DOMINION formed an upside-down triangle occupying the eastern corner of the continent. To the west lay the friendly Kingdom of Hemnates, and to the north the belligerent Rordpiers. Theolas's commercial hub bordered the southern ocean, while the world's largest blightland, the Great Vanargand Wood, forever loomed directly to the east.

The royal family and three margraves, whose four houses were some of the oldest in the realm and originated long before written record, oversaw these four crucial areas. Margrave Avarenton safeguarded the western border while Margrave Schudevich monitored the north. At the southern maritime capital, Margrave Wonberry stood watch. To the east, House Theolas constantly observed the Great Vanargand Wood. Dukes technically held the highest authority among nobles, coming just below royalty, and four such dukes lived in Theolas. But even their families had to concede to the margraves in both lineage and political relevance. For all intents and purposes, in times of emergency, the margraves wielded the power.

Vast highways connected their lands, the marches, at each cardinal direction with the royal capital, forming the primary arteries of the kingdom's trade and commerce. Its people called it the Cross,

and it had served as the testing ground for Christopher's budding staging service.

Melody and her companions presently traveled westbound on the Cross. About three days out, they would come to the road's titular crossing, where they would turn northward until branching off into one of the many capillaries that snaked from the main highway. That would take them straight to the Rudlebergs' home county—a five-day journey in all.

Because the Cross was the kingdom's primary trade route, designated stage stations lay at regular intervals along each each of its stretches so weary travelers could rest at inns. With proper planning, one could avoid camping outdoors even during a lengthy journey.

With proper planning.

"What do you think, Melody?"

The maid hummed in thought. "This…is a predicament."

Melody frowned at the map. The sky was deepening from vermilion to indigo on its way to inky black, but they were nowhere near the first stage station. They sat stopped at the edge of the highway, weighing their options.

"The stage stations lock up after dark, right?"

"Yes, that's right, my lady. I'm afraid we may not make it in time."

Practically every settlement in Theolas, from Paltescia itself to the humblest villages, boasted some sort of outer wall. Partly this

protected them from bandits, but mostly it repelled the monsters that would sometimes emerge from the blightlands. There was no killing the horrors without mana, be that in the form of a magically enhanced blade or a simple spell, so towns and villages often lacked the means to fight back. Nighttime made the creatures especially violent, and thus most settlements shut their gates before dark.

This was not to say monster sightings were a particularly *common* occurrence. Very few blightland beasts wandered far from their birthplace, but nightly lockdowns persisted as a tradition, a remnant of the past. A fairly obnoxious one in situations like Melody's. Once closed, those gates wouldn't open for the gods themselves.

"Will we have to camp outside tonight?" Micah asked.

"I'm sorry," said Luciana. "This is my fault for getting myself into a tizzy this morning."

"You've nothing to apologize for," Melody insisted. "Isn't that right, Micah?"

"Nothing at all, my lady. If anything, we ought to pry a few reparations from that tactless Lord Maxwell Reclentos."

"Thanks, guys," Luciana said.

Maxwell's invitation to the Summer Ball, and the lengthy interrogation Luciana's friends launched afterward, delayed their departure by three hours. They'd traveled as quickly as they could, but it was simply too much time to make up.

"If we're camping, we should probably start setting up soon," Micah pointed out.

Luciana peered outside the window. “Yeah, before it gets dark.”

The sun had already vanished below the spiky ridge of the mountains, swiftly giving way to indigo.

Melody nodded as she assessed the sky. “We’ll settle here for tonight, then. Rook, could you remove us from the road?”

She called to him through the window in the carriage, and Rook gently rolled the carriage into an open pasture. Luciana and Micah hopped out to take down their camping equipment before surrendering the task to the much more vertically gifted Rook. Meanwhile, Melody surveyed the area for a suitable place to set up.

Somewhere flat and in the open, she repeated in her mind. *Ah, this could work.*

It was a ways away from the road, but so long as they cleaned up after, it would do just fine.

“Miss Melody!”

Melody turned to find Micah rushing toward her.

“What is it?”

“It’s the luggage! We didn’t pack a tent! What do we do now?!” Micah asked.

“Oh, that’s all right. A tent wasn’t on the list.”

“What?! Why not?! How are we supposed to camp without a tent?”

Melody chuckled. “I’ll show you. Let’s head back.”

“Uh, I really don’t like how you’re laughing.”

Her teacher only smiled.

When they returned to the coach, Luciana blurted, “What do we do, Melody? We can’t all sleep in the carriage. There’s not enough room.”

“Not to worry, my lady. We won’t need to resort to that.”

“We won’t? Then what are we doing?”

Another suggestive chuckle. “Firstly, I’ll need to borrow your basket, Grail.”

The pup yipped as Melody removed him from his perch in the driver’s seat by the scruff of his neck. Melody paid no mind to the confused onlookers as she shoved her hand deep into his makeshift bed.

“While I see to preparations,” she said, “please relax yourself, my lady. Micah, if you’ll pour some tea.”

From the basket, Melody pulled a fully formed round, wooden table and a cabriole-legged chair with a plush cushion. Placing those on the grass, she dove her hand back in to discover a tea set. Warm liquid already sloshed in the glass pot.

This was Melody’s own personal cupboard, and it did not obey the rules of time and space. Naturally, this meant instant tea, whenever and wherever. She’d made sure to have a pot ready for the long trip.

“Oh, thank you, Melody!” Luciana said. “I’d love a cup, Micah.”

“I… Yes, my lady,” Micah said. “You’ve adapted, I see.”

Micah, however, was still struggling with the sight of a portable teatime springing fully formed from a basket. She was not surprised, exactly—more so disappointed that she wasn't surprised.

On the opposite end of things, Luciana had transitioned comfortably into the acceptance stage. Melody could summon tables and chairs and tea out of nothing? Of course she could. It would be silly to presume otherwise. Rook, meanwhile, lacked any point of comparison for this absurdity and simply continued to haul luggage down from the roof of the carriage.

"Miss Melody, why do you need Grail's basket for this?" Micah asked. "Is it some kind of limitation on the spell?"

Micah assumed Melody had no need of such trivial objects for her magic. What was stopping her from forming a black hole out of thin air and pulling things through that? The basket introduced all sorts of physical inconveniences.

Melody raised her eyebrows incredulously. "Because it would be utterly ridiculous to create something out of nothing. Remember this, Micah: Appearances are everything."

"And pulling tables and chairs from baskets is *less* ridiculous?!"

On her first day at the Rudleberg estate, upon learning of their tragic lack of uniforms, Melody had created her own then and there. She could teleport with the Ovunque Porta spell, but she could not bring along her mistress or her family, as only servants used such pathways. She could create infinite space within pocket dimensions but would only do so via physical objects like baskets or pockets. She was Melody, defender of many hills, a woman of appearances.

She could do away with her self-inflicted handicaps at any time. But she wouldn't.

Melody tilted her head at Micah's comment. *Is it that strange? I'd expect a world of magic to be more accepting of things like that.*

She did not know. Even now, she did not comprehend the sheer difference in scale of her perception compared to Micah's.

"Anyway, if you'll take care of Lady Luciana," she said, "I'll get things fixed up here."

"I don't even want to know what 'fixed up' means to you, but I'll ask anyway. What's the plan exactly?"

"Making us a place to sleep for the night, of course. One become many—*Alter Ego*."

Suddenly, there were eleven Melodys.

Luciana peeped and flinched like electricity shocked her.

"My lady?" said Micah. "Are you okay?"

"F-fine, thank you. She just surprised me."

Here was the one thing Luciana would never get used to. Alter Ego was special, having left an indelible mark upon her psyche as the first of Melody's shenanigans that she'd ever witnessed.

"Listen up," main Melody announced. "I'll start bringing out materials. You all begin construction."

"Yes, madam!" the ten Melodys resounded.

Melody held the basket with two hands and pointed it at the clones. Cleanly trimmed and treated logs began to fly out of it,

thumping heavily onto the soft pasture grass.

Micah and Luciana stared, mouths agape. Luciana's cup of tea hung in the air, halfway to her lips, and there it endlessly hovered.

Four Melodys spread out to different positions, held their hands up, and chanted. They sheared the grass away, and the land rose, forming a perfectly flat, miniature plateau. The other Melodys began working the logs and transforming the earth into a foundation. It was almost musical, the way the clones bustled here and there, pounding this and that, scrambling like ants on fast-forward, with the main Melody as the conductor.

This went on for close to half an hour, at the end of which the clones formed a line before their lady and bowed before disappearing in a puff of light.

Melody held her arms out, proudly presenting the final product. "Here we are! Your camping cottage, my lady."

"'Camping,'" Luciana and Micah said together.

Their incredulity didn't shake Melody's pride in a job well done. *This was no mere renovation like with the estate. I built this from the ground up! This elation. This fulfillment!* This *is what it means to be a maid!*

Her sample size may have been somewhat lacking.

"A-at least it's better than sleeping on the cold, hard ground. Right, Micah?" Luciana said.

"O-of course, my lady. Right you are. Let's focus on the positives."

The lady and the maid-in-training gazed upon the work in awe. A two-story building made entirely of polished wood suddenly stood before them. “Cottage” was a good word for it because it was certainly no primitive lean-to. The stripped lumber could have belonged to any stately cabin at a ritzy campsite, and it even came with a stable for the horse.

“Miss Melody, where did you get the wood for this?” Micah asked.

“Oh, the usual woods.”

“Deforestation! She’s de-wooded the Wood! Er, ahem.”

While not quite at a loss for words, Micah could not believe her ears. This work of art was made of lumber from none other than that greatest of blighted hinterlands: the Great Vanargand Wood.

“Don’t worry, Micah,” Melody said. “I harvested carefully, so as not to disturb the ecosystem. In fact, I’m confident the forest will be even healthier as a result.”

“That’s even more concerning. You’re sure we’ll be okay? We won’t be cursed, will we?”

“Cursed? Why, I shouldn’t think so. The lumber is sturdy enough that it ought to protect us from anything, even an earthquake.”

Blightlands, being areas of high mana concentration, gave rise not just to monsters but diverse flora as well. Manawood—magically dense trees of exceptional sturdiness found nowhere else in the world—made for a particularly attractive target for the timber industry, despite the risks. Naturally, such a product didn’t come cheap, and the

richer in mana the blightland, the higher the price the wood would fetch.

So what, then, did that say about this cottage made of manalogs sourced from the largest blightland in the world sitting right next to the kingdom's busiest highway?

"Miss Melody, can you conceal this with your magic?" Micah asked.

"I suppose I could, but why?"

"Do it! Do it now! Pronto! On the double!"

"I-if you say so. Hide—*Trasparenza*." A shimmering blanket of nothing drifted down over the cottage, obscuring it from view.

"There. I've cast a transparency spell around the vicinity of the cottage so it's only visible to those within a certain distance. It wouldn't exactly do to make it invisible to *us*."

Micah stepped outside the boundary of the spell and uttered a dumb, amazed *huh* when, indeed, the cottage vanished. Even the shaved grass appeared regrown. Everything was as it should be, nothing out of the ordinary. Clearly, Melody had cast no mere invisibility spell but a perfect camouflage. Micah couldn't complain about the results and yet still fought back the urge to say something about all this.

With everyone's worries satisfied, Melody guided them all inside for a proper introduction.

"Lamplight—*Luce*." Several orbs of light flew from Melody's palm, zipping to a number of candlesticks scattered about the place

and instantly illuminating them. “This is the living room. Everyone feel free to make yourselves at home here. Down the hall, you’ll find the kitchen and restroom, complete with a bathtub. Each of us has our own room on the second floor. Lastly, I request that you remove your shoes before entering.”

Everyone did as she asked and changed into slippers before passing through the mudroom into the cottage proper. Melody might not have done the living room justice in its size. There was a wide couch, big enough to fit Rook with room to spare, and a low coffee table. Above, a vaulted ceiling opened up to the second floor and lent the room a sense of immense scale.

The stairs leading to the bedrooms hugged the side wall. The hallway they occupied overlooked the floor below, separated only by a railing.

“You’ve explained the house itself well enough, Melody, but where did you get the couch and slippers?” Luciana asked.

The wooden embellishments and furnishings made enough sense, but everything else raised numerous questions as to its origin and sourcing. The furniture and slippers in particular looked made to order. Perhaps Melody had ordered them and stored them in her pocket dimension ahead of time, but then where had she gotten them from?

“I made them,” she answered simply.

“You what?” her lady and pupil said in unison.

They glanced down at their slippers, fluffy, comfy, and plush. They turned next to the sofa, where Rook tested the cushions. It

seemed to support him well, with just enough give. They made mental notes to try it themselves later.

"You what?" they said.

The question deserved repeating.

"I made them," Melody answered. "It was something of a, um, fantasy of mine, my lady. To build a little retreat for you to relax in one day." Melody fidgeted, cheeks reddening. "So I fashioned the furnishings myself in my free time."

"You made all this in your free time?"

"Yes, my lady. I found these curious, cattle-like creatures in my usual forest, and it occurred to me that they might make excellent leather. My estimations proved true."

"I'm remembering that really delicious steak we had for dinner one time," Micah said.

"Oh, I remember that too. It really was something, wasn't it?" Luciana agreed.

"I still have some left, as a matter of fact," said Melody. "Shall we do that for dinner tonight?"

"Please," the girls replied.

The dining room and kitchen lay at the back of the living room, as Melody had said. The bath and restroom were just down at the end of the hallway. In the kitchen, the group would find all the necessities, from cutlery to cookware, and the same went for the bathroom, which contained washbasins and soap and anything else one might need.

"You spared no effort, Miss Melody," Micah said. "I don't know what to say."

"Is all of this your doing as well?" Luciana asked.

"It is, my lady," Melody confirmed. "All in my free time. It was a bit of a project."

What free time? thought Micah. Her teacher rarely took even a few minutes for herself. Even on her days off, she wore her uniform. Micah could not fathom being that dedicated and still having time for a hobby, especially after the trials and tribulations she'd gone through just to learn the bare minimum requirements of her job.

"What about water?" Luciana went on. "We don't have a well."

"We'll simply have to make do with my magic, but please, don't be shy, my lady."

"Oh, good. But where does all that water for the bath and toilet go?"

Theolas did not enjoy any indoor plumbing, instead making use of commonplace magic items popularized by an old mage from long ago. Theolan toilets did indeed flush, but what about the one in the cottage? How *did* toilets away from civilization work?

"Wastewater will travel through pipes to a tank underground," Melody said. "The tank will magically break down its contents and gradually disperse it into the soil. Rest assured, I've considered every detail."

"Well, that's just lovely."

“You really can do anything, Miss Melody,” said Micah. “And I see you’re as unflappable as ever, my lady.”

Just moments earlier, Luciana had been as dumbfounded as Micah. She was quick to accept the reality of the situation.

“I can’t go on being unappreciative, can I? Melody built all this for me, and that makes me happy!”

Melody giggled. “You’re too kind, my lady.”

“They do say honesty is a virtue.” Micah sighed, ignoring the moment they briefly shared. “Initial shock aside, I have to admit this is leagues better than camping outside or cramming ourselves into the carriage. On that note, I say we start on dinner, Miss Melody. I’m starving!”

The maid and her lady laughed at the girl’s sudden mood swing, but if the darkness pressing against the windows was any indication, Micah was right.

“I agree with Micah,” said Luciana. “I’m hungry myself.”

“Very well. I’ll start on that steak,” said Melody. “Rook, if you would take everyone’s things to their rooms… Rook? Where’s Rook gone?”

“That’s a good question. Do you think…?” Micah said.

The girls crept back into the living room, and there they found him. Rook lay sprawled out on the couch, his breathing slow and deep. It was little wonder after he’d spent the entire day driving the carriage and on high alert for the dangers of the road.

The three women watched him in silence for a while before exchanging a look. They held their fingers up to their lips in unison.

And then they dispersed, Melody to the kitchen to begin cooking, Luciana and Micah to their rooms to divvy up their things. They did so as quietly as possible, until the smell of meat inevitably woke their groggy valet-in-training.

It wasn't until he came whining and clawing at the door that anyone remembered that they'd left Grail outside this entire time.

Why bring me along if you're just going to forget me?! the poor thing wailed for no one to hear.

The steak helped a little.

Chapter 9:
Ill Omens

THE SUN ROSE EARLY ON AUGUST 2ND, the second day of their journey. At five in the morning, everyone woke to eat breakfast. Going to bed early the night before had helped with their early start today. Back at the estate, Luciana would have eaten alone while the servants attended to her, but as time was of the essence, everyone ate together this morning. Melody had prepared a quick and easy meal of sandwiches.

"No one makes these like you do, Melody!" Luciana said.

"I simply reused the roast beef from last night's dinner, my lady. I'm pleased you like it."

On the contrary, there was nothing quick or easy about the feast laid out on the table.

"Our plans?" Rook asked while he nibbled a sandwich. "When do we leave?"

"We'll finish eating, gather our things, take apart the cottage, and then be on our way," Melody said. "We ought to be able to make up for yesterday's delays with this early start."

"You're taking this place apart?!" Micah shouted.

"Say it isn't so, Melody!" Luciana said. "It'd be such a waste to undo all this hard work!"

"Well, we can't exactly leave it here," Melody said.

Leaving a vacant house on the side of the road was perhaps not the wisest plan. Who knew what manner of crime or illicit activity it could host. From the start, Melody had intended to take down the structure.

"You should use your magic to store the entire thing," Micah said.

"I should what?"

"That's a great idea, Micah!" Luciana said. "Then we can use it wherever we go!"

"Pardon?"

"We could even leave all our luggage inside, so we don't have to pack up again," Micah went on. "Think of all the time we'd save!"

"I'm sorry?"

"This is far more comfortable than an inn anyway," rambled Luciana. "And we can save on room fees."

She and her partner in crime nodded at each other before facing Melody as a united front.

"Well, Miss Melody? Can you do it?"

"Please, Melody? Can't you?"

"I… Oh, all right," Melody said. "I'll try."

"Yay!" they cheered, sharing a crisp high five.

Melody gave herself a moment to breathe.

Rook watched the giddy pair out of the side of his eye. "You're very persistent."

"Did you *feel* those beds?!" the girls snapped. Plush blankets were no laughing matter.

"I made them out of the feathers of a bird I found in the woods," Melody said. "I'm glad they worked as well as I thought they might."

"Is there anything you *can't* get from that forest?" Micah asked.

"I'd like to know that myself," Luciana said.

Doubtless Melody remained oblivious to the fact that the animals she hunted for these resources were, in fact, monsters. Who was the apex predator in the world's largest blightland? Fearsome beasts beyond imagining? Or a passing maid?

Micah knew her answer, as impossible as it was to imagine Melody hunting anything other than dust bunnies. Not that she wanted her to stop.

"This is really the cottage? It's so cute!"

Luciana gazed into the crystalline globe in her hand. Inside, encapsulated by a dome capped over a firm piece of earth, lay a miniature version of Melody's cottage. To the unknowing observer, it might seem like a mere snow globe, but Luciana was right. It was, in fact, the cottage itself.

"I wanted to preserve it in an accessible form for the sake of future use," Melody explained. "Simply plant the base in the ground and undo the spell, and it will appear."

"I don't have the first clue how something like that even works," said Micah.

"It's quite easy, really. Simply designate a specified point in space and time, and—"

"I'll take your word for it! I'll take your word for it!" Micah cried out while smooshing her hands against her ears and shaking her head.

At first a little taken aback, Melody finally laughed when her lady did. She had to admit that Micah's antics were pretty cute.

Melody's newest addition to her maid magic repertoire, Spazio Tempo Dominare, was not a spell for the layman as it incorporated highly sophisticated, advanced formulae. But for the layman's understanding—it was a spell for manipulating space-time. By pausing time over a set area, then shrinking that space down to the size of a palm, she had effectively created a snow globe out of a real piece of the physical world.

It was, of course, not at all as simple as it sounded, but that was the long and short of it.

Existing outside of the flow of time meant Melody didn't need to worry about maintaining the cabin, and all the furniture and luggage would remain exactly where she'd left it. Its shrunken size helped with erecting it as well. Melody wouldn't have to rebuild a foundation or re-dig a septic tank when she could just carry all that around too. All the most convenient aspects of her handy pocket dimensions sat in the palm of Luciana's hand.

Needless to say, after Luciana and Micah's pestering, they would not be stopping at any stage stations aside from during the occasional errand run. They were free to travel as far as they could until night fell, whereupon they would simply re-erect the cottage.

The conveniences spoke for themselves, but there were less obvious benefits to the arrangement as well. Namely, they got to avoid the potentially unruly inn clientele who made many a long journey miserable when tensions were already running high. Having accommodations not unlike those they had grown used to in the capital would go a long way toward easing the burden of travel, to say nothing of getting to eat together at the same table. That was one of Luciana's personal favorite parts.

Thus, the days passed along with the sedate scenery, and on the fourth of August they neared their destination without incident. Fortune willing, they would enter Rudleberg territory in less than twenty-four hours.

Luciana, having just finished dinner and a bath, sat in her room. "How is it that riding a carriage can be so tiring? And I've hardly felt a bump either, thanks to your magic, Melody."

"Idleness comes with it its own costs, my lady," the maid said, lightly toweling Luciana's damp hair. "It can be mentally taxing when you're unused to such journeys. Incidentally, how was your journey when you first arrived in the capital?"

"Much worse than this, come to think of it. We were on a strict schedule so we could reach each stage station in time. It was anything but leisurely, that's for certain. I was exhausted by the time I

made it to the estate but, well, one look at it made me forget all about that." Luciana's eyes glazed over.

Melody's, however, sparkled. "Ah, of course. Those renovations are some of my favorite works yet. I still look back on those days fondly."

"I can't say I agree, but as long as it made someone happy."

"Oh, it did!"

Luciana did her best to return her maid's beaming grin. *All's well that ends well, I suppose.*

Hair dried and nighttime preparations complete, Luciana retired to her bed. Her long-awaited homecoming lay just one sleep away; she couldn't greet her people with bags under her eyes.

"Good night, Melody."

"Good night, my lady."

The maid put out the magically lit candles, casting the room into darkness. Luciana shut her eyes and waited.

And waited.

"Can't sleep…"

An hour later, sleep still eluded her, in spite of the fatigue aching in her every limb. Luciana lay wide awake, much like a child the night before an anticipated outing. Tomorrow loomed unwavering in her mind, staving off drowsiness like a misguided guardian.

"I'll get a glass of water. Maybe that'll calm my nerves."

Shuffling into her slippers and out of her room, Luciana crept down the stairs, careful not to make a sound. Enough of the Luce spell lingered to supply a dim, ambient light so she could find her footing and make her way to the kitchen.

She poured a glass of water and took a sip.

"My lady?"

Luciana started with an odd peeping noise. Somehow managing to keep from spilling her water, she slowly turned around. "Oh. It's just you."

"Whatever has you awake at this hour?" Melody asked. She wore a light robe over a nightgown, her hair loose around her shoulders.

Luciana had never seen her in quite so candid a state before. Her heart lurched at the sight. Granted, she wore little more than her maid.

"What are *you* doing awake?" she said.

"I heard your door open and followed to see what the matter was."

"Ah, right. Your room is next to mine."

The cottage was nowhere near big enough to separate the servants' quarters from the master or mistress's, and Melody of course wanted to ensure she could respond with haste should anything happen to her lady, so she'd placed them in adjoining rooms.

"You're not often awake this late, my lady. Is something wrong?"

"I was just thirsty. Well, that and I can't sleep." Luciana laughed awkwardly.

Melody sighed, then smiled in relief. "That's only natural, my lady, with your homecoming so close at hand."

"You think so? Like you said, I've never really had trouble falling asleep before."

"If it's troubling you, why don't I sing you a lullaby?"

"A lullaby?" Luciana blinked. "Melody, the Spring Ball was months ago. I'm a grown lady."

"What's the harm? You *are* technically still a child for the next three days until you turn fifteen."

"That doesn't make me a baby, thank you very much."

"Then I apologize and rescind the offer."

Luciana pouted for a while before averting her gaze. "But I would like to hear you sing."

Melody thought she might say that and happily escorted her back to her room. She tucked Luciana into bed, drew a chair close, and began to sing quietly.

She has such a pretty voice, Luciana thought.

The gentle, somnolent tones caressed her ears. It was the same melody she had sung for Grail once before. The same her mother had sung for her. One of Melody's greatest treasures.

Luciana's eyelids grew heavy. Her consciousness faded.

"Sweet dreams—*Fa in Bel Sogno*."

Peace took her.

Luciana blinked awake.

What? Where am I?

Had even Melody failed to put her to sleep? No. Something was off. She wasn't in her bed.

She wasn't in the cottage.

Luciana found herself in an unfamiliar hallway. To her right, a wall. To her left, a row of large windows, nothing visible beyond them but the blackness of night. She tried to open one, but it wouldn't budge. Unlit light fixtures clung to the ceiling. What light existed came from below, at her feet, seeping out of the bottom edge of the wall at even intervals.

I suppose that means I don't have to worry about tripping, but knowing where I am would be better.

She stepped forward. *Ka-clunk*. She looked down to find heavy boots on her feet. The nightgown she'd gone to sleep in was gone.

Wait a minute. This dress…

It was the gown she'd worn all the time before Melody came into her life.

Where did this come from? Melody remade this ages ago.

Fear overwhelmed the confusion. What was this place? Why had her old dress returned? What was happening?

She took a closer look at her surroundings. It wasn't just the hall she didn't recognize. It was the architecture itself. Whatever it was, it did not look Theolan in the slightest.

The floor and walls are smooth, but it's not marble, she deduced. *I don't know* what *it is. There are all these windows but no embellishments. Anywhere. It's all so sanitary. Too bland to belong to a noble, but far too expensive-looking to belong to a commoner. What* is *this place?*

Luciana swallowed and continued forward. She would not find answers standing still.

Her footsteps echoed eerily down the dreary, empty hallway. If anyone was around to hear them, they did not show themselves. She reached the end of the hall, where the path continued through a door. The plate on it bore an inscription in a language Luciana could not read.

I've never seen a round doorknob before. I suppose it works the same as all the others. Just turn it… It's open.

The door offered no resistance. Luciana's heart pounded in her ears. What lay on the other side?

She ventured on.

There's…no one here.

It was a large room, unlit like the hallway. The windows continued here, lining every wall, facing nothing but shadow.

A mess of desks in pairs, each one facing another, littered the room. Metal, from what Luciana could feel. Books lay across them, sat

stuffed inside them, and mingled with various bundles and documents spilling off of a waist-high shelf along the wall.

The disorder in the room encompassed more than just the books. On several of the desks sat peculiar plates of lustrous metal that seemed to fold at the middle. Inside were protrusions that gave way to pressure but served no other immediately obvious function.

Elsewhere, a similar, larger plate of metal drew Luciana's eye. Some kind of pedestal held it aloft. It reminded her of a vanity mirror. Those strange protrusions adorned a nearby length of an alloy of some sort. She gazed into the glossy void of the large, metallic sheet but saw nothing save the blurry reflection of her own face.

And then she remembered. "I can do more than Fare Acqua. I'm no one-trick pony!" She clenched her hands. "Lamplight—*Luce*!"

Luce, any novice mage's very first spell, had once proved an impossible challenge to Luciana, but Melody's instruction had borne fruit. A tiny, flickering candlelight appeared at her fingertip. It was feeble but enough to give her more visibility.

She peered into the sheet. "What?"

The blurry reflection revealed more in the light. Luciana saw herself, but she was a stranger.

Wh-what? My hair. It's like flax. My skin is cracked. And this is *my old dress. This isn't… This is…*

It was her—before meeting Melody. Her, when she'd been alone.

The door clicked.

Luciana yelped, her light going out. Two men entered the room. She turned toward their voices.

"I'm glad your pitch went over well, Katsuragi-san."

"Likewise, but y'know, still a lot up in the air. I've got some writing to do if they want more specifics on the plot by the next meeting."

A young man in a short-sleeved, collared button-down and a fastidiously straight necktie entered with the man called Katsuragi, who looked older. His clothing seemed less rigorously tidy, especially the tie barely dangling around his neck.

"H-hello," Luciana called out. "I seem to be—"

"They loved what you had, though," the younger man said. "Getting Mizuno-san on board for art probably won you a few points."

"Having big names to drop gets you far in this world. Let's get moving before anyone changes their mind."

"That's the spirit!"

Do they not notice me? Luciana wondered. *What am I looking at?*

There were many strange things about the scene playing out before her. The men's apparent disinterest in her presence for one, and the fact that the world seemed to come to life around them for another. Everything had been dark. Obscured. The hallway. The room. But everywhere the men went, the area around them glowed, as if a spotlight tracked their movements.

Something told Luciana that the key to understanding all this lay in understanding the men. She couldn't speak to them, clearly, but she had nothing else to go on, and so she approached. The one called "Katsuragi" sat at a desk, opened one of the folding metal sheets, and pushed one of the protrusions. The upper half of the sheet glowed, and writing appeared on it.

It's a magic item. What's it for, I wonder?

The younger man peered at the glowing sheet from behind Katsuragi. Luciana stood in the background and observed.

"So this route—"

"So the flag here triggers—"

I don't have a clue what any of these words mean.

Their conversation entered one ear and exited the other. "Route?" "Flag?" "Bad end?" Evidently, this was commonplace terminology for these two, but to Luciana it was incomprehensible. Curious that she could understand the rest of their language.

What now? They're the only two leads I have. Should I search around more?

Just then, the men finally uttered words she could understand.

"So this girl." The young man snapped his fingers. "What's her name? Uh… Luciana Rudleberg. What's the plan with her?"

…Me?

Unease held her gut in a vice grip. They knew her. How did they know her? Luciana listened closer. She would soon wish she hadn't.

"Luciana Rudleberg? Oh, I'm killing her."

I… She stumbled back. Katsuragi's decree echoed painfully in her mind. *He's going to…kill me? Luciana…Rudleberg? But why?*

Unease darkened to pitch-black fear. This man wanted her dead. And he'd declared it so matter-of-factly. So callously.

"That's a little dark, don't you think? Kill off Luciana and nobody else?"

"I realize that, but her death's what inspires the protagonist and sets everything in motion. It's unavoidable. Luciana Rudleberg *has* to die. The protagonist needs her dead, so I'm killing her."

"Well, I know there were opinions about that. Did you see the art Mizuno-san drew of her getting a happy ending? I'm not entirely sure why the protagonist was a maid pouring tea for her, though."

"Fanart before the game's even greenlit? Someone's jumping the gun a little."

The men chuckled.

Luciana's stomach churned, leaving her nauseated. *These people. They're…laughing about it.*

"So, how's she going to die?"

"What I was thinking was—"

Enough! No more!

Luciana flew out of the room and back into the hallway.

How do I leave?!

She ran. Ran. Ran. Ran. And the hallway went on. And on. And on. Her breaths turned to pants, then to desperate gulps. She stopped sprinting and checked behind her. The room was still there.

She had not moved an inch.

Why? How? I… I ran as hard as I could.

"Luciana? Oh, I'm killing her."

Her blood turned to ice. She was in danger. These men wanted her dead. She had to escape.

She ran again. No plan. No route in mind, only mad terror to propel her forward. She ran. Exactly as she had before. To exactly the same result.

There was only one end available for Luciana Rudleberg.

I can't.

She fell to her knees, shoulders heaving, lungs burning. She could run no more. The room was still right there, but she could run no more.

Her world spun. Her vision twisted. The walls and ceiling melted and warped, dragging the door ever closer.

I can run no more…

The hallway shrank. The door loomed.

It was coming for her.

Behind her, an endless hallway. Infinity. Before her, mere steps away, inevitability.

She could run no more.

Luciana stared as her fate approached her, inch by fatalistic inch.

Suddenly, platinum light flashed from the infirmary, blinding, flooding the somber hallway and driving back the darkness. It slammed against the door like a physical force.

Reality settled. The door vanished. Everything vanished, replaced by that silver radiance. Nothing remained in any direction but pure light.

Infinity. Possibility. The future.

"Beautiful…"

Footsteps plodded behind her. Luciana turned. She had to squint against the light pouring from the infirmary. No, pouring from its true source.

The brightness obscured the person approaching her, turning them into a sketchy silhouette. They walked right up to her. Still, she could not make them out.

They offered a hand. Not a name. Not words of consolation. Not some indication as to whether this was a hand she could trust or not.

Only a hand.

Luciana took it.

I'm not afraid.

Luciana smiled.

The person tightened her grip and smiled in return.

I have no reason to be scared. I know. Because I'm safe with you. Because you'll always…

"Good morning, my lady."

"Melody?"

What was I just…? I feel like I was in the middle of something. Something important.

"My lady, if you could, um, release my hand."

"Your hand?"

Luciana was clutching it tightly. When had she grabbed hold of it? She tilted her head as best a lady could while lying in bed.

"I was trying to wake you when you suddenly reached out and snatched it," Melody said.

"Oh. I don't remember that at all."

"It must have been quite the dream you were having."

"A dream… Right. A dream."

Luciana finally let go and sat up.

"Was it a good one?"

"Was it? I can't really recall. I remember being scared, though."

"Scared? Oh no, was it a nightmare?"

"No. Not at the end. I remember…not being scared at the end. But that's all."

Such was the way of dreams. It had felt so unquestionably real in the moment, but the harder she searched her memory for those

experiences, the deeper down they hid.

I feel like I was on the verge of realizing something really important. What was it?

"Strange," Melody muttered to herself. "That spell's supposed to only bring *sweet* dreams." She shook herself from her ruminations and reasserted herself before her lady. "In any case, shall we see to your morning routine? You've a home to return to today."

She offered her hand. Luciana took it immediately.

"Right. It's a good morning, Melody!"

The maid drew her lady up from the bed and out of the realm of nightmares.

Chapter 10:
The County and Its People

THE FINAL DAY OF THE JOURNEY, AUGUST 5TH, ushered Luciana and her retinue straight into Rudleberg territory.

The Cross was long behind them, and they now moved north through the Barony of Faronkalt. All that remained of the Rudleberg demesne, one-fourth of its original size, consisted of the northernmost villages, the southern reaches being divided into east and west. Viscount Lillertcruz ruled the west, and Baron Faronkalt the east. The way from the capital to their home estate cut through the eastern barony by necessity.

"We should make it by noon at this rate," Micah said.

Luciana giggled with excitement. "I can't wait to brag to everyone about the cute, young maid and handsome valet trainee we have now!"

"Oh, my lady, you make me blush."

"I'd have said 'childlike' if I meant you, Micah."

"My lady!" Micah gasped. "I may be small, but I assure you, I'm every bit the woman you are!"

"Yes, of course you are."

The bickering was entirely playful, and both knew it. The carriage was giddy with excitement as they neared their destination. Fortunately, the trip had been a painless one, free from both bandit

and monster encounters. Not that any of the passengers genuinely feared either with both Rook and Melody present, but the absence of danger was not unwelcome.

"My lady, what's it like in the Rudleberg demesne?" Micah asked.

"Oh, you haven't heard?"

"No, my lady."

"I suppose *you* wouldn't have."

"What? Why me specifically?!" Micah asked.

"My lady," said Melody, "you never told me either."

"Indeed," Luciana said. "Because I've told no one."

"My lady, please!" Micah said. "Can we be done with the games?"

Lucian laughed heartily. "Okay, sorry. Rook should hear too, though, so how about I tell you all over lunch?"

The maids agreed, and before long, the carriage wheels rolled along Rudleberg soil. When lunchtime arrived, they pulled over to the side of the road and parked beneath a tree. There, they spread out a cloth, and Melody laid out the food she'd made that morning—sandwiches of all types and a number of sides beyond simple finger foods.

"Feels like a picnic, doesn't it?" Luciana said.

"Blue skies, a shady tree, sandwiches on a blanket. It's a picnic, all right," Micah cheerfully agreed.

She and her lady stuffed their cheeks and moaned in delight. “Delicious!”

Rook quietly fed himself with one hand, slipping Grail some vegetable-filled meat rolls with the other.

As Melody doled out sides to Luciana, she returned to the topic on everyone’s minds. “You were going to tell us about your home, my lady?”

“Mhm. Right,” Luciana mumbled around a full mouth.

She told them all there was to tell. The Rudlebergs were situated in the north central region of Theolas, and they were remarkably small for a countship. The lord two generations ago had shrunk their land to its current size after poor leadership necessitated that he sell off large swathes to remunerate debts, and now the original Rudleberg estate lay in the hands of Viscount Lillertcruz.

The family had built a humble replacement constructed entirely out of wood on what remained of their domain. It was where Luciana grew up, and her family managed three small villages from there. The estate stood roughly at the heart of those villages, equidistant from each.

“You didn’t build your home in one of the villages?” Micah asked.

“At the time, there was too much disorder for that. Our territory had suddenly and drastically shrunk, and our family thought it might send a bad message if we picked one village over another.”

“A bad message?” Micah tilted her head. “How’s that?”

"A lord inherently favors the land he resides in," Melody said. "My assumption would be that they wanted to avoid showing such favoritism."

"That's a good way to put it," said Luciana. "These villages have been on fairly equal footing in terms of wealth and size for a long time. What do you think might happen if one suddenly became the count's home?"

"It'd basically be the new capital," Micah said. "Wait, but these are just villages, aren't they?"

"And it's because they exist in such small communities that little discrepancies can become points of contention," Melody clarified.

"I'm sure all that and more weighed on my grandfather's mind when he made this decision," Luciana said. "Anyway, that's how the estate ended up where it is. Because all of the villages are equally far away, it implies that they'll all be treated equally as subjects."

"I bet being away from town causes all sorts of inconveniences," Micah said.

"You stop noticing them when you've grown up that way all your life. Well, not that I enjoyed the two- or three-hour trips anytime I wanted to go over to one of the villages to play. And lord help me if I ever went without Dyrule to escort me."

"Dyrule?"

"He's our estate's only guardsman. There's also…"

Luciana described the six individuals who made up the Rudleberg home estate. First of all was Hughes Rudleberg's younger

brother—that is, Luciana's uncle—Hubert the bailiff, who acted in Hughes's stead. Hubert Rudleberg was an unmarried, burly man of thirty-two. Then there was the oldest member of the home, fifty-nine-year-old Ryan, the house butler. Finally, Lullia, the forty-nine-year-old housekeeper, Mira, her junior by five years, and Aasha, the youngest at twenty-eight, made up the maid contingent of the household.

"And last but not least is Dyrule, our guardsman and the only mage in the whole county. He's twenty-nine," Luciana said. "As for the villages, there's Tenon to the north, Gourges to the east, and Durnan to the southwest. Ryan and Lullia are married and come from Tenon. Mira comes from Gourges, the eastern village. And Aasha and Dyrule both grew up in the south—Durnan."

"I'm not even going to pretend like I'll remember all that," Micah said flatly, pinching the bridge of her nose. "So only six people run the whole county?"

"They get by. It helps that it's so small." Luciana smiled in a way that said she knew very well how tight a ship they ran.

"The details will sink in as we get to know them personally," Melody told Micah. "Lord Hubert, the bailiff. Master Ryan, the butler. Madam Lullia, the housekeeper. Her two underlings, Mira and Aasha. And then Dyrule, the guardsman. I'll commit those names to memor…"

"Melody?" Luciana looked at her funny. "What's wrong?"

A curtain of doubt obscured Melody's expression. "My lady, why is your guardsman not present in the capital? With you and his lord?"

Luciana froze. Her gaze darted away from the maid.

Melody smelled a secret. Her eyes narrowed. “My lady?”

“So, um, funny story about that…”

Luciana explained that Dyrule had, in fact, escorted her to the capital in much the same way Rook had, by driving the carriage and watching for danger along the way.

“It wasn’t easy, let me tell you. There was no fancy cottage, so we had to rush from one stage station to the next. I was worn out by the time we reached the capital.”

“I recall you saying as much,” Melody said. “So then why wasn’t Dyrule there when I first arrived at the estate? Surely he saw the state of it, and I hesitate to believe he’d leave you alone there if he had.”

“Well, that’s the thing. He didn’t.”

“He didn’t? Didn’t what? See the estate?”

No answer.

“My lady?”

“I-I may have…sent him home before we even made it to the Upper District.”

Melody and Micah stared at their lady in disbelief.

Luciana forced herself to explain. She and Dyrule made their way to that noblest of areas of the city where all aristocrats resided, she said, when suddenly, Luciana made a mad dash for the district ahead of her guard. Dyrule was at a loss when Luciana successfully shook him and reached the Upper District first. He could not give

chase without proper authorization to enter and thus had to return home, crying all the way.

"My lady." Melody's lips were pressed into a hard line. A young noblewoman slipping past her escort and fleeing into the city on her own? What in the name of all that was holy had she been *thinking*?

"W-well, he's the only mage in the county. What if there was a monster attack back home while he was stuck with me? I tried to tell him when we first got to the capital, but he wouldn't listen."

"So you took matters into your own hands."

Luciana nodded meekly. Melody rubbed her temples and groaned.

Although rare, there were always a few unlucky settlements each year that suffered attacks from monsters who'd wandered too far from some blightland or another, and it required magic to slay them. For villages without the means to fight, an encounter could prove catastrophic. Melody therefore understood her lady's actions and couldn't bring herself to condemn them entirely, though that only enhanced the pounding in her head. Had Dyrule followed her into the Upper District and glimpsed the estate, he would surely have insisted on staying. He would not have been much of a guardian otherwise.

"Come to think of it, I didn't see him with His Lordship or Her Ladyship either," Melody recalled. How had they made it to the capital? Surely not on their own.

"Oh, right, apparently they also slipped away without him knowing."

Again, Melody and Micah gasped in disbelief as one. The apple truly did not fall far.

"Father had the same concerns I did," Luciana said. "Dyrule was intent on joining them for the journey here, so they left a letter for Uncle and went in secret."

Melody's migraine worsened. "I feel bad for Dyrule…"

No one should take security so lightly, least of all a noble. At any rate, the count and countess had announced their safe arrival by letter, and the guardsman narrowed his responsibilities to protecting Hubert and the local villages.

"All this talk is making me itch to see everyone," Luciana said. "I hope they're doing well." The lady was awfully bouncy for all the crimes she'd just confessed to.

I imagine she's going to regret hurrying when she's subject to an ear-lashing first thing, Melody thought. She also thought that perhaps the lord and lady's absence had something to do with their past buffoonery, but surely not. Surely not.

As they finished lunch and gathered their things, Luciana stared fixedly in the direction of home. "Not long now."

Suddenly, Grail went wild. He started to bark and howl at something in the direction Luciana was facing.

"Grail," she said. "What's gotten into—"

And then the ground rumbled.

Chapter 11:
Birthday Bash

SOMEONE SHRIEKED.

Melody and the others dropped to the ground as the world shuddered and shook. The maid did not lose her composure for even a second, however.

Intense shaking. Inability to stand, she coolly analyzed. *Perhaps a magnitude of…*

When she was still Mizunami Ritsuko, Melody had put herself through numerous simulated earthquakes at disaster centers specifically so she could maintain control of any situation during her maidly career. Thanks to that experience, she deduced that this was a magnitude somewhere in the upper fives. Had they been in a population center, she would have had to be mindful of falling objects, but out in the open they had nothing to worry about save the lone tree they'd eaten under, and its roots held firm.

They stayed down and waited for the shaking to stop. Gradually, it eased up.

"What was that?" Luciana looked shell-shocked.

"My lady, are you hurt?" Melody asked.

"N-no. I'm okay." She'd never experienced such a thing before.

Micah sighed. "Sheesh. That was pretty violent."

The maid-in-training was a little shaken but otherwise calm. She clasped her hands at her chest as she took in her surroundings. Rook was already back up and calming the frightened horse.

Melody took solace in her companions' fortitude. She picked up a fallen cup, refilled it with water, and handed it to her lady. "Breathe, my lady. Drink."

"R-right." She did. Fast. The stress left her parched. She downed the glass in a single gulp, then let out a heavy breath, a little calmer than before. "Thanks, Melody. I'm okay."

The maid smiled in relief.

"But what was that?" Luciana wondered aloud. "The earth was… swaying."

"That was some earthquake, huh? I've never been in one that big!" Micah said excitedly.

For a girl from Japan, earthquakes were simply a part of life. Not necessarily a daily thing, but a common enough occurrence. Something of this magnitude was rare indeed, however. Knowing everyone was okay, though, Micah was more elated by the experience than anything else.

"That was an earthquake? The earth certainly did, well, quake." Luciana wrapped her arms around herself. "I've only ever read about them." Lingering shock left her face pale.

Earthquakes were not a common phenomenon in Theolas. According to a memoir at the estate, the most recent recorded earthquake had occurred almost a century ago, and it had been fairly

small, only a two or three on the seismic scale. The count at the time recorded the quake, more out of whimsical curiosity than as a damage report.

"If they can be this dangerous, I wish people would have written those reports more earnestly," Luciana said.

"I'm sure they didn't think the quakes were so serious at the time," Melody said in defense of her lady's forebears. "With something of this intensity, I'd expect wooden structures to suffer the most. Some may even collapse…entirely."

The color drained from Melody's face as she spoke. She turned in the direction Luciana had faced moments earlier.

"What is it?" Luciana asked.

"My lady, do you think the estate is okay?"

"The estate? The estate!"

They were only about an hour out, so the estate certainly had suffered the shaking as well. If they were closer to the epicenter, they may have endured a stronger quake. Luciana had never been in an earthquake before, so none of this occurred to her.

"O-our house!" she sputtered, shooting to her feet. "The villages! Are the people okay?!"

"Rook, can we get moving?" asked Micah.

He shook his head. "I need more time to calm the horse. She's still spooked."

Luciana was not the only one experiencing their first earthquake. Rook's soothing was the lone thing keeping the poor

horse from bolting.

"Oh no. What now?" Luciana was white as a ghost when she turned her gaze back toward the estate.

Running would not get her there any faster than waiting on the horse would, but neither could she just sit around. Frustration and fear clouded her mind. She had to do something, and yet could do nothing.

Melody made up her mind. "My lady, I will go ahead and ascertain the situation myself."

"You'll what?"

"Flight—*Ali da Angelo*."

Grand wings shimmered to life at Melody's back. Maid magic—Ali da Angelo. As the incantation implied, this spell granted her angelic wings that allowed her to fly. She could make the final leg of the journey through the air far faster than any horse could carry her.

"I will learn what I can and await your arrival by carriage, my lady."

"No, Melody!" Luciana said. "Take me with you!"

"M-my lady?!"

Luciana threw herself at Melody and locked her arms around the maid just as she was taking off.

"My lady, let go! You'll get hurt!" Melody cried.

"I know these roads, Melody. I can show you where to go! Take me! Take me with you!"

"M-my lady."

"Miss Melody, I think you should listen to her," a third party chimed in.

"Micah?"

"If it'll set her mind at ease, I mean," Micah said. "And think about it. None of them know who you are. They might not trust you."

The girl was right. Whatever crisis the estate found itself in, communicating with them would go far more smoothly if Luciana tagged along.

Melody groaned but ultimately acquiesced. "As you wish. Shall we be on our way, my lady?"

"Thank you, Melody!"

"Micah, Rook, would you be so kind as to regroup with us once this mess is resolved?"

"Of course," Micah said. "Safe travels, Miss Melody."

"We'll be there as soon as she's calm," said Rook.

Melody nodded. "Reach to me—*Allungare la Mano*. We're off, my lady."

Luciana yelped. Melody swept her lady off her feet, holding her longways like a princess being carried by a knight and enveloping her with invisible, reinforcing helping hands. The spell made her feel as light as a feather.

"Hold on tight!" Melody said.

"W-will do!"

Melody kicked off the ground, and they clambered into the air. They hovered for a split second before darting straight up.

Luciana howled as they zipped through the air. Melody, unable to console her just yet, rose to an altitude of about fifty meters, nearly fifteen stories up, and stopped. She could have gone higher, but there was no need.

She surveyed the landscape, getting her bearings. “Keep your mouth closed, my lady. We’re going to move fast.”

“O-okay! Uh-huh!”

Melody shot off like a bullet. They flitted past winding roads they would have had to snake around by carriage, moving many times faster than any animal known to man. A journey that should have lasted an hour would be complete in a matter of minutes.

Luciana, having shut her eyes tight, dared to take a peek. Her breath caught as she did. “Wow…”



The view from the sky nearly wiped away the panic fogging her mind. Almost, but not quite. The sky seemed to stretch on forever, the horizon farther off than ever before.

"My lady," said Melody, summoning Luciana from her wonderment. "We'll arrive shortly."

"Already? Wait, there it is! That's our…estate."

It was easy enough to spot from so high up. What should have been her home lay just ahead.

"Oh dear."

"No…"

They saw not Luciana's girlhood home but a dismal pile of rubble.

Melody was speechless. *This is worse than I imagined.*

Finances post-secession had forced the Rudlebergs to consolidate and rebuild in a smaller estate. A cheaper one. And with how few earthquakes the region suffered, the simple wooden construction did not bother to take them into account. The manor never stood a chance against the magnitude of earthquake that had just hit it.

"Uncle! Dyrule! Guys!"

Upon landing, Luciana dashed toward what was probably once the front door, though that was hard to discern among all the debris. Melody hurried after her, but not even she could fully conceal the shock on her face. All the seminars in the world couldn't prepare one for the realities of a genuine disaster. Melody stood paralyzed amid a

cacophony of inaction, all the phrases and steps and buzzwords she'd learned turning to static in her head as she beheld the scale of the tragedy. Even the greatest prodigy to have ever lived was only human.

But Melody still had a job to do. There could be survivors trapped in the rubble. She had to act quickly.

Someone beat her to the punch and shouted, "Milady!"

A brawny man of about thirty with short, spiky brown hair and eyes to match charged toward Luciana. A gnarly scar ran from his cheek to his chin. He certainly cut an intimidating figure.

Luciana brightened with recognition. "Dyrule!"

The Rudlebergs' one and only guardsman panted as he approached. "You've made it. Are you unharmed?"

"I'm fine, but…" Luciana surveyed the wreckage dubiously.

Dyrule did the same, his scowl deepening. "Yes. It's a disaster."

"I-if you were outside, are Uncle and the others…?"

Dyrule shook his head. "I was out on an errand for Lord Hubert. He and the others were likely inside when it happened."

Luciana slapped her hand over her mouth, eyes widening. "No…"

"Would you happen to have any idea where they might have been in the house?" Melody cut in.

"And you are?" Dyrule asked pointedly.

"She's Melody, a maid at our capital estate," Luciana said.

"Melody Wave, at your service. But perhaps we should save pleasantries for later. Might you answer my question?"

Dyrule thought. “At this time of day, they’d be in the dining hall, I assume. Lord Hubert and all the servants share a table.”

“Right! It’s lunchtime!” said Luciana.

“We should focus our efforts around that location then,” Melody said. “There may yet be hope.”

“Right! Uncle! Everyone! I’m coming!”

“My lady, wait!”

Luciana followed her memories toward the dining hall. Melody and Dyrule rushed after her.

Dyrule grimaced at the destruction. “Nowhere was spared.”

The support pillars had crumbled like paper, and the second floor apparently hadn’t lasted long at all. The entire ground floor lay under a whole extra layer of debris. Even with a general idea of where it ought to be, the dining hall was lost in the wreckage.

“Uncle!” Luciana cried to no reply.

“My lady, stand back,” Melody said. “I’ll clear away this rubble.”

“That’s no task for a woman. Make way,” Dyrule said.

“Rest assured, this woman is sufficient. I’ll have to be cautious, though, lest I cause another collapse.”

“I told you—”

Suddenly, the precariously piled rubble started to groan.

“Get back, my lady!” Melody said. “It’s coming down!”

Before she could react, the debris near Luciana crashed. The lady shrieked as it exploded outward.

“My lady!”

A great, grizzly roar erupted from the heap. “Phew! I thought I was done for!”

“Lord Hubert?!” Dyrule said.

A man clambered from the rubble. It was none other than Count Hughes’s younger brother, Hubert Rudleberg.

He took a big, long sniff. “Fresh air at last.”

He had Hughes’s face but not his build. Hubert was a large man who looked the part of a farmhand far more than an aristocrat. Overalls dangled over a short-sleeved button-down shirt. Several of the top buttons remained undone to make room for the man’s vast chest. All he was missing was a straw hat and a hoe resting on his shoulder.

The man made his way through the debris, parting it like an ocean, until he came up to Luciana.

“Uncle! You’re okay! Thank goodness!”

“Well, if it isn’t Luciana. I see you’ve made it here in one piece. Welcome home.”

“‘Welcome home’?! I was scared half to death that you’d been crushed!”

“Yes, well, I very well may have been if it weren’t for Schue. One minute we were eating, the next the ceiling was coming down. If the boy hadn’t shouted at us to take shelter under the table, who knows what might have happened?”

“So the others are okay too?”

Right on cue, the other servants crawled out of the estate's remains. Hubert, somehow, had escaped unscathed, but the rest of the survivors bore injuries of varying severity, though no one's life was in any immediate danger. While Ryan managed to free himself, the maids required Dyrule's assistance.

"Let's see to those wounds," Melody said, trotting over.

"Your cooperation is appreciated, but where did you get that first aid kit?"

From a pocket dimension, of course. She and Dyrule quickly triaged and began treating the four injured members of the house.

Luciana sighed. "Thank goodness everyone's safe."

Hubert was not so relieved, though. "Where's Schue?"

"Schue?"

Just then, another man appeared from the opening Hubert had created. He had golden hair, at least where it wasn't covered in dirt and debris, and sun-kissed skin. He wore a manservant's uniform—collared shirt, necktie, vest, black slacks.

"Ah, there he is. Glad to have you back, Schue."

"Did you have to leave me there all by myself?" the straggler griped before promptly tripping on a bit of protruding wood.

Melody was there with first aid at once. "Are you okay?"

"Uncle, who is this?" Luciana asked.

"Allow me to introduce Schue, our newest trainee," said Hubert. "I was patrolling the county after you left for the capital, when I found him collapsed on the side of the road. He had nowhere else to go, so

I took him in. He's a real asset, I tell you. We wouldn't have made it out of this without him."

"Wow. Then I suppose he's earned—"

Luciana had hardly finished the thought before the boy dropped to his knees.

"One glance is all I need to know," he said. "I am madly in love with you. Please, will you be mine?"

It was like something straight out of a play. Kneeling like the protagonist of a great romance, Schue laid his heart bare before his savior.

Melody recoiled, entirely appropriately. "I-I beg your pardon?"

Unfortunately for Schue, there was a certain unwritten rule with a certain lady—and he'd just broken it.



"Oh, he's earned something all right."

Hubert's eyes shot open. "Luciana?"

Dyrule's did the same. "Milady?"

They had never seen this girl before. That cold, dead smile. This was not their Luciana!

She strode forward, stepping in front of Melody, who quietly shrank back.

"M-my lady…" Melody said.

Luciana smiled, and yet she did not smile at all. "Greetings. You're the one called Schue? You have my thanks for rescuing my uncle and our retinue."

"Huh? Oh, you're pretty! Wait, you said 'uncle'?"

The poor boy. He knew not the forces with which he reckoned.

"But let's get one thing straight." Luciana produced the birthday present she'd received from Melody, the folding fan with the special magic enchantment.

She held it aloft and activated it with a minuscule amount of mana and a flick of the wrist. The fan transformed into not just a fan, but a mighty harisen.

"Hands *off*, fool!" she roared.

"Gwulbluh!"

The full force of the fan's might struck Schue's cheek. Luciana was a natural possessed of perfect form. She swung from the wrist,

the hips, *and* the shoulder, so when the fan hit, it hit hard. Schue spun in place, tumbling back into the rubble.

"Schuuue!" the men cried.

This was the true nature of the gift Luciana had requested Melody craft for her. An implement only for her, harmlessly torturous, tortuously harmless—the Holy Harisen. Though lacking in any actual substantial force, the sound and impact alone could adequately punctuate any point in need of emphasis. It had proven quite effective against her father, and in knocking some sense into Luna during her darkest hour. Luciana could think of no better birthday present.

To add to its effectiveness, enchantments on the fan made it impervious to blades. In fact, it could effortlessly win such an encounter. It could even parry and nullify spells. To put it lightly, one did not want to go up against this particular harisen.

"M-my lady, what are you doing?!" Melody shouted.

Luciana scoffed. "It was the blunt edge."

"The blunt edge?! It's not a sword, my lady! And you don't even practice fencing! How do you know what that means?!"

Luciana leered down at the very-much-unconscious Schue lying in the rubble and huffed.

Chapter 12:
The Maid Who Knew No Fear

"I AM SO SORRY!"

Schue, after Hubert rescued him from his predicament, awoke from his stupor and almost immediately darted for Luciana, sliding up to her like a prostrating baseball player. His lack of self-respect did not garner much sympathy, least of all from Luciana, who stared down at him like he was mud under her shoe.

"It was the heat of the moment!" he said. "I was possessed by an unnatural force! We men, you see, we're cursed to lose ourselves when girls are pretty! It was a crime of passion! I had to try! Because even if only one out of a hundred girls gives me the time of day, it was all worth it! Does that maybe sort of kind of make sense?!"

"I wish you hadn't come out of the rubble," Luciana grumbled.

Schue bleated. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! So very sorry!"

Luciana had found her rock bottom. This was the absolute lowest she could think of someone. All the points Schue had earned by saving her family were but a drop in the bucket of his transgressions. In fact, he may have gone *below* rock bottom and entered the negatives. Frankly, there was no coming back from this for Schue. All of Melody's suitors were enemies to Luciana, plain and simple.

Elsewhere, far away back at the capital, unbeknownst to anyone, a certain knight shuddered.

"The capital has…shaped milady," Dyrule said.

"They grow up fast, don't they? Girls especially. Blink and you miss it," Hubert waxed sentimental.

Ryan shook his head. "That is a generous interpretation, my lord."

"My lady," Melody said, "you heard the man. He meant no harm. Can't we turn the other cheek?"

"You're right, Melody. I missed one!" Luciana said. "Men like him are all the same. They'll never change unless they're forced to!"

Schue blubbered. "I've repented! Turned over a new leaf! I'll never woo this fair maiden ever again! Probably!"

Luciana snarled.

"Why are you making things worse for yourself?!" Melody shouted at the man. "Bite your tongue, for goodness' sake!"

"I can tell no lie, good maiden! If I don't believe it in my heart, I can make no promise! Please, forgive me!"

"You just saved me the trouble of digging your grave!" Luciana said.

Schue shrieked. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"My lady," Melody said, "a noblewoman does not speak like that!"

Shrieks, screams, and cries of all sorts echoed across the miserable remnants of the former Rudleberg estate. Melody had to

put her lady in a nelson hold to keep her from bringing her harisen down a second time.

"What exactly are we watching?" Ryan muttered.

Hubert guffawed. "Why, a comedy, I should think."

"Featuring your niece, my lord?"

"Yes, it is a shame to end it early, isn't it? But there's work to be done." Hubert clapped his big hands together. The booming noise froze the play's actors in place. He approached. "Luciana, so sorry to interrupt, but I'll need to steal Schue from you."

"It'll have to wait, Uncle. I'm afraid this one's scheduled to be quartered and drawn."

"Actually," Melody chimed in, "traditionally, criminals are drawn and *then* quartered. It would be far too cumbersome to parade the criminal around after they've already been dismembered. Also, again, where did you learn to speak like that?"

"Madam Maid, could you please not give her ideas?!" the accused pleaded.

It was all Hubert could do not to crack up again. "I do so hate to be a killjoy, but seeing as our affairs are in order here, we ought to take account of the rest of the damage to the county. We're going to need Schue's help with that."

That finally snapped Luciana out of her rage. There were more important matters at hand than some skirt chaser. "You're right." She shut her fan and paced. "I hope everyone is okay."

Dyrule and Ryan shared sighs of relief as the Luciana they knew returned.

"Normally, this would be a one-man job, but it seems to me that time is of the essence," Hubert said. "I want Schue to hurry on to one of the villages for me."

Luciana grumbled. "I suppose that's for the best."

"So you forgive me?" Schue jabbered. "Thank you so much, fair lady!"

"Don't push your luck."

"I can assure you, fair lady, that I have taken each and every one of your well-justified criticisms into solemn account and do hereby swear to consider them in the very near future!"

"I should hope that would be the present," Melody said. He sounded all too much like a dodgy politician to her.

Hubert swiftly divided up responsibilities. He would make haste to Gourges to the east, and Ryan would assess the situation at his hometown to the north, while Schue went to Durnan in the southwest. The three maids were too shaken to do much of anything and currently rested on a blanket Melody had laid out for them. Stress had put them to sleep.

"I will remain and ensure milady's safety," Dyrule said.

"We'll be fine. You should stay with Uncle." Luciana was not about to do this again, especially now that she had Melody. The men, however, did not see things as she did.

“We can’t leave women to fend for themselves. Dyrule stays,” Hubert stated.

“But what if you need more help in town? We won’t go anywhere. Take him with you. We also have—”

“My lady! Miss Melody!”

“Help on the way,” Luciana finished.

Micah’s voice heralded the carriage’s arrival.

“And who’s that?” Hubert asked.

“My carriage. Seems they’ve caught up.”

“Your carriage? How in the world did you get here without it?”

“We flew.”

“You… Well, yes, I assume you arrived in a hurry, but how exactly?”

Luciana chuckled. “Let’s just say I have my ways.”

Her uncle’s misunderstanding of her phrasing was too entertaining to correct. Not that he would have believed her even if she did explain. She laughed again.

Dyrule assessed the carriage. A small girl hung out the window, waving. In the box sat a handsome young man. The sword at his hip didn’t escape the guardsman’s notice.

“That man. He’s your escort?”

“That’s Rook,” Luciana said. “We hired him in the capital. He’s our newest valet-in-training, and he saw us all the way here safely.”

Ryan's interest was piqued. "A butler-to-be, is he? Shall I whip him into shape later?"

"That was part of why we brought him. He doesn't have anyone to learn from in the capital, so we were hoping you could teach him some things."

"I see." Ryan bowed low. "That can be arranged, my lady."

Meanwhile, Dyrule's face was in his palm. "She's run off ahead of her guard yet again…" He sighed. Then kept sighing.

"Um, Melody was with me this time, I'll have you know," the culprit argued.

"You'd placate me with the presence of one maid? You are a guardsman's worst nightmare, my lady. Truly. Do you have any idea how beside myself with worry I was when you disappeared? And after His Lordship, frankly, I have to question if any of you are cognizant of your positions at all."

By the time Dyrule finished his rant, the carriage reached them.

"Sorry for the delay," Rook said.

"Oh no, this is awful," Micah said. "The whole place is flattened. My lady, Miss Melody, were either of you hurt?"

"No, Micah, thank you," Melody replied. "We're fine, and luckily the others are as well."

"Thank goodness." Property could be replaced but not people. Micah sighed with relief.

"We'll do proper introductions once Lullia and the others are awake," Luciana told her uncle. "But these are my three attendants

who came with me from the capital."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Hubert," Melody said. "I am Melody, maid of all work."

"P-pleasure to meet you! I'm Micah, maid-in-training!"

"Pleasure. Rook, valet-in-training."

Melody and the valet performed proper bows while Micah curtsied rather clumsily.

"If only we could have met under better circumstances," Hubert said. "I am Luciana's uncle, Hubert. I leave her in your capable hands."

"Yes, my lord," the servants replied in unison.

He nodded, satisfied. "Rook can stand guard here then, and Dyrule will come with me. There's no telling how much debris will need moving."

Dyrule stood at attention. "Milord. You, the one called Rook. Stay vigilant."

"Understood," Rook said.

"Now," Hubert said, "let's be off. There's no time to lose."

"A moment, please." Melody ran up just as the three groups began to disperse toward the villages. She handed out stationary and writing implements. "For taking account."

If the damage was bad enough, they would likely need a way to record it all.

"Melody, you shouldn't have!" Schue said. "Oh, how considerate of you to think of me!"

"Schue," Ryan snapped. "Enough. You're making her glare. Thank you, madam, we'll make good use of these."

Melody handed the implements to Hubert last. "Here you are, my lord." She beamed up at him.

"Thank y—"

His hand froze. He stood still as a statue, staring into the maid's eyes.

"Is something the matter, my lord?"

"N-no. Nothing. Thank you. You're a great help."

"Safe travels."

"Right. Safe travels."

The lord dashed away at a full sprint. Leaving Dyrule behind.

"Lord Hubert! Oh, for the love of…" The guardsman raced after him.

"What gave him pause, I wonder," Melody said.

"Maybe you charmed him," Micah teased. "Maybe it was love at first sight."

Melody laughed. "Please. He's more than twice my age. He'd hardly take an interest in me, I'm sure." The notion was simply absurd.

Still, Micah thought, *she's the heroine. May-December isn't exactly out of the question.*

Micah watched Hubert's quickly diminishing figure, eyes filled with budding curiosity.

As for Luciana—"I'll have to have a long talk with him when he returns."

The harisen was back in her hand. Her eyes narrowed, as if trained on a singular goal. She took a swing. Just for practice.

That girl, Hubert thought as he ran. *She looks an awful lot like her. Not her hair or eyes but her smile. It was just like Selena's.*

What am I thinking? She's young enough to be my niece.

"My lord, wait! For goodness—wait!" Dyrule shouted. "Damn, he's fast!"

Hubert ran from the ridiculous thoughts all the way to Gourges.

"Tea, my lady."

"Thank you, Melody." Luciana sat at a table with some refreshments to help settle her nerves. All the chaos had left her terribly thirsty. "Delicious."

"You honor me, my lady."

The maid smiled warmly at her lady, and Luciana smiled back. Such a lovely moment it was.

"Is now really the time for this?" asked Micah, spoiling it entirely.

"Am I not allowed a little escapism?" Luciana pouted. The comment, unfortunately, forced her to briefly face the reality unfolding around her.

"Debris removal team reporting. We've found undamaged pottery!"

"Very good. Turn it in to the recovery team."

"Yes, madam!"

The remains of the Rudleberg estate now hosted fifty Melodys busily working in tandem to clear the mountain of rubble. The main Melody, meanwhile, focused on attending to her lady.

The Melodys were divided into a number of teams. There was debris removal, tasked with, well, the removal of debris; the recovery team, who collected and kept tabs on all the potentially usable cookware or tools they unearthed; a team dedicated to retrieving as many administrative documents as possible; and so on, all working together. And, as was tradition at this point, all worked double time. Doubtless they would finish their work long before Hubert returned.

"It's a good thing the other maids are asleep, otherwise they might faint at the sight of all this. I know I did. Once." Luciana's eyes glazed over.

As did Micah's. "It is a surreal scene, isn't it?"

Melody, as ever, had not a clue what they were going on about.

"What are we going to do about all this?" Luciana asked.

"We should complete the work before nightfall, my lady," Melody said.

Luciana shook her head. "No, I mean about *all* of this. How am I going to tell Father?"

"That's true," Micah said. "The entire estate did get flattened."

"I'll bet it's going to be expensive…"

"Oh. Right. That part."

The Ignoble Rudlebergs were ever at the mercy of their past mistakes and that brutally blunt moniker of theirs. With their debts paid, however, and Count Hughes's appointment to the Chancery, Hughes had hoped he might be able to provide a little more for his family. This tragedy had struck with a truly cruel sense of timing. Luciana did not want to think about the cost to replace all that had been destroyed.

Perhaps they would have to get comfortable with debt once again.

"My lady," Melody said, "shall I rebuild the estate myself?"

Luciana didn't humor the absurd suggestion long. "That would save us a lot of grief, financially speaking, but no. Thank you, Melody, but Father is the head of the house, so ultimately it's up to him. We probably shouldn't tread on his authority."

"Miss Melody, I have an idea," said Micah. "What if you just made it how it was before the disaster? Like turning the clock back with your magic. Could you do that?"

"No, Micah. Don't be silly."

Luciana's eyes widened. "You *can't* do that? Not even you?"

"Regrettably, my lady, while I could certain apply my maidly talents toward simply building a new estate, returning the current estate to its previous condition is impossible when I have never seen the manor whole."

"Define 'maidly talents.'" Luciana really should have known better than to question this sort of thing at this point.

"But you wouldn't be building it yourself," Micah pointed out. "Wouldn't turning back time do all the work for you?"

"Impossible for an entirely different reason. Time flows in but one direction," Melody explained. "Once it passes, it's gone forever. I could speed it up, slow it down, or even pause it temporarily, but I cannot ever reverse it."

"It might be easier for us to think about your capabilities in terms of things you *can't* do at this point." Admittedly, Micah found it a little reassuring that even Melody had some limits.

"On that note, my lady, once we've finished the cleanup, I'll prepare temporary living arrangements," Melody said.

"That's probably for the best," Luciana said. "Are we going to use the cottage?"

"I think not. It's far too small, and it won't do as a long-term substitute after we've returned to the capital and while the new estate is still under construction."

"That's true. It does rely on you being around," Micah said.

All the lights and water sources came from Melody's magic. As a quick place to rest on a long journey, it was rather convenient, but to Hubert and his retinue, the majority of whom could not use magic, it would prove quite the opposite.

"In any case," Melody said, "I will construct an impromptu, temporary estate of sorts for both Lord Hubert's and our own comfort.

If that's all right with you, my lady."

"We do need somewhere to sleep. Will you have enough materials for something like that?"

"Plenty, my lady. I've still a healthy supply of lumber."

"How much did you deforest?" Micah asked. Mostly rhetorically.

Melody had used so much wood on the cottage, yet somehow she still had more? The thought of a freshly thinned and healthily growing Great Vanargand Wood threatened to give Micah an ulcer.

"Everyone!" Melody called out to her clones. "Next, we must build temporary lodgings, so make the necessary arrangements!"

"Yes, madam!" the mob roared before returning to work with renewed vigor. Things were progressing smoothly.

"Thanks to Melody, we can take care of the most pressing concerns," Luciana ruminated. "But there's still Father to report to. That'll mean another trip to the capital, but I hate to leave at a time like this, even if Uncle's here to handle things."

As much of an emergency as this was, she'd only just arrived. Luciana wanted to be of use, but word had to reach her father somehow. Conundrums.

Melody and Micah watched their lady pace. Rook was off on his own, securing the perimeter. Grail, as usual, slept peacefully in the carriage.

"Do you remember the spell you used in the forest?" Micah whispered to her colleague. "Couldn't you use that to zip to the capital?"

"Technically, yes, but…"

Micah spoke of Ovunque Porta, of course, the gateway spell that could connect two distinct locations with a magical door. She'd experienced it firsthand when Melody transported a rampaging Bjork from the Royal Academy to the Great Vanargand Wood.

Ovunque Porta is meant as a pathway for servant use only, Melody thought. *To let my lady use it would be improper, to say the least.*

In many estates, the servants used completely separate hallways from their master or mistress for the sake of propriety, and to ensure the master and mistress felt the servants' presence as little as possible. Melody had applied this same principle to the Ovunque Porta spell, but it was an entirely self-enforced rule in that case, and nothing physically prevented her lady from making use of those pathways. After all, Lect had done so and he was petty nobility.

Melody coped with the distress of this realization under the pretense of "friend privilege."

In any case, it was a matter of pride. Melody wanted to maintain her finicky principles as best she could, and that got her thinking outside the box.

That's it. If servants have their own pathways, then I just need to make one for my lady!

"If you'll excuse me, my lady."

"Hm? Oh, sure. You're excused, Melody."

The maid curtsied and left. Luciana thought little of it other than that Melody probably needed a bathroom break, but the maid returned no more than a minute later.

"Back already?"

"Forgive me for the delay, my lady. The preparations are complete," Melody said.

"The preparations? For what?"

"What's this about?" Micah asked, head cocked at the same angle as Luciana's.

Melody smirked proudly. "Humble welcomes—*Benvenuti Porta*."

A grand double door rose from the ground before Luciana and Micah with great pomp. Silver embellishments adorned the door, granting it an imposing air. Whosoever used this door was clearly an individual of great importance.

Micah took an awed breath. "What in the world…?"

Luciana gawked. "Is this what I think it is?"

The Benvenuti Porta slowly opened. On the other side lay not a hill of rubble swarming with scrambling worker Melodys, but rather… "L-Luciana? Is that you?"

"Father?"

The capital estate's foyer, in which stood Count Hughes. He was dressed like he'd just returned from an engagement, and Serena was there greeting him.

"Gentlesister," she said with a lilt of surprise. "Forgot

something?”

“Oh, no. Our lady simply has something to report to His Lordship. It was an emergency, you see.”

“Well, goodness. It must be some emergency if you’re allowing her to use Ovunque Porta. Unless this is different? It certainly isn’t the door I’m used to seeing.”

“Indeed. I’ve fashioned a new one for the family’s use. Both our lady and His Lordship are free to pass through without worry of unseemly faux pas.”

Serena couldn’t stifle a giggle. “That’s perfect, Gentlesister.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No!” the Rudlebergs snapped. Father and daughter cradled their heads in their hands, faces contorted in pain.

“You see the problem with this, yes, Luciana?” groaned Hughes.

“I do, Father. We are in agreement.”

“My lady? What’s wrong?” Melody asked without a hint of irony.

That earned her a pair of sighs.

“Serena, is my mother in? If she is, please bring her to the dining hall immediately,” Luciana said.

“Yes, my lady.”

“Does anyone else know of this?” Hughes asked his daughter.

“Fortunately, Uncle is away right now. Only those of us from the capital know.”

“Assemble everyone. Rudleberg family meeting in the dining hall!” Hughes said.

Much hustle and chaos followed this command. Melody alone stood frozen in place, as confused as she had ever been.

Chapter 13:
The Maid Who Learned Fear

BACK IN THE PALTESCIA ESTATE, SERVANTS and family sat face-to-face in the dining hall.

"I officially call this long overdue meeting to session," Hughes said.

"Wait, where's Rook?" Luciana searched for him.

At the head of the table sat the house patriarch, Count Hughes. His wife, Marianna, sat to his right, followed by their daughter. On the opposite side of the table sat Melody, Micah, and Serena, but no Rook.

Micah raised her hand to speak. "He stayed behind to look after the maids."

"Ah, right. That makes sense," Luciana said.

"He also said that he had no business here and it would be a waste of time."

"Micah, I think he may have appreciated if you kept that to yourself," Luciana said. "In any case, I guess Lullia and the others would be a little shocked to wake up alone. Anyway, please continue, Father."

Hughes nodded. "Let us get right to the crux of today's meeting: Melody's complete and utter lack of perspective in regard to her magic."

Question marks could have flashed over the heads of every servant at the table at Hughes's words.

"Wait, Micah? Melody and Serena I get, but you're confused too?" Luciana asked.

"Oh, it's just, why now? This all feels awfully sudden," Micah replied.

"Serena," Melody said, "do you know what this is about?"

"I'm afraid all my magical knowledge comes from you, Gentlesister. I'm rather lost myself." The doll rested her cheek against her hand.

Micah nodded. "It's always the one you expect to be the most normal who has the least common sense."

"So, um, what's this about my lack of perspective?" Melody asked.

"Melody, dear, your magic has been a great help to us and this family," Marianna said. "But, well, the spells you cast are special. Unlike any other."

Melody beamed. "Yes, my lady! Because it's maid magic! Magic made for maids by maids!"

Marianna wore a crooked grin. "How do we put this?"

"Allow me, Mother," Luciana chimed in. "To be blunt, Melody, your magic is completely unique. It's special. In the sense that it's unparalleled—in a way that many people would probably want for themselves if they witnessed it."

"I'd be happy to share the secrets of maid magic with them. It's not especially difficult."

To Melody, these powers were simple conveniences, tools to aid her in her work, tools that others in her profession would undoubtedly make good use of as well. She welcomed the opportunity to proselytize her unique brand of sorcery.

Luciana, however, shook her head. "What I'm saying is this: I don't think that's true. I think *only you* are capable of using magic in the way you do."

"What? But that's…"

"Miss Melody, on a purely technical level, you're beyond anyone," Micah said bluntly. "But even more than that, no one has anywhere near the amount of mana they'd need to cast any of your spells."

"They don't have enough mana? How?"

"She doesn't know," Micah muttered through a sigh. She looked up at Melody, meeting her eye to eye. "Because you have the most out of anyone in the kingdom! Probably anyone in the entire world!"

Because you're the heroine, dang it! she added mentally.

"The most mana in the world? Me?" Melody blinked. "Don't be ridiculous, Micah. That's hyperbole if I've ever heard it. I'm still largely untrained. Why, just a few months ago I couldn't cast a single spell. And you say I'm number one in the world?"

"Mana is inherent to the individual. When you learned how to use it is irrelevant."

"I…suppose." Melody turned to her lady, searching for a lifeline.

She didn't find one. Luciana and her family held firm, regarding Melody with stony expressions.

"I can't speak on the scale of the entire world," Luciana said, "but you're without a doubt number one in the kingdom."

"My lady?!"

"Agreed," the count and countess said.

"Y-Your Lordship. Your Ladyship."

"Melody, do you remember when I was attacked at the Spring Ball?" said Luciana.

"I'll never forget it."

Melody gritted her teeth. *My enchantments failed. I failed. My lady's dress was in tatters. She lost consciousness. I'll never live down that shame. All the more reason to doubt this ridiculous assertion that I have the most mana in the kingdom, much less the world!*

Luciana would not abide such excuses. "It's thanks to your magic that I made it out unharmed."

"But your dress was destroyed. You didn't come back to us until the next morning."

"You're missing the bigger picture. Without your magic, it would have been far worse. I would have died, Melody. *Your* magic saved my life."

"Y-you're exaggerating, my lady."

"It is not an exaggeration," Hughes said.

"My lord?"

"The scoundrel who attacked my daughter did more than swing a sword. Several of the attendees were trapped in some kind of dark barrier of his making. Even Sven Shaykrode, His Majesty's archmage, could not break it."

"The archmage himself?"

"Indeed. Over and over, Archmage Shaykrode bombarded the barrier with spells of incredible power to no avail whatsoever. Only when His Royal Highness defeated the villain did it finally fall, but let that speak to the strength of the threat we faced."

"I wasn't privy to the details. I…I'm glad you're safe, my lady."

"As am I," Hughes continued. "But she would not have been if not for the protection you applied to her dress. Make no mistake, Melody, you saved my daughter from a man powerful enough to challenge the archmage himself. So please understand, this power of yours—it is incredible. And it does, indeed, surpass the greatest spell caster in the realm."

Melody did not speak. She couldn't.

I'm the…most powerful spell caster in the kingdom?

"If I may," Serena spoke up. "If what you say is true, then pardon my confusion, but what exactly is the concern? Is it not a good thing that Gentlesister has so much mana?"

Silence fell heavily over the dining hall. The question snapped even Melody back to her senses. Assuming she believed these claims, why did this truth call for an emergency meeting?

Hughes explained soberly. “The mana isn’t the concern. It’s what can be done with it. Namely, anything. It’s as Luciana said. There are no few number of nobles or merchants who would covet you were they to know of your power.”

“And with your talents?” Marianna continued. “You’re a superb maid. You can divide yourself to be everywhere all at once. You can make any dress your heart imagines. There’s no protection sturdier than your defensive spells. You can create *life*, as you did with Serena. On top of all of that, you’re an excellent cook, a thorough cleaner, and a speedy maid. From my point of view, there’s nothing you can’t do.”

“But most of all, you’re really pretty!” Luciana hastened to add. “And that’s something everyone can see!”

“What…all that is to say,” Hughes went on after recovering from his daughter’s non sequitur, “is that you draw attention. Frankly, it’s a miracle no one’s taken notice of you thus far.”

Somehow, completely oblivious to her situation, Melody had avoided the world’s attention. By some twist of fate, her work as a maid offered her the very obscurity that had concealed her feats and miracles within the bubble of her family.

But she’d crossed an important line today.

“Your newest teleportation spell. It’s far too ostentatious,” Hughes said. “Granted, your ability to multiply isn’t exactly subtle either, but the implications of this newest spell are dangerous.”

Micah nodded, finally understanding. “Thus the emergency meeting.”

Her past as a Japanese schoolgirl still far outweighed her time in this world. She did not yet possess the same sensitivities as the Rudlebergs. Teleportation magic was about as cliché as cliché fantasy could get, so it only made sense to her that Melody could use it. The reason for the Rudlebergs' panic did not fully set in until just now. Clones or magical armor could stay private, but teleportation was, by its nature, a tad more flashy. And attractive.

"I can see how that might incite a small-scale war over her," she reasoned.

"It indeed could," Hughes said. "And we Rudlebergs, sad as it is, would lack any meaningful authority or say in such a conflict. Staving off commoners is one thing, but our aristocratic peers would swiftly overwhelm us."

"But I don't want to leave House Rudleberg," Melody argued meekly.

"It's very sweet of you to say that." Marianna smiled at her, and the maid smiled back. The expression soon withered. "But if a noble of high enough standing ordered it, you would have no say in the matter. We couldn't protect you."

Melody glanced around the table, speechless. The somber expressions that greeted her rooted her in this harsh reality.

"Melody," Luciana said, "if someone discovers your magic and people begin to vie for it, it's not losing you that scares us the most—it's you losing your freedom. And you *will* lose your freedom."

"My freedom?"

"Like we said, we're operating under the assumption that you have more mana than anyone else in the kingdom. You can multiply and make dresses stronger than armor and build cottages in half an hour and then stow them away in a globe to take wherever you go. You have a rare gift. Special magic."

"One of those is new to me," Hughes commented offhandedly.

"And now that you have this spell that can send people across vast distances and you're ready to put it on display… Melody, if the Crown found out, I struggle to believe they'd let you keep being our maid."

"The Crown?!"

This was getting out of hand. The stakes just kept rising.

"That's right," Luciana continued grimly. "Someone as strong and talented and pretty as you—the realm would never waste that kind of asset. I imagine they'd make you a court mage."

"A court mage? But I don't want to be that," Melody protested weakly. "I want to be a maid."

She couldn't believe it. She refused to. They would have to drag her away kicking and screaming.

Luciana shook her head. "They'll probably use all sorts of means to force your hand. You could be adopted into a noble house, or even engaged to a member of the royal family."

"Engaged? To royalty? Y-Your Lordship, surely *this* is hyperbole."

Hughes didn't even blink. "I wish I could say it was. Your gift is simply that valuable. Strong heirs are valuable. A royal could view you

as a powerful addition to their pedigree."

Melody froze. Her mouth hung open in numb shock. *Adopted? Engaged? I could become nobility. Royalty, even. If that happens, my life as a maid would be…*

"I…"

The entire table leaned toward Melody. "You what?"

"I don't *wannaaaaa*!"

This was not the sort of wail the Rudleberg estate had grown accustomed to. This voice, brand new to the vibrating walls of the estate, was of the maidly variety.

"I'm…! I'm never using magic again!" Melody blubbered, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I was so happy when I got these powers," she sputtered. "I thought I could make my master's life better, whoever they were. I thought it was a good thing, but it…it could unmake my entire maid life!"

Melody sagged with betrayal, utterly crestfallen that her pride and joy, her beloved maid magic, could become a noose around her neck. Every time she used it, the rope tightened a little more. Every time she used it, she ran the risk of revealing herself and ending this ideal life of hers. She'd never even known the risks until now.



She couldn’t bear the thought of giving up her dream. She would rather die. The idea terrified her so completely that all other thoughts fled her mind.

Hiding her tearstained face behind her hands, Melody declared, “I’m locking these powers away forever, moving far off, and starting over as a plain maid who’s never even heard of magic! Thank you for everything and goodbye!”

She darted for the door. Hughes and his wife could only watch, mouths agape. Micah was flabbergasted. Even Serena, the great magical maid automaton, stood frozen in her spot.

Only one person retained the wits to respond.

“Melody, don’t go!”

Luciana hurled herself at the maid, screaming at the top of her lungs. She wrapped her arms around Melody’s waist and tackled her to the floor, shouting the whole way. Luciana hardly even noticed the impact as she held the maid with an ironclad grip.

“Ow, that hurt… My lady?”

“Please don’t go, Melody!” Luciana sobbed. “Please don’t go!” She was even more of a mess than Melody, her face soggy with tears and snot.

Wh-what in the world?! What… I don’t understand. Somehow, her lady’s inconsolable, heartbroken display soothed Melody. She watched Luciana sniffle and bawl, a gentle smile overtaking her lips as she did.

Melody reached into her pocket and produced a handkerchief. "I won't leave, my lady. I'm not going anywhere. Please don't cry."

Luciana sniffed and hiccuped. "Do you swear?"

"On my honor, my lady." Melody dabbed the tears from her cheeks. She was much prettier without them.

Melody's heart swelled in her chest. *I'd be a failure of a maid to leave a place where I'm so clearly needed.*

Micah, on the complete opposite end of the emotional spectrum, was aghast. "That's the Jealous Witch for you…"

Jealous Witch? Serena thought. Micah must not have thought anyone would hear her, but now didn't seem a particularly good time to ask what she meant by that.

Once composed, Melody returned to her seat. "That was unbecoming of me. I apologize."

With Luciana still affixed to her waist.

"Luciana," Hughes snapped, "go to your seat."

"No!"

"My lady, I gave you my word," Melody said.

"Nuh-uh!"

"Look at you," Marianna teased. "You're like a little baby."

"I said no!"

The shock of Melody's threat had reverted the young lady back to infancy. It didn't seem worth the effort to try and get through to her right now.

Hughes attempted to restore a measure of decorum by clearing his throat. “At any rate, I think the message is clear. You will always have a place in House Rudleberg.”

“Your talents are certainly attractive. We won’t patronize you,” Marianna said. “But you’ve done so much for this family, and we want to return the favor one day. When it’s, er, a little more within our means.”

“Your Lordship. Your Ladyship. Thank you,” Melody said.

“I don’t care if you have magic or not! I want you to stay here forever!” Luciana said.

“I’m flattered, my lady. Then I suppose it’s best that I do away with the cottage.”

“What?! But… N-never mind. Do what you have to.” Luciana’s expression flashed from grief to acceptance in record time.

“Our lady’s a little indecisive,” Micah teased.

“I-it was a nice house!”

“I’m only joking,” Melody laughed. “I will spare the cottage.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks, Melody!”

The weight bearing down on the dining hall finally lifted and levity returned. Serena decided now was a good time to ask, “What exactly do we intend to do about Gentlesister’s magic?”

The hall fell quiet. Hughes cleared his throat. “The important thing is to be mindful about hiding her magic more proactively going forward.”

"So she shouldn't use it at all?" Luciana asked.

"Not quite. We've benefited from it far too much to place the onus on her alone. But the fact remains that she does need to be more prudent about using it."

"Then she can use as much as she wants! She just has to avoid getting caught!"

"That's, well, not the *wrong* idea."

It was, however, perhaps the complete opposite extreme of what Hughes was suggesting.

"I understand, my lord," Melody said. "It's true that I've paid very little mind to those around me, but I'll make a point to be more aware of the time and place if I want to use magic. They'll have to pry this apron off my corpse." A flame burned so fiercely in Melody it was nearly crackling. "But how should we approach the situation with those in the county?"

Hughes thought about that. "I would err on the side of caution and continue to be discreet. I trust our people to keep things under wraps, but the best secrets are ones no one needs to keep. Then again, we may want to include Hubert so that things run a little smoother."

"We can wait for him to get back, then bring him here so we can explain," Luciana suggested.

"That'll do. Did you hear that, Melody?"

"Yes, my lord."

And so the very first Rudleberg family meeting was adjourned. The specifics of concealing Melody's powers would be left up to her discretion, which was a fittingly inconclusive resolution for the Rudleberg household.

"Before Hubert and the others return," Hughes added, "might I check the condition of the estate? I'll be on tenterhooks if I don't see it for myself."

The count passed through the Benvenuti Porta door and stepped onto the site of the disaster. Normally, several of those returning after him would not use the same door he did, lacking sufficient nobility for such a privilege, but the master allowed it on the technicality that they were his attendants. Besides, it would have been silly to cast Ovunque Porta as well.

Hughes took one step into the county and froze. "What is this?"

Luciana, Melody, and Micah croaked in unison. He blanched not at the miserable condition of the estate but rather the building that had suddenly appeared behind it. The estate was actually entirely gone, and the clone Melodys were sorting through items recovered from the wreckage.

"I don't recall that being there."

"We, er, did leave them with instructions to build temporary lodgings," Luciana said.

"Lodgings? That's a miniature estate," Micah said.

"I-I'm sorry," Melody said bashfully. "It completely slipped my mind."

Indeed, a miniature estate awaited them. Like the cottage, it was made out of polished lumber rather than full logs, and though small, it offered all the refinement of a noble's residence.

The Melodys had painted the walls white (with paint from God knows where), and tiled the roof in dark gray shingles like a protective shell. Smoke billowed from a chimney. For something made of wood, the place did not look cheap. In front of it, Melody clones tended to flower beds and put the finishing touches on a fence that enclosed the perimeter.

It was fantastic.

"Not off to a very discreet start," Micah mumbled.

Hughes pinched his brow.

Chapter 14:
Welcome Home for Now

SOME TIME LATER, MELODY SPOTTED A MAN running toward them from the east.

"My lady, Lord Hubert's returned…alone?"

"Alone? Dyrule isn't with him? That's convenient, I suppose."

"True enough, but what is he thinking running off without an escort," Hughes said.

"Very irresponsible of him," his daughter agreed.

Evidently, there was an entire family tree of pots and kettles. Melody and Micah shot each other a disbelieving look.

"Do you think it's mandatory or something that everyone in House Rudleberg hate their guardsmen?" Micah asked Melody under her breath.

"I think not, but it could be hereditary."

"Allergic to safety."

Theories abounded.

"Welcome home, Uncle," Luciana said.

"Good to be home, Luciana," Hubert replied. "Gourges was safe for the most part, thankfully. They were spared most of the shaking."

"That's good. Do you have any idea where Dyrule went?"

"Dyrule? Why, he's… Where did he get off to? He was right there with me earlier."

"Quick on your feet as ever, I see."

"Dyrule's just slow!" Hubert guffawed. "Maybe I ought to make the boy run laps with me."

"Or you could go easy on the poor man," Hughes said. "Welcome back, Hubert."

"Well, thank you, Brother! I may have rushed a bit in my excitement to report the village's safety, so I… Brother?" Hubert's wolfish grin vanished, and his eyes widened at the man who should not have been there.

"I had some business to discuss with you," Hughes said. "Melody, if you would."

"Of course, my lord." The maid stepped forward as instructed. "Welcome home, Lord Hubert. Please, take this to freshen up."

Melody handed the sweat-drenched man a wet towel. She beamed at him as she did, much in the way she'd practiced in Lect's class at Royal Academy.

The sweat-drenched man blushed. "Th-thank you." He accepted the towel awkwardly, but found his gaze stuck on the maid's smile.

A small hand on his shoulder jolted him from his stupor. "Uncle, I do hope you're not developing any untoward feelings for a fifteen-year-old girl."

"Wh-what? Of course not, Luciana. Where did you get that idea?"

She wore the same dead smile she'd leveled at Schue. Her eyes turned Hubert's blood to ice. "I'm going to take you at your word, Uncle." Her hand slowly slid off his shoulder.

He did not question how she'd reached that high in the first place.

"It's nothing, really. Melody here just bears a striking resemblance to my, er, first love."

Everyone blinked in surprise.

"I didn't know you'd ever fancied anyone," Hughes said.

"I never told you. Or anyone for that matter."

"But why not?" Luciana said. "You could have introduced her to everyone."

"No, I'm afraid I couldn't have. When I knew her, she was already with child."

The estate itself could not have fallen more heavily than silence did just then. Hubert's first love was a married woman? Should he have admitted to something like that?

Hubert stared off into the distance. "She'd parted ways with her husband and had no other family to turn to. She was going to raise the child on her own. And I fell in love with her." He chuckled wryly.

"What happened to her?" Luciana asked.

Hubert ruffled a hand through his hair. "She was just passing through, actually. Leaving the capital, pregnant as she was. I happened to stumble upon her while she was recuperating from a bout of fatigue. I gave her a place to stay in Gourges, where she had

the baby. She stayed about a year after that, then continued on to the west."

"So nothing became of you two" Luciana said. "That's a shame."

"In a romantic sense," Hughes said with difficulty, "but I can't imagine ever being allowed to marry a woman heavy with someone else's child—a commoner, no less, if she was living in a village."

"It was hopeless from the start," Hubert said. "She'd separated from her husband but still had feelings for him. It was complicated, she said." He paused. "I proposed, actually, before she left. She turned me down gently at least." Another harsh chuckle.

Luciana and her father fell quiet. This was an old wound they'd already pried too far open.

Hubert turned toward Melody. "Your smile reminded me of her, and it revived old feelings. I apologize if I made you uncomfortable."

"Not at all," Melody said, still wearing that very same smile.

Hubert's gaze softened. *That's exactly how Selena would look. I wonder if she's well these days.*

How sad that he couldn't know this was her child and that Selena herself had already gone from this world. How sad it was that Melody couldn't know that Hubert's love was her mother, and here, the County of Rudleberg, was her birthplace. One day, maybe they would both realize, fate willing.

Hughes cleared the air with a cough. "Back to what it is I'm doing here."

"Right, I was wondering that, Brother. If you've arrived after Luciana, you must have left not long after her. Was there trouble in the capital?"

"Not at all. Not yet, anyway."

Hughes revealed everything to his brother regarding Melody and her magic. The story was certainly tough to believe at first blush, but one look at the grounds of the estate convinced him.

"She made this in the short time I was away at the village?" Hubert said. "'Incredible' doesn't do it justice."

"I can't apologize enough, my lord," Melody said.

"Apologize? What for?" Hubert said. "I hadn't given a single thought to where we were going to sleep tonight. I ought to be on my knees thanking you."

"You're too kind, my lord."

A nostalgic smile. A flustered blush. And then the ominous weight of a hand on Hubert's shoulder.

"Excuse me, Uncle. Need I remind you that I have your word? Am I going to regret trusting you?"

"N-not at all. It's reflexive, Luciana, I assure you. I have only one love, and it isn't Melody." Hubert collected himself. "I'll pen a report and send it to you soon, Brother. You can base your response to the situation on that."

"Right," Hughes replied.

"Now, are Lullia and her girls still asleep? Good. Luciana, you and I will handle the edifice that's just sprung up. It was always there.

Understood? We stick to that story until it sticks."

"Will that actually work?" Luciana asked.

"It will if our acting skills are up to it. Stick to it until it sticks. Can you do that?"

"I can!"

"Melody—I hate to ask this of you after all you've done, but can you return the rubble to where it was?"

"I certainly can," the maid said, "but why?"

"It will be hard enough to sell the bite-sized manor we have here," Hubert said. "I don't think we can pass off a mountain of wood as well. It's best that we leave it as is until my brother reads the report and decides on a course of action, in any case."

"Understood. I'll make it so."

"Ah, but leave any tools or documents you've found. Missing paperwork will hinder our administrative measures. It should be easy enough to claim we dug for the paperwork ourselves as a matter of necessity."

Melody blinked, struck by the thoroughness of Hubert's leadership, then gave a lopsided grin. "Very well. Reach—*Allungare la Mano—Mille*."

Invisible arms, thousands of limbs of pure force, lifted the neatly organized piles of wooden debris. Had they been visible, one could have mistaken Melody for the great, thousand-armed deity Senju Kannon.

Melody manipulated the arms all at once, completely in parallel, rebuilding the wreckage nearly exactly as it was, as if she were working from a blueprint. It happened swiftly and almost completely silently, not even disturbing the maids sleeping nearby.

"I can certainly see the need for secrecy." Hubert laughed awkwardly.

"We can only hope the feeling is mutual," said Luciana.

"She's a sharp girl," Hughes said. "I'd like to think she knows how to control herself."

House Rudleberg could only hope and pray.

The work did not take long. Hughes returned to the capital through the door, the wreckage rebuilt itself, and those who remained busied themselves carrying the recovered tools and documents into the small manor.

Dyrule was the first of the retinue to return from the villages, wheezing for his life. "Lord Hubert… Please do not do that again."

"What took you so long, Dyrule? You ought to work on those legs."

The guardsman's shoulders heaved, his hands planted on his knees. Let it not be said he hadn't tried his damnedest to keep up, for whatever good it did him.

"I'm afraid that's going to take…some time," Dyrule said. "What is that?" The elephant in the room, as it were, finally caught his eye.

"What is what?"

"The manor that's sitting there. That wasn't always there. Was it?"

"Has the heat gone to your head? That's our emergency shelter, Dyrule. We built it in case of an emergency just like this. How could you have forgotten?"

"What? No, I'm quite sure—"

"Uncle, I think he must have overexerted himself," Luciana conjectured.

"So it would seem," Hubert said. "Exerted quite overly indeed."

"I really don't think that would affect my—"

"It's always been there," uncle and niece interjected. They wore blindingly bright smiles. "Hasn't it?"

They put up the perfect defense against anything Dyrule might have said. He quickly forfeited the battle with a shake of his head. "Yes, yes, it has. It's always been there. Are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied with what? Well, I'm glad to hear you speaking sense again," Hubert said. "It's always been there."

"It was such a wise decision to build it, wasn't it, Uncle?" Luciana said.

She laughed. He laughed. Everyone laughed. Clearly something was going unsaid. Nobles rarely put on a show like this without cause, but Dyrule was powerless to object. *It's rare that our house deals in secrets, but I suppose this is one of those times.*

He sighed quietly enough that they wouldn't notice. How in the world did this estate get here? Where had it come from? Dyrule was

clueless, but the Rudlebergs were not unreasonable masters. They shared a mutual trust with their staff. If they deemed this worthy of such secrecy, it was surely for good reason.

The guardsman knew his place well.

Ryan returned next, and then the maids woke, and they all received the same treatment. Being the practiced professionals they were, they too picked up on the hidden meaning behind the deception and arrived at the same conclusions Dyrule had.

And then there was Schue.

"What the? What is that? Hey, what is that? Guys, are we not going to question that?"

"It's always been there," uncle and niece said. "Hasn't it?"

"No," Schue stated flatly. "No, it hasn't. It wasn't there a few hours ago, so why is it there now? This is crazy. Someone agree with me!"

Hubert and Luciana kept smiling.

Schue gawked at the gaudy mystery monolith, repeatedly mouthing "what?" in bemusement. He was not quite as practiced in servitude as his professional colleagues. "Lord Hubert, an explanation please!"

"Enough, Schue," Ryan said.

"But how are we supposed to pretend like there *isn't* a brand-new estate that just appeared out of nowhere?! Don't you want to know what's going on?!"

The other servants expressed their feelings on the matter through pinched foreheads and lowered eyebrows. A migraine swept through the group.

Schue did not know his place.

In came a hand. It landed firmly on his shoulder.

"Schue," Luciana said.

"Hm? M-my lady? Wh-why, uh, do you look so mad at me?"

Dread rippled out from that vice clamped on his shoulder like cold spreading from ice. Luciana smiled and brandished a familiar fan.

Schue gulped.

"Go on," Luciana said. "What do you want to know?"

"Nothing! What a lovely estate that's always been there! Now we have somewhere to sleep! Oh, what a kind mistress you are! It's such a good thing this has always been there!" Sweat beaded on Schue's brow.

Luciana released his shoulder but still wore that dead smile. The harisen returned to its original fan form. She flicked it open in front of her mouth. "I really wish you hadn't come out of that rubble."

"I-I'll just go help unpack and organize!"

The hapless boy hurried to the manor. Scurried, rather. Like a mouse. While the other servants spared no particular sympathy for him, they too thought it best to busy themselves at their not-at-all-brand-new home.

Melody's latest creation was a two-story, wooden marvel. The second floor contained the family's living quarters, while a single

hallway on the ground floor housed the servants', men on one side, women on the other. Small as it was, it still boasted a parlor and wells for the garden and kitchen. Dug by Melody, of course. The original estate had had one, so it was no hassle finding a source of groundwater.

Once everyone found their rooms in this sudden manor nevertheless equipped with all the bare essentials, they gathered in the dining hall. Hubert sat at the head of the table, with Luciana and her retinue to the right of him and his retinue to the left.

"Now, it's a tad late, but I think introductions are in order," the bailiff said.

The county retinue took the lead. Luciana had practically grown up with all of them, so they directed their words at Melody and her colleagues instead.

"My name is Ryan, and I'm the estate's butler. A pleasure to meet you."

"I'm Lullia, the housekeeper and also Ryan's wife. How do you do?"

The old couple bowed together. Each of them had more than thirty years of experience in their professions, and it showed. Ryan was a handsome older gentleman with gray hair, though his size would have fooled most observers into thinking he was younger. Lullia did up her soft brown hair just like Melody's and carried herself with a subdued, pleasant demeanor.

"I'm Mira, a maid. While I'm younger than Lullia, we've served House Rudleberg for nearly the same amount of time. Please don't

hesitate to seek me out should you have any questions."

Mira, for her part, bore a slightly more jovial air. She had a slender build and fine green hair she kept neatly tied up. She was unmarried.

"You can call me Aasha. I'm another maid. Pleased to meet you."

The final woman bowed, her big, red braid slipping over her shoulder. She was the most willowy of the bunch.

"As I'm sure you know, I'm Dyrule, and I'm charged with the protection of House Rudleberg. When they want to be protected, that is." The guardsman glared at his lord and his accompanying niece. The fierce display didn't faze either of them, a testament to how often they'd endured this particular look. Dyrule crossed his arms and sighed.

Incidentally, he and Aasha were childhood friends.

"Last but not least, I'm Schue! A real go-getter with the ladies, if I may say so myself, and a hopeless romantic looking for his better half in a lonely world. Also, I'm technically a valet-in-training."

"How very flattered I am to be a footnote in your introduction," Ryan said.

"Er, sorry!" The boy grinned.

His tan skin and bright blond hair might remind a modern resident of Japan of the stereotypical type of man who enjoyed flippant and superficial relationships with women. It was hard to

believe he'd saved the family with the quick-witted, rational idea to take shelter beneath a table during an earthquake.

Micah leaned on the side of unbelievable. *This guy's got looks that could kill and a body that's not too bulky but not too slim. He's literally every woman's ideal man—physically speaking. But god, he is* so *annoying! That attitude ruins everything!*

That inane grin of his certainly didn't help. It was messy and dumb and stood in stark contrast to all of his other, sharper features.

"Oh, but when I say I'm looking for my better half—Micah, I think your name was? Yeah, you've got a little growing to do, but I'll swing the question by you in five or so years. Even I have my principles."

"Please don't talk to me." Micah's smile was as cold and uncaring as Luciana's.

What in the world is this absolute gag character doing all the way out here?! If you were at the academy, I guarantee you'd be in for a world of hurt! The main boys would walk all over you, creep!

Schue took this all in stride. "You're excited, huh? I am too!"

Micah sighed, because that was all she could do in this situation. But she was alone. Someone was giggling. Someone very close by.

It was Melody. "Schue's a funny fellow, isn't he?"

E-excuse me?! Micah's jaw hit the floor. On Melody's other side, Luciana was similarly aghast. Evidently, they were on the same page. *Hello?! Miss Heroine?! Please don't tell me you just triggered a romance flag with the gag character!*

Luciana gaped, shock stopping up her throat so only bewildered choking noises could emerge.

Was the County of Rudleberg going set the stage for a budding romance? Only time would tell.

Chapter 15:
Melody's Prohibition Declaration

WITH INTRODUCTIONS OUT OF THE WAY, Hubert turned to the next order of business.

"To the matter at hand. I want to hear your reports on the damage in the other villages. Ryan. Schue."

"Yes, my lord."

Schue perked up. "Right!"

Ryan led. "My account concerns the northern territory. I arrived in Tenon after approximately two hours of travel on foot, but for a mercy, I found no substantial structural damages. They felt the earthquake, but not as strongly as we did here. Items fell from shelves, but that was the extent of the damage."

"Same for me," Schue said. "The southwest didn't suffer much in the way of collapsed houses. Durnan shook, but the people looked more shaken than the buildings."

"Thank you, both of you. Gourges was much the same," said Hubert. "The silver lining to losing our estate is that the disaster spared our people."

The knowledge that there had been no casualties lifted a weight from the entire room. But Melody was still confused. *Complete structural collapse of wooden buildings. That means upward of a magnitude six earthquake. Yet only two hours away by foot it barely knocked things off shelves? That would put it at a four. No. This*

world's architecture can't be as resilient to earthquakes as Japan's. It would have to be even lower than a four. How is that possible? How could the tremors be so concentrated?

Melody studied a map of the county laid out on the table. At the center of a triangle of villages stood the estate. A road ran through it —the one she and her lady would have come in on.

About an hour out, it was a magnitude five. Or is an hour inaccurate? There was a lot of winding along the road from what I could see from above. As the crow flies, we were a good deal closer than any of the villages. But that means…

Placing the earthquake at a magnitude in the upper sixes at the estate, five where Melody first felt it, and less than four even farther out in the villages painted a stark picture. A picture that put the estate at the center of a quickly deteriorating tremor that weakened the farther it spread from its source.

It could only mean one thing.

The estate was the epicenter.

Some subterranean phenomenon must have triggered a particularly localized earthquake just below them. How unlucky could the Rudlebergs possibly be? But there was hardly any point in bemoaning the pettiness of a natural disaster.

If we're at the epicenter, I need to warn everybody.

Oftentimes, smaller earthquakes followed the largest tremors. They could experience continued periodic shaking, especially after an earthquake as big as this one. Some aftershocks could even be even

larger than the original quake. In such cases, some experts debated whether "*after*shock" was an appropriate term.

Melody couldn't know if this world followed the same seismic laws as Earth, but you could never be too careful.

Just as she was about to voice her concerns, Schue's hand shot up. "So to summarize, Lord Hubert, it seems like the epicenter was here at the estate."

"Oh? It was?"

"It was strong enough to topple the building here, but in the villages things only fell from shelves. My lady, how intense was the shaking where you were?"

"Enough to make standing difficult," Luciana said.

Schue considered that. "I see. And you were closer to us than any of the villages, so I think it's safe to assume we were at the center of the earthquake."

"I have to admit, that's not a theory I like," Hubert said. "I only hope rumors don't spread."

"There are more important things to worry about, Lord Hubert. There could be more," Schue said.

"More? More earthquakes? In such quick succession? Our last one was over a century ago."

"It depends on the type of quake it was. If it was a subterranean collapse, then things could still be unsteady. It very well could happen again."

"*That* is not a theory I like." Hubert crossed his arms, deep in thought at Schue's explanation.

Melody blinked at Schue. This was so unlike him. No sooner had she pieced all of it together than Schue put it into words. The boy was sharper than he let on. To reach those conclusions as a former citizen of Japan, where such knowledge was a matter of life or death, was one thing, but as a resident of this world where earthquakes were so rare? His powers of deduction were simply incredible.

Schue quite possibly had just made his first and only ally in the room.

"Melody, he says it can happen again. What are we supposed to do?" Luciana's eyes shone with tears as she looked to her maid. These quakes were not familiar to her and thus left her frightened. She could not soon forget the sight of her home reduced to rubble.

Melody offered her a reassuring smile. "Rest assured, my lady, this estate has been thoroughly reinforced in the event of a repeat. There's practically no chance it will come down."

"Really?"

"I guarantee it. Ah, but there could still be jostling, so we ought to rearrange your bedroom so that nothing could fall on you while you're sleeping."

"Okay. Yeah." Luciana exhaled heavily. "That's good to hear."

Melody replied with a grin.

The county retinue, meanwhile, shared one singular thought: How did Melody know how the estate had been built?

Hubert glanced at his servants and agonized. *What happened to discretion?*

Talk was cheap, and Melody's magic was all-encompassing. They had not forgotten their intent to conceal, but that intent proved difficult to execute. And the two worst offenders were particularly oblivious.

The meeting did not last much longer after the revelations about the epicenter of the quake. They couldn't do much to act on Schue's warning save wait and hope. They made a point to watch out for objects falling during the night, and the discussion ended.

"As for the upkeep of the estate, I don't want to upset things too much," Hubert said. "Ryan and Lullia, I'd like you to operate as normally as possible and continue to take charge of your respective retinues. We should settle into a rhythm. We may be here for some time."

"Yes, my lord," the couple replied.

"What about my people?" Luciana asked.

"Melody and Micah, I want you to answer to Lullia but continue to look after Luciana," said Hubert. "Rook, I'm told you have lessons with Ryan."

The capital retinue voiced their assent.

"How long will you be staying with us, by the way?" the bailiff asked.

"Until the nineteenth. We intend to leave on the twentieth."

"Two weeks, then. Plenty of time to make yourself at home. Well, what's left of it, that is."

"Uncle, you're putting your foot in your mouth again."

Luciana and Hubert bantered good-naturedly. The loss of her childhood home should have pained Luciana, but she and her uncle found humor in even that situation.

Where in the world does she learn these phrases?

Melody knew exactly which words to put in Luciana's mouth and which words not to.

Melody opened her eyes just as the sun peeked over the horizon the next day, August 6th.

She swiftly dressed in her uniform, then made her way to the foyer to receive her duties for the day. Nine servants, including her, waited for instruction, which made gathering in the kitchen a tad cramped.

When Melody arrived, she found that the butler and housekeeper had beaten her to the meeting. "Good morning, Master Ryan, Madam Lullia."

The couple returned her greeting with genial smiles.

"I thought I would be the first one here. You're awfully early," Melody said.

Lullia giggled. "Aren't you a passionate one? We've a brand-new estate to work with today, so I could hardly keep my eyes shut long enough to sleep last night."

"We were of a like mind," Ryan said. "We were just chatting to pass the time."

"Is there room for one more? I was so excited I couldn't help but get up early too," Melody said.

"Well, we won't put that enthusiasm to waste, I assure you," said Lullia. "We're glad to have you."

"Thank you!"

Ryan and Lullia welcomed the young maid's youthful energy. It threatened to rub off on them as well.

The rest of the servants filtered in and greeted each other, but one stood out like a sore thumb—because he was last.

"Good morning," Schue yawned.

"Good morning, Schue. I'm glad you could join us," Ryan said pointedly. "Next time, do us the courtesy of arriving earlier."

"I'm sorry, it was just those beds. They're so comfy I could hardly drag myself out of mine."

"If it wasn't the beds, I'm sure you would have found some other excuse," Ryan said. "You showing your face mere moments before work begins is nothing new. Never mind. Just line up with the rest."

"Yes, sir," Schue yawned again. That earned him a head-shake.

Ryan and Lullia stood in front of the line. From left to right stood Dyrule, Mira, Aasha, Rook, Micah, Melody, and then finally Schue.

"Morning, Melody," the latter said.

“Good morning, Schue.”

He made that loose, melty grin, instantly transforming the stud into a dud. Melody didn’t seem to care one way or another.

“Hey, so you’ll have some days off while you’re here, right? Do you maybe want to—”

“Schue,” Ryan snapped. “Quiet. I’m about to announce the morning agenda.”

The valet went straight as a rod. “Yes, Master Ryan! Sorry, Master Ryan!”

Melody let a chuckle slip. That boy always seemed to be up to something.

Ryan waited for silence. “Dyrule, patrol the estate’s perimeter, then return to your position with Lord Hubert after breakfast. Assist him with his duties. As for myself, I’ll be instructing Rook and Schue this morning.”

“Understood,” the guardsman replied.

“Schue, Rook, after this, you’re to come with me and learn about your duties. Milady was kind enough to provide us with a horse, so we’ll begin with husbandry.”

The trainees affirmed their understanding.

Ryan nodded, then deferred to Lullia. “Your girls, if you would.”

“Of course.” His wife addressed the maids. “Mira, Aasha, you’ll be on breakfast duty.”

“Yes, madam,” they replied.

"Melody, go with them to assist. You've been serving morning tea at the capital, I hear. I quite like that, so we'll be taking inspiration from you. Prepare a cup for the lady and Lord Hubert, would you?"

"Certainly," Melody said.

"Micah, dear, you're still in training, is that right? You can come with me after we've disbanded and help with my duties, which would normally include cleaning, but seeing as that isn't necessary, I suppose we'll use the time to familiarize ourselves with the estate's layout. Polish a few things here and there?"

"Y-yes, madam!"

Lullia gestured to Ryan. The butler cleared his throat and assessed the line of servants one last time. "We've unfamiliar hallways to walk with unfamiliar associates, but remember that each and every one of you is united in service to House Rudleberg. Behave yourselves accordingly, and I will do the same."

The underlings sounded off. And so the morning began.

The men went outside, Dyrule on his patrol and Ryan to the stables with his new pupils. Lullia and Micah vanished with their cleaning supplies. Melody and the remaining maids departed at once for the kitchen.

"All right, let's whip up something tasty," Mira said, taking charge as the oldest of the group.

"Yes, madam!" Melody and Aasha replied.

The kitchen came alive. Melody would not be around long and so accepted a simple assistant role for the benefit of the mainstays of

the county retinue.

"We'll do bread and soup for breakfast, I think," Mira said.

"I think I saw bacon too," Aasha said. "Shall we fry some up?"

"An excellent idea, Aasha." Mira cheerfully pulled vegetables out of the pantry. "You do need to eat bacon quickly before it goes bad. Let's do it!" She was in a sunny mood that morning. "It's a good thing milady brought so much food with her. We might have had to go without the bread otherwise."

"What with all our stores being ruined along with the estate, I'm inclined to agree."

That food had, of course, come from Melody's magical cupboard of wonders. Between the many herbs she'd gathered from her infamous trips to the woods and the vegetables she'd bought in bulk at the market for cheap, she had stockpiled quite a bit. She'd baked the bread in the travel cottage but claimed she'd purchased it in town on the way there.

"And it's thanks to Melody's group we have any utensils to use," Mira said. "All the food in the world wouldn't matter much if we couldn't cook it. It can't have been easy digging these out, Melody. Thank you."

"I'm simply happy to be of help," Melody replied.

She'd unearthed most of the cooking utensils from the rubble of the previous estate. The familiar implements helped Mira and Aasha work at their best, even in the unfamiliar environment.

Amid the idle conversation, breakfast proceeded apace. Mira dexterously chopped vegetables while Aasha fed firewood into the cookstove.

Only when she went to get the water jug so she could fill a pot did something interrupt Aasha's flow.

"Something the matter?" Mira asked.

"Oh, no," Aasha said. "The jug is just a little lower than expected."

"Ah, we did make soup for dinner last night. We must have used some water then."

"Allow—" Melody started to reach for the jug but stopped herself midway.

Aasha cocked her head to one side. "Melody?"

"I'll, um… I'll fetch us some more!"

"Would you do that?"

"Of course! I'll need it for the tea anyway, so two birds with one stone!"

"If it isn't too much trouble."

"Not at all!"

Melody exited through the door that connected the kitchen to outside.

That was close, she thought. *I nearly filled the jug with magic on reflex.*

She stopped in front of the well, placed a hand on her chest, and took a breath. “I’ve come to rely on magic more than I thought. It’s time I broke that habit.”

Come to think of it, she could count the number of times she’d fetched water from a well on one hand. Magically conjured water was simply easier to produce, fresher, and cleaner. Something about it made it excellent for brewing tea as well. The aeration, perhaps.

“I don’t need magic to be a maid. From now on, no spells during work.”

Melody scrunched her brow, filled with determination, and hurled the bucket down the pit.

“And that’s what I decided.”

“Hm. I suppose that makes sense.” Luciana sipped the early morning tea Melody had delivered while Mira and Aasha continued with breakfast.

Melody had just confessed her anxieties to her lady.

“You have been awfully frivolous with magic in the past,” Luciana said. “We must be careful. You never know what could expose you. You will be careful, won’t you?”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Anyway, you remember what we talked about yesterday during the meeting, right? About this afternoon?”

“I do, my lady. You have plans to romp about—that is, inspect the villages, yes?”

"That's right. It's no romp. Strictly business. We'll start with Gourges Village to the east."

"As you wish. I'll see to preparations at once, my lady."

"Thanks!"

Melody's lady was not good at hiding her excitement when she got giddy. Melody would never tell her that, though.

Chapter 16:
Luciana Does the Rounds

"YOUR CARRIAGE AWAITS, MY LADY."

"Thanks. I'll be right there."

On the afternoon of August 6th, Luciana and her retinue assembled for her inspection of the county's easternmost village, Gourges. The lady herself was going, of course, but also Melody, Micah, Rook, and—

"Enough, Grail! Sit still!" The most well-behaved ancient evil of all time had endured the majority of this adventure via sheer laziness—and thus mostly gone unnoticed—but its hour had come. The wicked Luciana had ensnared the pup and now cradled him in her arms.

Hubert chuckled. "He's a rowdy one, isn't he?"

"He loves to be chased, which is awfully cute, but it can make him a handful."

I'll show you a handful if you don't get your hands off of me! You're covered in that wretched, saintly stench!

Luciana interpreted none of this from the trembling pup in her embrace, of course.

"I'm glad you're getting to have some fun," Hubert said. "With things the way they are here, I'm afraid I won't be able to give you much of my attention."

"That's okay, Uncle. I'm not at all surprised that you'll be busy with the estate given the situation."

"Were that the end of it."

"What? What do you mean?"

Hubert shrugged, a weary look on his face. "If you don't mind, when you're not too busy enjoying yourself, give these to the mayor. That's all I'll ask of you. Promise."

Luciana huffed. "I'm not going there to 'enjoy myself,' darn it! I'm visiting on behalf of my father, the count, to observe the goings-on!"

Her uncle guffawed. "Yes, of course. How could I forget? Keep a sharp eye out for me, will you?"

"Can do! Let's go, Melody."

"At once, my lady."

The maid accepted the documents for Luciana, seeing as her arms were full of Grail. Luciana skipped over to the carriage in a most businesslike manner that undoubtedly spoke to the immense amount of business she would conduct during her outing.

"And you keep an eye on her for me, Melody," Hubert said.

"Certainly."

The carriage rolled off toward Gourges.

Luciana sat in her seat, humming cheerfully and stroking Grail's fur. It made for lovely ambiance as the countryside rolled by outside the window.

“My lady, what kind of place is Gourges?” Micah asked, sitting opposite Luciana.

“What kind of place is Gourges?” she parroted.

“You just seem really chipper about going there. Is it a fun place? Is there something you’re looking forward to?”

Luciana thought for a moment. “Not particularly. There are fields where they grow wheat and other vegetables but not a lot else. It’s a plain village, just like the other two.”

“Really?”

Melody giggled. “Our lady’s just excited to be back home and see her people.”

“N-no I’m not! It’s not that! It’s not that at all!” Luciana squeezed Grail in her arms and shook not just her head but her entire body in fierce denial. Clearly the mannerisms of a lady telling the truth.

Grail howled as his ditzy owner swung his body to and fro.

Gourges Village lay about a two-hour walk east from the Rudleberg estate. A carriage could cut that time in half. Luciana and her entourage arrived in a little over an hour but to little satisfaction.

“I can’t believe this!” huffed Luciana.

The carriage had become a sauna of pouty rage.

“To your credit, my lady, I’d be offended too if the gatekeeper I knew suddenly didn’t recognize me,” Micah said.

“Take it as a compliment,” Melody replied through an amused

chuckle. “It goes to show how beautiful a lady you’ve become.”

Luciana was not feeling quite that magnanimous at the moment.

Like most villages, Gourges protected itself from bandits and monsters and such via an exterior wall. As they passed through the gate, Luciana had hailed the lookout on the wall, a young man whom she knew, only to be met with little enthusiasm.

The gatekeeper had spoken but three words: “And you are?”

He hadn’t recognized her. This did not please Luciana. Melody had to hold her lady back, lest she strike the poor man with her harisen. Talking her down was still a work in progress, doubly so because this very display of hotheadedness had jogged the gatekeeper’s memory, which only stoked Luciana’s rage all over again. And round and round they went.

Luciana sheathed her harisen only after a dozen or so heartfelt apologies, and reluctantly at that. But one had to be understanding of the gatekeeper’s struggle. Luciana before and after Melody was a night and day transformation of infomercial proportions—a transformation Micah could attest to, having known her lady’s original self from the game.

I have to cut him some slack, the girl admitted. *Anyone who knew her before would never make the connection. If anything, that guard had more manners than me. I’d have called her crazy for assuming I’d recognize her after she went and got all pretty.*

Micah couldn’t know that a certain marquess’s daughter had arrived at that same conclusion herself.

“Where to, my lady?” Melody asked.

“To the mayor’s house, so we can pass along those documents. It’s also about the only place we can park the carriage.”

“Understood.”

By the time they arrived, word had already spread throughout the village. A young girl stood in front of the building to greet them.

“It’s been a while, Qila.”

“It has, Lady Luciana. Welcome home.”

The girl called Qila smiled softly and bowed. It took the small girl down below even Luciana’s height. Her plain, brown, chest-length hair billowed in the breeze. She put a hand to her cheek and sighed wistfully.

“I see the capital has polished you into the diamond you always were,” she said. “Look at you.”

“Y-you think so?” Luciana stuttered. “I wouldn’t know.”

“I certainly do. It’s no wonder Rand mistook you for someone else. Why, you’ve come into such beauty, I just might swoon.”

Rand happened to be the young man they’d clashed with at the gate. Word traveled fast in these parts.

“Y-you’re exaggerating now.”

Luciana wore the same summer dress she’d worn the day they left the capital styled with a shawl draped over her shoulders. Instead of a ponytail, however, her hair spilled freely down her back, and she

wore a straw hat to shade her skin from the sun. She would have made an excellent model for a resort back in Japan.

"I've brought papers with me from Uncle Hubert," she said. "Is the mayor in?"

"I'll fetch him. Come in and make yourselves at home."

They were guided inside to a humble dining table. Mayors of villages were not so privileged as to have parlors like their noble superiors.

The mayor appeared shortly thereafter. He and Luciana chatted for some time before she delivered the documents.

"I thank you for these, Lady Luciana," he said. "And I apologize for the trouble."

"I wanted to come visit anyway, so it was really no trouble on my part. Well, that's all the business I had to attend to, but would you mind if I took a look around the village?"

"Of course not. Qila, be a dear and escort her, would you?"

"Yes, Father," the girl said. "This way, Lady Luciana."

After bidding the mayor farewell, Luciana followed Qila out. Melody and the others trailed close behind.

"Oh, that's right. Qila, I forgot to introduce you. These are my maids, Melody and Micah, and Rook, our valet-in-training."

"Good day, Madam Qila. Melody, at your service."

"I'm Micah, maid-in-training. Nice to meet you."

"Rook. Valet-in-training. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you," Qila said. "Well, this is quite the attractive entourage you've collected, milady. I didn't know you had such discerning tastes."

"It wasn't on purpose! It just so happened that everyone we hired turned out to be really good-looking!" Luciana protested.

Qila hid her mouth behind her hand and tittered. "I'm only joking. On to the village." She continued along.

"You two seem awfully close," Melody said to her lady as they walked.

"We sort of grew up together. We'd play together whenever I came to visit as a kid."

Qila turned. "Where should we go? Honestly, you know your way around the village well enough on your own, so I'm not actually sure where I'm meant to escort you."

"Let's start with the wheat fields. I want to see how the harvest is coming along. Could you tell me how things are?"

"Lord Hubert hasn't told you?"

"I've only just arrived, so he hasn't told me much of anything. Is there something I should know?"

Qila considered that. "It would be faster to show you, I think. This way."

She guided them to fields that should have spread golden before them. And they did. But something was wrong.

Melody frowned. "My lady, is this standard for a crop in the county of Rudleberg?"

"No. This doesn't look right. Is it happening again this year?"

"This is the best of the crop, actually," Qila said. "Thanks to Lord Hubert's efforts to rejuvenate the soil, things have improved somewhat, but it's still far from where it should be."

The field was dull, the wheat stunted and lagging behind in its development. There would, thankfully, be something to harvest this year, but much like last year, these fields would not produce the bounty one might have hoped for.

"We reap in a month. We're hoping to see a little more improvement before then." Qila ran her hand over a stalk. The plant drooped as much as her words.

"A month?" Melody said. "I should think you'd be harvesting around now."

"Not in our territory. We harvest in September and sow in the spring," Luciana said.

"This is the spring wheat strain then."

"That's right. Everywhere south of and including the capital plants winter wheat. The northern territories primarily plant spring wheat."

This staple crop came in many different strains, the two most prominent being named for their growing seasons. Winter wheat was planted in autumn, grew through winter, and was harvested the following summer. Spring wheat, true to its name, was sown in spring and reaped in fall of that same year.

In areas with mild winters, the cold supposedly brought higher yields, and so most favored winter wheat. However, in cold climates where other vegetation struggled to survive, spring wheat reigned supreme.

The county of Rudleberg must endure harsh winters, Melody surmised. *Spring wheat already yields less than the winter variety, and they've been suffering bad harvests.*

"According to your estimates, what's the projected profit from this year's yield?" Luciana inquired.

"Optimistically? Not enough," Qila replied. "I expect we won't turn a profit at all. Which we can weather this year, just like we did last year, but if this continues into the following year, or the one after that…"

Count Rudleberg's skilled handling of last year's crop failures had secured him a position at the Royal Chancery, but he was no miracle worker. If these bad harvests became a pattern, it would place his house in dire straits indeed.

"Is it the same in the other villages?" Luciana asked.

"I'm afraid so. No one can figure it out. The quality of the soil seems fine. We haven't suffered a drought. It's anybody's guess as to why our wheat refuses to grow."

"I wish I had an answer."

"Pardon me," Micah said, timidly raising her hand, "but would this not be a case of soil fatigue?"

Anytime crop yields fell, soil fatigue leapt out as the prime suspect. Planting the same things in the same places over and over depleted the soil of nutrients, but the solution was simple: crop rotation, alternating what you planted where.

It's such a common thing in these fantasy reincarnation stories, Micah thought. *Trouble in the farmlands? Soil fatigue! Step one in the agricultural revolution!*

Or was it?

"That's a well-documented phenomenon, and all of House Rudleberg's territories make use of long-held crop rotation practices," Qila said. "I'd be surprised if that were the cause."

"Oh. I see."

"But the thought is greatly appreciated, Micah."

"Sorry I wasted everyone's time."

The mystery remained a mystery. Luciana was stumped. Micah had been shot down. Rook certainly had no idea what to make of this. Even Melody could not deduce the cause. As mad as this maid was, even she lacked the superhuman ability to diagnose something so complex at a glance. If she could, she might have been more monster than maid.

"I'll speak to my uncle about it," Luciana said.

"We'd appreciate… Oh?"

They'd left the field behind and were making their way back to the mayor's house when they spotted three villagers on their path. They were huddled together and speaking frantically.

"What's everyone doing here?" Qila asked.

The villagers appeared to be farmers, but not of wheat. "It's my crops, ma'am. There's something strange about them."

"I noticed the same, ma'am."

"Me as well."

"Strange?" Qila repeated. "Strange how?"

The men explained that during their morning rounds, they noticed a patch of their crops with odd, black speckles. They insisted the blemishes had not been there yesterday.

Qila and Luciana exchanged glances, then nodded to each other.

"Show us," the lady ordered.

They did, leading the entourage to fields of tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplants, and a number of other summer vegetables.

"I see the speckles," Luciana said.

Curious dark spots marred several of the plants. Some appeared only on the leaves, while others dotted the vegetables themselves.

Melody spoke with one of the farmers and, upon obtaining permission, tasted a sample of a speckled tomato. She froze.

"How is it, Melody?" Luciana asked.

"It's not quite sour how a tomato should be. It's more bitter… Astringent."

"*My* tomatoes?" the farmer said in disbelief. "That can't be."

"Is it much the same for the other fields?" Luciana asked.

“Better, I might say. This one’s had it the worst as far as I’ve seen,” another farmer said. “Mine hasn’t quite reached this state.”

The farmland lay near Gourges’s west-facing gate, and at least a fifth of the crops seemed affected by the blemishes. The other two fields, sitting closer to the village center, fared slightly better, but the damage was far from insubstantial.

“What in the world could be causing it?” Melody wondered.

Suddenly, Grail started barking.

“Grail? What is it?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were here.” Naturally, Luciana had completely forgotten she’d even brought him along.

Grail’s eyes were trained on Melody, slobber dribbling from his snout. Or rather, his eyes were trained on what she was *holding*.

“You want this?” Melody asked.

The pup barked and panted, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth as he scrambled after the tomato.

Melody knelt down and offered it. “You won’t like it. It’s bitter and gross and—”

Grail snatched it anyway. Melody stared in mute surprise while he gobbled the whole thing up.

“He practically inhaled it.” More barking. “What? You want more?”

Melody looked at the farmer.

"I suppose I don't mind parting with the lot. They're not fit for people, that's for sure. Only hope they don't hurt the poor thing."

"That worries me too," Luciana said. "I don't think you should be eating those, Grail."

Grail thought differently. Grail craved only tomato. So when it became apparent he wouldn't get it from his masters, he darted off into the field. But the pup was too small to reach any of the red delights hanging from the vines, and started gnawing on leaves instead.

"What? Oh, lord, you'll eat anything," Luciana said.

The pup *om*'d and *nom*'d, but never actually bit the leaves clean off. Only gnawed.

"Enough," Luciana said. "Take that out of your mouth."

Grail yipped in protest as Luciana scooped him up. He struggled, for what good it did him, while Luciana held him firmly.

"What a nut," Luciana said. "How can those spots possibly be that appetizing?"

"It's strange he likes them so much," said Melody. "I found it rather unpalat… Hm?"

The maid's eyes went to the leaves Grail had gnawed. She squinted. *Those had spots on them before, didn't they? Where did they go?* The leaves looked spotless now. *Maybe I was mistaken. In any case, this is quite the mystery. First the wheat, now this strange disease infecting the other crops.*

Melody took an infected leaf between her fingers and frowned. *Assuming it is a disease, that could necessitate culling the entire field. If only there were a way to get rid of these pesky things.* She ran her thumb over the leaf and glared at the speckles.

They shattered under her touch.

"What?"

As she brushed the dark spots, they lifted from the leaf and shattered in the air like glass.

Melody yanked her hand back. The fragments of the broken blemishes dissipated on the wind. When she looked back at the leaf, it was spotless.

What in the world?

"What is it, Melody?" Luciana said.

"Oh, nothing, my lady."

"If you say so. I'll make a note to inform the mayor and my uncle about what we saw here. We'll need to do some deeper investigation into this. In the meantime, leave everything as it is. If it spreads, I'll recruit my uncle and we'll pull up anything we have to."

"I'd be much obliged," said the farmer.

"I would've liked to take a walk around town, but this warrants hurrying home, I think. The sooner Uncle knows the better. Let's go, Melody. Melody?"

"Oh, yes. Of course, my lady. I'll bring the carriage at once. Rook?"

Before leaving, Melody took one last look at the leaf she'd touched. Still no spots. *The only explanation I can think of is my mana. If what my lady says is true, and it really is the vastest in the kingdom, then maybe…I can get rid of the blemishes.*

Melody had to consider her next move carefully, a task she set herself to as soon as she and Rook left to retrieve the carriage.

Meanwhile, in Luciana's arms, someone else was doing some thinking of its own.

Delicious. Positively delectable, these blighted crystals! Negativity in its purest form. I demand more!

Chapter 17:
A Maid's Midnight Mission

"THE BLEMISHES ARE IN DURNAN AND TENON too?" Luciana asked.

"We received reports shortly after you left for Gourges," Hubert said.

It was after dinner, and Luciana had just finished telling Hubert about the situation regarding the crops in Gourges Village, only to learn this was not news to her uncle.

"The accounts from the other villages match what you told me," Hubert said. "Sightings that began today. I've been told that yesterday, everything was normal, but today, farmers spotted those speckles on everything from leaves to stems to fruit. According to taste-tests, they make the affected vegetables terribly bitter and near inedible."

"Certainly not for Grail, though," Luciana muttered.

She and Hubert shot a sideways glance at the pup snoozing in his basket in a corner of the dining hall. Such lethargy and such a cute little belly would lull anyone into assuming this was just a goofy young mutt.

"It could be an epidemic," Hubert said. "We'll have to observe the situation closely over the next few days."

"I'll keep my eye out for any changes," Luciana said. "Also, though you devoured far less than Grail, you still tasted the infected

product, didn't you, Melody? Tell someone if you start feeling sick, okay?"

"Yes, my lady," said Melody while delivering the after-meal tea. She smiled reassuringly.

Hubert accepted a cup and brought it to his lips. Moments later, his eyes flew wide. "This is delicious."

"Melody's tea always is," Luciana said with no small amount of pride.

"You must have made this with the leaves you brought," Hubert said. "What brand is it?"

"Belleschwit," Luciana answered.

"What? No."

"Nobody can match Melody when it comes to brewing tea, Uncle." Luciana took a smug sip.

Hubert studied the brown, gently rippling liquid in his cup, then turned to the maid. "Melody, would you be willing to share your secrets with my people? Lord knows they try, but this is by far the best cup of Belleschwit I've ever had. Lullia, if you'd be willing to learn."

"Certainly, my lord," the housekeeper said. "Is now a good time, Melody?"

"Of course. If you'll excuse me, my lady," said Melody. She curtsied most perfectly, then vanished into the kitchen with Lullia.

Hubert waited until they were gone to lean back in his chair and sigh. "This tea is the only good thing that's happened today."

"Uncle…" Luciana's expression darkened. "What are we going to do?"

Hubert shrugged. "What we can. We'll ascertain the situation, and if the spots have spread overnight, chances are we've a blight on our hands. In the best-case scenario, we simply uproot the infected plants. In the worst…"

"We'll have to cull everything?"

Hubert frowned and nodded.

They did not speak of it again that night.

That evening, in her chambers on the second floor, Melody brushed Luciana's hair before bed while Luciana's thoughts continued to race, further unsettling her.

"I'm finished, my lady."

"Huh? O-oh. Thanks, Melody."

"Thinking on this afternoon's events?"

"Yeah. I wish I could do something, but…" Luciana trailed off. "Some homecoming this has turned out to be, huh?"

She couldn't help but laugh wryly at the whole thing. What had happened to all that joy and levity and excitement she'd felt on the way here? Had her home collapsing not been enough? The villages had to suffer too? The earthquake was one thing, but now her family faced yet more hardship. And she'd only been here two days.

"I'm going to go with my uncle when he inspects the villages tomorrow," she said. "Which is not exactly how I wanted to spend my birthday, but here we are."

"Yes, that's right. It is your birthday tomorrow, my lady."

"At least I got to celebrate it early with family and friends, so I suppose it doesn't really matter if we do anything for it tomorrow."

Melody could not make out her lady's expression from where she stood behind her, but she had a feeling she knew what it was—and that it was all bravado.

"Anyway, good night, Melody."

"Good night, my lady."

Luciana lay in bed, and Melody snuffed the lights. Luciana stared up into the darkness, restless. It reminded her of her nightmare from a few days ago. Nothing remained of the dream but the frostbitten scar of fear it left in the pit of her stomach.

Maybe it was supposed to be a warning of what was to come.

Naturally, the fragile-hearted sought meaning in such things, even when there was none.

If it was supposed to be a warning, though…then that means…

Exhaustion both mental and physical took hold. Her thoughts slowed, blended, melded together, going intangible and fuzzy as they faded.

It was a scary dream… It wasn't a good one, but it wasn't… It wasn't all…bad…

In moments, she was asleep. It all returned to her in that instant: the fear, the door, her inability to stand as it closed in on her, and the girl who'd appeared in a flash of silver light. Her hand, most of all. Its warmth.

The sounds of slumber filled the darkness of her room.

While Luciana slept, Micah lay awake in her own bed, mind racing.

"The Rudleberg estate. Gone with an earthquake. Poor harvests. Black spots on crops. None of this ever happened in the game." Certainly, nothing like this ever occurred in *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*. "August of the first year is supposed to be all romance fluff. There's not supposed to be all this serious plot stuff."

Micah rolled around in the fancy bed Melody had made her, digging through her brain for a crumb of a hint from the game that might serve them in some way. Unfortunately, she found nothing.

Or so she thought.

She shot up. "Wait a second. House Rudleberg should be totally defunct right about now."

Luciana Rudleberg, the Jealous Witch, mid-boss of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, should have hit rock bottom by now. A count's daughter in name but ignoble and unfit for the title. The subject of scorn and scrutiny. She was supposed to view the heroine from that vantage of inferiority and pain, witness the privileged life she led, and envy her. The Dark One would then take advantage of her despair to control her and turn her into the game's first boss encounter.

That was what Luciana Rudleberg *should* have been, the colloquially named Tragedy Girl, on account of her subsequent death,

after her defeat, at the hands of the Dark One. First, she was an Ignoble. Then, a puppet. Then, a corpse. To make it worse, hers was the only actual death in the entire game. "Tragedy Girl" was an apt moniker.

"The count worries constantly for her after she closes herself off," Micah recalled. "He starts failing at work, he's dismissed from the Chancery, and then he's forced to turn to crime."

But the count was a good man, one entirely unsuited for dark dealings. They apprehended him almost immediately, thus setting in motion the entire Jealous Witch Incident, culminating in the climactic battle and later leading to the end of House Rudleberg entirely.

"The game takes place pretty much entirely in the capital, so I guess anything that happened in their territory wouldn't come up much during the main narrative. Right?"

Micah wasn't satisfied with that conclusion. She hugged her pillow, flopped onto her back, and stared at the ceiling.

"Either way, all of this is just cruel. First, an earthquake flattens her home like a pancake, then the harvest fails, and now some kind of disease has hit the vegetables. At this rate, the house won't manage to stay afloat and…" Micah shot up again. "And they'll loop back to being Ignobles."

A chill ran through her.

All these ill-timed misfortunes happening one after the other. They might have overcome a bad wheat harvest, but when coupled with the plant plague and the complete destruction of the countship's base of operations, what could they do? Only sheer good luck placed

quick-thinking Schue in their path during that quake, otherwise they could have lost much, much more than the estate.

How would Luciana's heart have weathered that? How would the Rudlebergs' finances?

Such a disaster would doubtless incur massive debt and extensive sacrifices. Plus, they'd lose their family on top of it all. Luciana certainly could have detached herself from reality and closed herself off after something like that—which would worry the count, which would mean mistakes at the Chancery. What if that resulted in his dismissal? The count would lose his income. Hughes would have nowhere to turn. Nowhere but the illicit. They would catch him before long, and they would surely make an example of him.

It would be the end of House Rudleberg.

Saddled with immense debt and the loss of her status, Luciana would suffer scorn and scrutiny. The wounds carved into her heart would deepen and fester as her peers turned against her. Her reputation would fall all the harder too. She would become not just the Fae Princess, but the Fae Princess who'd fallen from grace. The things people would say…

Ultimately, she would have to wonder: Why her?

Then, *"Such exquisite envy. Such delicious darkness. You have been wronged, and you crave justice. Justice I can provide, my new pawn!"*

"And then she'd become the Dark One's puppet. The Jealous Witch! Yeah, right. No way! No way it goes that far!"

Micah buried her face in her pillow and flailed her legs. *It's totally absurd to think the world's throwing things at Luciana with the intent to turn her into the Jealous Witch. That can't be. It's like some narrative force is trying to shove things back on track or something. That's crazy… Right?*

"Ugh, I could at least bounce ideas off of someone if Anna-oneechan were here!"

Eventually, by some miracle, Micah managed to worry herself to sleep.

Melody returned to her room, but did not remove her uniform. In near complete darkness, she lowered herself onto the edge of her bed. Only the faint moonlight trickling in through the window illuminated her figure.

She looked down at her hand as she recalled the afternoon's revelations. *I had thoughts when I touched those speckles. I wanted them gone. Every last one.*

And then she'd touched them, and they went away, like dust in the wind.

"Why did that happen?"

She could think of only one explanation: her mana. It was special, apparently. They said she had unique powers. It didn't feel that way to her, but this was what she'd been told. She was different. To Melody's knowledge, this was the one thing that separated her from the average individual.

It's my magic. Can I use it to get rid of those spots?

Perhaps. It warranted testing, but it was late now. She could convene with her lady and Hubert in the morning.

Melody shook her head. *I may only get their hopes up for nothing. I mustn't do that to them.*

She remembered standing behind her lady earlier, imagining the brave smile she must have been wearing. She could not fool Melody. Luciana bore a pain she valiantly stuffed down. With her in such a state, Melody could not bear to give her lady hope only to rip it away.

In that case, I'll just have to test my theory now! I'll go to the village and see for myself what my mana can do.

Once resolved, she acted decisively. She threw open her window and incanted, "Hide—*Trasparenza*. Flight—*Ali da Angelo*."

Invisible to the naked eye and borne aloft by wings, Melody took flight. A girl clad in black and white soared through a starry sky that night.

She scanned the ground but quickly encountered a problem. *It's too dark to see anything.*

The county slept at this hour, and had therefore snuffed all their light sources. Without a means to get her bearings, Melody couldn't even discern which way was east. She considered using Ovunque Porta, but she'd promised her lady she would be discreet with her magic. The chances that a passerby would see her were slim this late at night. Even so, Melody had deemed flight the least risky method of travel, especially since she could do it while invisible.

Granted, that presented its own problems.

Luce would only light my immediate surroundings. Anything strong enough to act as a spotlight would attract too much attention. What should I do?

She could not use any lights. So then how could she see in the dark unaided?

She had one idea: Rook.

Rook can concentrate mana in his eyes to enhance his sight, Melody recalled. *I wonder if I can perhaps give myself night vision with the same method.* She shut her eyes and tried. *Not the green-shifted intensification of goggles but proper night vision. The ability to see the world as it exists in darkness.*

She opened her eyes once more.

I did it! I can see! Her efforts had borne fruit. The world revealed itself to her. *To Gourges!*

Melody darted through the night sky like a comet. In minutes, she reached her destination. Ensuring there were no potential witnesses, she glided over the village's wall and landed in the field she'd inspected with her lady.

The spots. They're spreading.

Through her enhanced eyes, Melody could easily pick out the blemishes infecting more and more of the crops. Earlier today, the blight affected a fifth of the farmland; now at least a third suffered the strange disease. Melody was right to have hurried.

Please work, she prayed, placing her hand on a speckled tomato. She concentrated her mana at her fingertips. *Please. Please disappear!*

Crack. Mere moments after coming into contact with her mana, the spots shattered like glass, leaving behind a healthy, red tomato.

It worked! I did it! I can… Huh?

Melody followed the fragments of that mysterious blemish. Her augmented eyesight allowed her to track it as it rode the wind, becoming imperceptible to the average eye. She watched it glide away until the particles found purchase on yet more tomatoes. Whether it hit a vine or leaf or the fruit itself, it burrowed in and festered.

Melody was dumbfounded. Her magic wasn't removing the spots, simply changing them into a form that allowed them to infect yet more crops. *Oh, what do I do? How do I save the farm?*

She shut her eyes and thought. Ostensibly, all she could do was break the spots. The problem, then, was what to do with the waste product before the wind could scatter it and spread the disease.

Waste, Melody could deal with.

"I'll just take the garbage out! *Ali da Angelo!*"

Wings sprouted from her back. She launched herself into the sky and glided to the village center, scanning the surroundings with her enchanted eyes. The black blemishes, pregnant with darkness, appeared to her as scars on fair skin.

They're all over the village.

It was worse than anyone had thought. But it went far deeper than initial impressions. There was a skew to the distribution of the blemishes. They seemed to be concentrated on the western edge of the village and radiating east. Melody didn't know enough to figure out why this pattern occurred, and it was secondary at this stage anyway.

She spread her arms wide. "Come, arcane winds—*Argento Brezza*."

A breeze rolled through the village. Stiff but not violent. Gentle but not weak. Pleasant. Enough to ruffle leaves and shake branches; enough to make one comment on the fairness of the day's weather.

It's only a breeze. Even if someone wakes up, they'll think nothing of it.

From high above, Melody controlled the winds as a conductor might an orchestra. The breeze drifted through town as she swung her arms, then it passed through the fields, carrying with it a magical power that spelled doom for every blemish in its path.

A silent symphony of cracks and snaps and pops played as the blemishes shattered, the sound not truly audible because it wasn't truly a physical sound.

As she carried out her massacre, Melody eventually realized that the spots *were* mana. Concentrated, solidified mana clinging to the crops. Something about Melody's mana clashed with these dark tumors. They could not maintain their structure in her mana's presence, and with their dissolution came a crackling that only mages

of particularly sharp hearing could perceive. But even if such an individual existed in the village, Melody's wind carried the sound away.

The breeze blew past leaves and roots and fruits most would call vegetables. It swept away the blemishes as it went, but were that the end of it, those marks would have settled somewhere else to infect anew. Fortunately, Melody's silver gale clung tightly to the dark dust. It carried the fractured mana up and away, gathering it in one place. The mana seemed to naturally coalesce; one speck could grow into a visible stain, after all.

Melody let it coalesce. She collected every bit of dark mana polluting the town's agriculture and condensed them in one spot.

An hour of this later, Melody deemed the village free of contaminants. She regarded the fruits of Argento Brezza's labor—a ball of pure dark energy large enough to hold a human man. Raising her hands, she next summoned her winds from the town to the skies above to begin a magical battle. Mana versus mana.

Melody surrounded the orb with Argento Brezza and pressed down on it from all sides. The dark mana resisted. Condensing so much of it in one location seemed to alter its properties. It did not like being this confined. It wanted to diffuse. Expand. This must have been what gave rise to the epidemic, but the winds kept bearing down, and the ball grew denser, shrinking to the size of a face, and then further still. Eventually, it seemed to reach a limit.

The winds died. The ball surrendered to gravity and fell. Melody caught it in her palm and studied it. It was the size of a marble now and dark as night, matte, without luster. She ran a small amount of

her magic through it, and a crack opened. Her mana repulsed it, even in this state. Soon enough, though, the crack healed itself.

Melody stowed the bead away in her magical storage and landed on the farm she'd visited earlier. Not a spot in sight. Only bright red tomatoes. She glanced left, then right, muttered a quiet apology, and picked one. She took a big bite.

"It's perfect. Perfect."

It tasted as a tomato ought. None of the bitterness lingered. Tears of relief stung her eyes. Before they could fall, she quickly finished the rest of the tomato and wiped the tears away.

Now I know I can save the villages with my magic. If I want to be as cautious as possible, I should do it all tonight. Right! Let's do this!

She faced southwest and made for Durnan, but stopped after only a short way.

"What?"

She whipped around. Nothing. Nothing lay behind her but the sleeping village. So then why couldn't she leave? Why did she feel like something was calling to her?

It wasn't over. Something told her so. Something beyond reason. That was why she'd stopped.

Melody walked through the village, trusting her instincts, waiting to see what they wanted to show her.

And then she found it.

"It can't be. Here too?"

She found herself standing before the field of stunted wheat. The disease was here too, something told her. Melody strained her enhanced eyes, studying the wheat closely, but found no sign of the blemishes.

But the mana is here, she thought. *I can sense it.* She didn't know why she was so certain, but something told her she was right.

She parted the stalks and continued to search. Still nothing. *Maybe it's not blemishes this time. Maybe it's…*

This harvest had failed because the wheat had not grown properly. There was very little to actually harvest because so little of it had developed as it should. It wasn't a matter of soil quality. The crops were getting plenty of water. The wheat had everything it needed to thrive, so the problem could only have originated from one place.

Maybe it's the roots. They aren't absorbing the nutrients they need. The dark mana had to reside in the soil. *That must be where the blemishes came from in the first place, but then why doesn't the wheat have any spots? Where's the divergence? Moisture?*

Wheat required relatively little water to grow, especially compared to other staples like rice. That the tomatoes and cucumbers had developed outward symptoms while the wheat had only struggled developmentally may have meant the dark mana was using water as a mode of transportation, hitching a ride on it from the soil into the plant itself. Wheat also had less surface area. Perhaps the mana had no room to materialize structurally and so accumulated in the soil

instead, eventually reaching high enough concentrations to hinder growth.

All theories, of course, and Melody didn't care to waste time having them peer-reviewed. She placed her hands on the topsoil and circulated her mana through it, like she'd done for Luciana when testing her for spell casting ability. She waited for something to react to her energy.

She didn't have to wait long before quite possibly (and literally) unearthing the solution to these poor harvests. Almost instantly, dark mana burst from the ground and dispersed around the area.

But how do I collect any of this? I can't blow wind through soil… Oh!

Melody produced the black mana bead from her personal storage. She observed two diametrically opposed characteristics in it: The mana was drawn to itself, and it wanted to spread itself. The bead in her hand was stable, meaning at this size, its attractive force outweighed the dispersion force. Her hypothesis was immediately proved correct when she placed the bead on the ground and the mana particles surged toward it. The bead soaked them up like a sponge, but only those particles that Melody had already forced up out of the ground. Those still settled in the earth didn't respond.

She got to work, expanding the range of her mana, circulating it wider and farther underground.

Gourges, Durnan, Tenon—east, southwest, north—Melody toured all over the county, exorcising the dark mana from the

vegetation and soil alike. She did not finish until orange began to peek over the eastern ridgeline.

Melody returned to her room a zombie, changed into pajamas, and instantly collapsed into bed. The soft mattress forced out a sigh.

She pulled the bead of concentrated mana from her storage. It rested on her palm next to her face as she gazed at it. Even after two more villages' worth of dark magic, it never exceeded its original size. It was but one of a myriad of mysteries, but solving those mysteries could wait.

The maid smiled. She'd done it. It hadn't been easy—it had taken the entire night, even—but the work was done. And it had only cost her an ocean's worth of mana. Melody was going to feel this when she woke. Already, her limbs ached.

Her thoughts finally slowed. Her muscles relaxed. She let her guard slip.

Now my lady can have…a proper birthday. I'll just…close my eyes for…

Bead still in hand, Melody drifted to sleep. Sunrise was only minutes away. She would have to get up for work then. But for once, the mighty Melody needed a break.

"…ease."

That…voice.

Melody found herself in darkness, an unfamiliar void.

"…ease. …you. Do n…"

Someone was speaking. A disembodied voice. Ageless and fathomless.

"…ease. I b…ill of…"

It was getting closer. Melody couldn't find its source. She tried to speak, to ask who it was, but her throat closed up around the words as it drew closer still.

Strangely enough, Melody felt no fear.

The voice was in her ear now.

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

Melody jolted awake. She recognized this place. She was in a room, one she'd made herself, one located in the servants' corridor of the temporary estate she'd built after the Rudlebergs' original manor fell.

It was *her* room. This relieved her for some reason.

Still a little…er, very sleepy.

A glance out the window showed the sun about halfway up the eastern mountains. She couldn't have been out for more than an hour. She had to hurry or she'd be late for the morning roundup.

As she heaved herself out of bed, she noticed something resting in her palm. "Oh. I never put this away."

Melody gazed at the little bead, the amalgamation of all the dark mana in the entire county. She wanted to be rid of it for good, but all

she could do was break it down into dust that would spread and place the villages in danger all over again.

Her eyes narrowed. *I suppose I'll have to hold on to it until I learn how to dispose of it.*

Stowing it away, she quickly got dressed and hurried out of her room.

"Good morning, Master Ryan, Madam Lullia."

"Good morning, Melody," Lullia replied.

"Melody," Ryan said.

Again, the old couple had beaten her to the foyer. Melody approached them, but her legs carried her hardly a step before they buckled. "Huh?"

She hit the floor. Ryan and Lullia rushed to her.

"Goodness, Melody, are you all right?" Ryan asked.

"I-I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I suppose I tripped."

"Your complexion looks pale, dear. Come here." Lullia put a pleasantly cool hand to Melody's forehead. "You have a bit of a fever. You ought to rest today."

"What?" Melody's eyes went wide and she started to protest.

Lullia shook her head and shut her down. "The exhaustion from the trip must have finally caught up with you, and with all the chaos that's followed, it's only natural you'd be a little under the weather. As this estate's housekeeper, I'm ordering you, Melody: You're to take the day off to recuperate. A proper maid takes care of herself."

"Yes, madam…"

On August 7th, the day of her lady's birthday, Melody took her first sick day ever.

Chapter 18:
A Lady's Liability

LUCIANA WAS CONFUSED WHEN LULLIA arrived to wake her up on the morning of her birthday. She very nearly spilled her tea when she heard the news.

"Melody's sick?! Really?"

"That's right, my lady. She arrived at the morning meeting looking a little unwell and collapsed. I detected a hint of a fever, so I've instructed her to take the day off. I don't expect it to affect our performance, seeing as we already have quite a bit of help at our disposal these days."

"I-I see. It must have been that tomato she ate yesterday!"

"She's not shown symptoms of stomach trouble yet, but I suppose we'll have to wait and see."

"I should go see her."

"Allow her some space, if you would. It could be contagious, and she's finally getting some sleep. It took some doing, but once I managed to get her into bed, she was out like a light."

"Okay," Luciana said. "Fine." She stared out the window, completely forgetting to drink her tea.

After Lullia helped her dress—a task that would have been Melody's—Luciana boarded the village-bound carriage. She was

joining her uncle, Hubert, along with guardsmen Dyrule and Rook, and Micah, who would be her attendant.

"The estate's in your hands," Hubert said to Ryan.

"Yes, my lord."

"Lullia, keep an eye on Melody for me," Luciana said.

"Of course, my lady. I'll check in on her anytime I find a gap in my duties."

Dyrule snapped the reins, and they were off. Behind him, inside the carriage, sat Hubert and Rook with Luciana and Micah opposite them.

"I didn't think Miss Melody was even capable of getting sick," the young maid said.

"You and I both. Nothing like this has ever happened before." Luciana sighed, casting her gaze out the window. She had to wonder what the last straw on her quickly deteriorating mental fortitude would be. The flattening of her home honestly should have been the first *and* last.

"It looks like snow," Rook mumbled.

"Snow? It's the peak of summer. What are you talking about, Rook?"

Micah chimed in. "I think he means in the sense that today's all topsy-turvy, my lady. Like that pigs might fly."

"Is Melody falling ill really cause for that much surprise?" Hubert asked.

"She's always bursting with energy," Luciana said. "We have to twist her arm anytime we want her to take a break because she uses all of her personal time for being a 'maid for fun,' as she calls it. She's never so much as caught a cold, much less collapsed on the spot."

"I haven't known Miss Melody long, but she never struck me as the type to risk a day of work by not taking care of her health," Micah said.

"Sh-she works even during personal time, does she?" Hubert said.

"She says it rejuvenates the heart and body more than any day off could. We've caught her working behind our backs on multiple occasions," Luciana said.

"Slacking behind an employer's back, I've heard of, but working? That's a new one."

"Melody's simply that enamored with being a maid. She's usually so meticulous about staying healthy."

"And she seemed perfectly fine just yesterday," Micah said. "It had to have been the tomato, right?"

"Grail's what makes me doubt that." Luciana remembered the way he'd scarfed down the breakfast Rook served him, then promptly went to sleep in his basket, just like the lazy mutt he was.

Luciana gasped at herself. *My cute little Grail? A mutt? What am I thinking?*

She focused on of all his most adorable traits. Like the way he whined and howled and ran anytime you tried to touch him. The way

he inhaled food like it was his last meal. The way he napped so often Luciana halfway doubted he wasn't actually a cat.

"Okay, maybe he is a mutt," she said.

A cute mutt, she decided.

An assessment that would surely flatter the Dark One.

"What was that, my lady?"

"Nothing, Micah. Talking to myself." They had more pressing things to worry about than Grail's status in Luciana's mind.

A few moments of silence passed before Hubert said, "Let's go over the day's agenda, just so we're all on the same page. We'll be touring all three villages to get a grasp on the current situation, beginning with Gourges. Then we'll head north to Tenon before turning south to Durnan. We'll inspect the fields and speak with the mayors and the villagers to get a clearer picture of what we're dealing with. Once we have one, we'll consider our next move. It ought to take a full day. Luciana, are you unchanged in your decision to accompany me for this?"

"I am, Uncle."

"But it's your birthday. You're more than welcome to relax at home, though I'd do more for you if that were feasible."

Luciana shook her head. "There's too much at stake to really get into a birthday mood. I'd rather put all this anxious energy toward the good of the people. I want to help."

Hubert regarded her. "I understand. Then I'll welcome your aid. Now, Micah, you ought to stay at her side while she's at mine. Rook,

her safety is your top priority."

"Yes, my lord," the valet said.

"You can count on me!" Micah assured. "Lullia even made lunch. I'm totally prepared!"

She proudly held up the square basket resting on her lap. Luciana and Hubert couldn't help but smile as she struggled to lift the thing with her tiny, ten-year-old arms.

"Not that we'd need it if Miss Melody were here," Micah said, setting the basket down.

Dyrule excluded, as he was outside the carriage, everyone present was familiar with the situation regarding Melody's magic. Micah relished the few moments she had to speak freely.

"When we arrive, I want everyone to look sharp. Remember your duties," Hubert said.

All present voiced their enthusiastic understanding. Little did they know how unnecessary it would prove very soon.

The carriage rolled past Gourges's gate and toward the mayor's house. The mayor himself and his daughter Qila stood outside, already expecting them.

"Greetings and welcome, Lord Hubert, Lady Luciana," the mayor said.

"Well met, Mayor," Hubert replied. "To the point, I'd like to discuss the matter of your crops."

The mayor exchanged looks with Qila.

"What? Has it gotten worse?" Hubert asked.

Perhaps something had changed overnight. His gut told him to steel himself for the worst.

The mayor stumbled over his words as he explained haltingly, evidently unsure of how to describe the miracle.

"You mean to say," Hubert deduced from his confused narration, "that the spots have all gone?"

"Yes, milord. Exactly."

The mayor explained on the way to the fields. Beside him, Luciana received the same explanation from Qila while they walked.

"This morning, we went to see if anything had changed, but we couldn't find anything," Qila said. "Nothing. Not on any of the vegetables, even the ones we knew had spots yesterday."

"They vanished?" Luciana said. "All of the blemishes? Even in the other fields?"

"Yes, milady. We just recently finished examining them and found not a single spot."

They came to the field Luciana had visited yesterday. The same farmer was hard at work today as well, though with a bit of extra pep in his step.

"The good news is you aren't blind," Hubert said. "I don't see any spots either."

"I swear to you, milord, we speak the truth," the mayor said. "They were there, and then they weren't."

Hubert chuckled. "I believe you. The other villages and my own niece corroborated your claims. I don't doubt what you saw."

"Melody ate one, for goodness' sake," Luciana added.

"I notice she isn't here," said Qila.

"Yes, well, she's…not feeling well today."

"Oh, I hope it wasn't the tomato she ate."

"It's hard to say. She has a fever, so she's resting at the estate."

Hubert rumbled in thought. Mysterious spots. There one moment and gone the next, taking their secrets with them. Having never seen them himself, Hubert half suspected mass hallucinations, but this was only the beginning.

"Milord, I had something else to bring to your attention," the mayor said.

"Oh? What's that?"

"The wheat fields, milord."

"The wheat? Has something happened to it? Heaven have mercy, not now of all times."

"You misunderstand, milord. The harvest isn't worse, it… Perhaps you ought to see for yourself."

Hubert wearily agreed. What in the world could it be this time? His head throbbed with questions as they made their way to the wheat fields. The moment they arrived, however, all his ruminations ground to a halt.

The bailiff was speechless.

"I share the sentiment, milord," said the mayor.

"What do you think?" Qila asked Luciana.

"It's incredible," the lady breathed.

Luciana's senses were as overloaded as her uncle's. These could not possibly be the same wheat fields she'd visited yesterday.

An abundant bounty spread before her.

"What's the meaning of this?" Hubert asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know, milord," the mayor said. "We found it like this when we went to walk the fields this morning."

A sea of gold—a *true* sea of gold—rippled in the wind, long, mature stalks reaching for the sun and ready for reaping. Harvesting in a month hardly seemed worth the wait anymore.

Hubert waded into the ocean of gold with the mayor and inspected the crops more closely. Even from afar, Luciana could see her uncle's mirth.

"I'm in awe," Luciana said. "And it all shot up overnight?"

"As are we. I haven't the foggiest idea how it happened," Qila replied. "It's as if they were asleep all this time, then finally woke and raced to maturity all at once."

"It really is."

More puzzles for the pile. Why had the wheat struggled for so long? Why had the problem fixed itself overnight? Questions heaped upon questions with no answers in sight, but at least Gourges's harvest appeared safe. Luciana quietly celebrated the unexpected removal of one item on their long list of worries.

It would have been even better if a new fear didn't sweep in instantly to replace it.

"It really is incredible. Like something out of a storybook," Qila said. "It's as if a great, powerful mage came down to grant us a miracle."

"Like a what?" Luciana and Micah said together.

"What?"

"What did you just say?" Luciana asked.

"It's as if a great, powerful mage came down to grant us a miracle?"

The lady and the young maid fell silent.

"Is there a problem?" Qila asked.

"It's nothing, Qila. Actually, I'm feeling a little thirsty. You wouldn't happen to have anything to drink, would you?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. How inattentive of me. I did actually make an excellent variety of herbal tea that I can prepare. Just a moment."

"You're too kind." Luciana waited until Qila left, then heaved a sigh. "I *knew* Melody falling sick was suspicious."

"With how careful she is?" Micah agreed. "Miss Melody is definitely a great, powerful mage, but even she gets weak in the knees when she works a miracle like this."

"Would it kill her to tell me these things beforehand?"

It was immediately obvious now who the miracle-worker had been. There was only one suspect.

"Should we tell Lord Hubert?" Micah asked.

"Not yet," Luciana said. "Not while the mayor's still around. He has to make sure everything looks okay anyway."

"I'm almost positive it is, but better safe than sorry."

"We keep what we just learned to ourselves for now, understand? That means you too, Rook."

"Right," the valet said.

Hubert was still romping about in the wheat, his gestures rife with jubilation. Luciana only slightly envied his innocence. Only slightly.

"Do you think it's the same at the other villages?" Micah asked.

"I'd assume so. You know she isn't the type to leave things half done."

"I guess that explains her nearly passing out."

Luciana laughed with Micah. "That it does."

Qila returned shortly. "Pardon the wait. This is the herbal tea I mentioned. It works wonders on the nose and throat."

Luciana and her attendants accepted the peppermint tea and enjoyed it while watching Hubert frolic among the crops.

Later, they moved on to Tenon, then Durnan, and each shared similar good news. Hubert couldn't make heads or tails of it, but neither did he care to question it. All was well, and he would not look this gift horse in the mouth. Little did he know the gift horse was Melody.

After thorough meetings with each of the mayors, the bailiff and his entourage finished their business for the day and returned to the

estate in record time.

She stirred, prying open heavy eyelids. She blinked until the world came into focus. She…did not immediately recognize this place.

"Good morning, Melody."

"My lady?"

She truly did not know this place. The first thing that greeted her was the perfectly sculpted features of a beautiful woman. Her, she recognized.

"My lady, what are you doing here?" Melody asked.

"I'm here to see you, silly," Luciana said. "I lied, actually. It's not morning. It's evening, and it's about time you woke up."

Melody glanced out the window. Orange had become orange yet again. She'd slept the entire day away.

Luciana set a hand on her forehead. "Your fever broke. Can you sit up? Are you thirsty?"

"Yes. Yes, thank you."

Though her body lagged due to grogginess, Melody could move. She sat up, accepted a glass of water from her lady, and drank the whole thing.

"Thank you, my lady. I needed that."

"I thought so. Does anything ache?"

"No, my lady. I feel well." Indeed, she wasn't sick at all anymore.

“Good. At least knocking you out is the only thing using that much mana does to you.”

Those words pierced Melody like a dagger. Luciana grinned.

“We visited the villages today,” Luciana said. “You’ll never believe it. All the blemishes were gone. The wheat harvest is looking quite abundant as well. Unbelievable, right?”

Melody didn’t dare speak.

“Uncle frolicked in every field we visited, you know. I found it hard to get excited, though.”

“I, um…”

“That gave me time to think about how all of that could possibly happen overnight. You did something with your magic, didn’t you?”

“Well, er…”

Luciana sighed. “Tell me these things before you do them, Melody.” She clung to her maid and buried her face against her stomach. “Do you have any idea how scared I was when I heard you’d collapsed?”

“My lady…”

She hugged her tighter. “I was terrified.”

“I’m sorry, my lady. Terribly sorry.”

“But thank you. For saving the villages,” Luciana croaked. “My people are my family. You protected them. Without you, there’s no telling how bad it could have been. Thank you, Melody. Thank you.”

Melody could not see her lady's face, but she could hear the fragility and shaking in her voice.

She stroked Luciana's hair. "Rescuing a village or two is all in a day's work for a maid if it means safeguarding my lady's happiness."

The maid's words warmed the lady's heart, thawing the icy tension that had crystallized around it over these past few days. Luciana had to bite the insides of her cheeks to keep from soaking Melody's clothes with tears.

When the threat passed and her feelings had settled, Luciana removed herself, smiling. "Lullia's actually working on a special birthday dinner for me, since we got back early. You'll be there, won't you? If you're feeling better, that is."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Oh, but I should go help. I've neglected an entire day's work."

"Don't even try it. You are not a maid today."

"B-but my lady…"

"Actually, I misspoke. You're not a maid today *or* tomorrow!"

"What? *What?!*"

Luciana grinned at Melody's flash of panic. "Consider this your punishment for keeping secrets from me. I'm grateful for what you did for the villages, but I'm less grateful about you hurting yourself to do it. A good maid takes care of herself, Melody!"

"My lady! Please, my lady, anything but this! I beg you!"

"Everyone was worried sick after your little episode. I've already spoken to Lullia and Uncle, and they both agree. It's already decided,

so make your peace with it.” Luciana chuckled smugly.

Melody slumped forward. “This can’t be happening.”

Luciana grinned like a fae trickster after a prank gone right. “Whether you like it or not, you’re going to have some fun tomorrow!”

The lady’s radiant voice rang through the room and down the hall. More than any other, these were the sounds that best suited any Rudleberg estate.

Chapter 19:
The Date

"MELODY, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?" Luciana said when she stomped into Melody's room the next morning.

"W-well…"

Melody sat meekly before her lady, who cut an intimidating figure with her legs squarely shoulder-width apart and arms crossed. Though this very same fiery lady had ordered Melody to take this day off, the maid wore her uniform.

"Nothing, Lady Luciana," said Micah, poking her head out of a dark closet. Her face betrayed a lack of surprise, as well as disappointment at her lack of surprise. "This is the only thing she has to wear."

Frustration and resignation dragged a sigh out of Luciana's mouth. "Melody, could you please explain why you don't have a single thing that isn't a uniform in your wardrobe?!"

"I'm sorry, my lady! So sorry, my lady!" Melody blubbered. She had neglected to bring even one article of plain clothing.

But was it truly neglect?

"You didn't plan on taking a single break on this trip, did you?!"

"Forgive me, my lady!"

"She isn't denying it," Micah said coldly.

It was true. Melody had every intention of spending every single day for three whole weeks, including travel time, on the job. What need had she of plain clothes?

"How many times do I have to say this?!" Luciana snapped. "Take! Time! Off!"

"It makes it very hard for us peons to rest if the boss never does, Miss Melody," Micah pointed out.

The defendant withered. "I'm sorry…"

Luciana and Micah sighed again. Just moments ago, they'd come to this room because it was almost breakfast time, and Melody had yet to show her face. They worried her illness might have relapsed. What they found instead was an awkward Melody standing stock-still in her maid uniform.

"I meant it when I said you were taking the day off. You're not keeping that on," Luciana had said.

"I-I knew you'd say as much, but…"

"But what? Get changed. Unless… Micah, check her closet."

"Yes, my lady!"

"No, Micah!" Melody had cried. "Don't!"

Micah checked the closet. The results of her investigation led to their present revelation: Melody did not possess anything but uniforms.

"You can leave your uniform on for now, I suppose," Luciana said. "It's time to eat."

“We’ll figure out your outfit after breakfast, Miss Melody!” Micah said.

“Okay,” the maid relented, sagging.

Luciana escorted a positively crestfallen Melody to the dining hall, practically dragging her along at times.

After their meal, they returned to Melody’s room, where they resumed brainstorming.

“Our one saving grace here is that she can make any clothes she wants with magic,” Micah said. “We can work with nearly anything.”

“True,” Luciana said. “Melody, unravel one of your uniforms and let’s whip up something new.”

“You ask me to slay one of my own children, my lady!” Melody gasped. “That’s sacrilegious!”

“Are maid uniforms a religion to you, Miss Melody?” Micah asked.

“You reap what you sow, actions have consequences, et cetera,” Luciana said. “You would have no need to slay your children if you’d brought other clothes in the first place.” Luciana jabbed a finger at Melody. “You did this, Melody! These threads are on your hands!”

Melody fell to her knees, hands over her face. “I… What have I done?”

“What am I looking at?” Micah had to ask. To her knowledge, they had not practiced for any play.

The conversation drifted toward lighter topics, like what kind of outfit Melody should craft.

"Please be gentle," Melody said.

"Lady Luciana, what do you think of something a little bolder? I know it's a lot of skin, but I think she could pull it off."

"She can't go out in a skirt that short, Micah. You could see her thighs! You might be onto something, though."

"What about a sleeveless knit turtleneck? Accentuate the chest! Make it sexy!"

"Modest suits Melody best, I think. Something innocent. Ruffled sleeves?"

"Pants might be good too. I'm thinking low-rise. A little navel."

"She'd look amazing in pigtails, I bet. We could arrange an evening dress into something more appropriate for daytime."

"Gothic, hm? That could be cute. What if we…"

"I said be gentle please!" Melody cried.

Otome gamer and heroine-lover Micah, together with Luciana, the staunch Melody-enthusiast, formed an intimidating duo. The bloodshed had only just begun.

But after some time…

"It's done," Luciana said.

Micah gasped. "Miss Melody, you look so cute."

"Finally," said Melody, for an entirely different reason than her lady.

The process lasted an hour, an exhausting hour full of nitpicking and suggestions and this-heres and that-theres. But they'd completed

an outfit at last.

Melody wore a frilly, white blouse with loose, ruffled sleeves open at the shoulders, breezy and perfect for the weather. The black and white layers of her skirt fell to her calves. A vertical row of three white buttons defined her waist at her midline. A sliver of skin peeked above a pair of black booties—paired with black socks—for a striking accent to the ensemble. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders, though it wasn't at all plain thanks to a sunhat with a black ribbon that matched her skirt.

In her right hand dangled a woven tote bag, a final statement on the casual theme that defined the outfit.

"Miss Melody's ready for a day out!" Micah said.

"I'm starting to wonder how we wound up with black and white as the main colors," Luciana said. "We looped back around to maid."

"It's what she looks best in, after all. It doesn't look like a uniform, and that's what matters."

"This is most certainly *not* a maid uniform!" Melody agreed vehemently.

So it was that the maid found herself in possession of a new set of plain clothes.

"I'm going to be studying administration with Uncle," Luciana said.

"And I'll be attending to her," Micah added.

And off they went, just like that.

Left with the ambiguous order to "enjoy herself," Melody paced the hallway, wondering what in the world to do with herself.

"What is one supposed to do on a 'day off,' exactly?"

Her lack of direction came partly from her single-minded interest in all things maid, to be sure, but the quietness of the Rudlebergs' demesne did not help matters. The estate stood on a plain at the center of a triangle of equidistant villages. There was nothing around for miles.

What was Melody meant to do?

The other servants, Schue excluded, had grown up in this area. Often, they would take their vacations in small bursts to spend time in their hometowns. Needless to say, this did not help Melody's plight.

Micah did say I was ready for a "day out," so I suppose I'll take a short walk. Then maybe do some sewing in my room.

A sad schedule for a fifteen-year-old girl.

Melody headed for the estate's back door. She'd built one there for servant use, the front being reserved exclusively for her mistress and other such personages.

The temporary estate had nothing in the way of a genuine garden, but Melody hadn't skimped on flower beds. As she exited through the back door, she found someone outside tending to them. A bag lay nearby, filled with dirt and weeds. The person hummed to himself as he watered the flowers.

"Schue?"

The boy finished his song. “Oh, is that you, Melo…dy? Holy cow, you look amazing.”

Mouth agape, Schue dropped the watering can and hurried closer. “I mean amazing! You’re so pretty, Melody! Right, I forgot you have the day off. Me too! Gosh, you’re pretty!”

“Th-thank you?”

“Is that a question?” Schue snorted. “You’re awful cute, you know that?” He donned that melty grin of his.

Melody, faced with an avalanche of compliments, could only blush. The boy was right, though. Lect would have suffered a dire case of mumbling had he seen Melody then. That was the difference between the two boys: Schue spoke his mind.



"You said it's your day off?" Melody said. "And you're out here tending to the flowers?"

"Something about gardening speaks to me. I'm doing it because I want to, don't worry."

"I see you're in your usual clothes too."

Indeed, Schue wore his servant's uniform. Melody assumed he lacked anything more suitable for menial work.

Schue grinned. "Actually, I don't own anything else. It's never really been a problem."

"I'm quite happy in my uniform as well, but my lady disagrees. She just released me from a lengthy lecture."

"Oh, well I'm on her side on that one. I'd be angry too if I was robbed of a sight like this. It's perfectly understandable."

"I-is it?"

"Girls are pretty, and they ought to dress like it." Schue nodded, agreeing with his own argument.

Fashion as a concept was lost on the maid, however, at least when it came to herself. Hypocrite that she was, she quite enjoyed dressing up her lady.

"Were you on your way somewhere?" Schue asked.

"Just taking a walk. I don't have much else to do, as it happens."

"Nothing to do?" Schue thought about that. "Do you maybe want to do something with me?"

"With you?"

"The horse that drew your carriage is in the stable, right? Why not hop on it and take a ride? We could reach one of the villages in no time and return just as quickly."

"Going by horse…" Melody mused. "You know how to ride one?"

"Do I? It's practically my specialty!" Schue flashed his teeth and beat his chest.

Melody considered the offer. It certainly appealed more than a plain old walk. They could maybe even stop by Gourges so she could see the fruits of her labor herself.

"I accept," she said. "If you'll have me, that is."

"Yes! Horseback date with Melody!"

"I-I'm sorry?" the maid said. Yet she could not outright deny him as he skipped around in joy.

While Schue saddled the horse, Melody went to the kitchen to make lunch, preparing simple sandwiches for the two of them and stowing them in her new tote bag. Its designers couldn't possibly have imagined it finding a use so quickly, but Melody was pleased that it had.

She rendezvoused at the stable. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting, Schue."

"Not at all. Only just got here myself." He snickered. "Oh man, it really is a date."

Melody laughed too. Not at the same thing as Schue but rather at the fact that such silly things tickled him so.

Schue prepared the horse for riding, planted his foot in the stirrup, and swung into the saddle. With a goofy grin, he offered his hand to Melody, who accepted. He hoisted her up behind him. Melody sat sidesaddle, on account of her skirt, hugging her arms around his waist for security.

"Off we go," he said.

They started at a trot, clipping and clopping away from the estate. Melody marveled at the scenery. How different it looked from just a little higher up. She'd seen it from much higher when she flew, but this point of view revealed new things in new ways.

"Not nervous, are you?" Schue asked.

"No. It's just curious how much the world can change from a different vantage point. I could gaze at it from here forever."

"Glad you like it. How's about a change of scenery, though?"

"Huh?" Melody yelped as Schue cracked the reins and sped up.

The horse jostled them as it galloped, destroying the serenity of the scenery. Melody had to cling to Schue's back, much to his delight.

"We'll come out on a clearing soon," he said. "Keep holding tight if you want, but don't forget to take in the view."

"Wha—I…W-will do!" Melody replied with difficulty as the bumps and thumps jolted her.

Riding horseback was not the same as riding a bike, motorized or otherwise. Bikes did not have four stomping legs. They also weren't living, breathing creatures attempting to maintain their own center of gravity. Horses did not come with safety features. It was all Melody

could do to keep from sliding off or snapping Schue's spine from the force of her arms around him.

Schue did not mind, of course. Schue was in no pain whatsoever.

Gradually, Melody adjusted to the shaking and swaying and started to appreciate the nature around her. "How beautiful."

Whipping wind. Hissing grass. Her ears soaked it all in. This was an altogether different experience from a speeding carriage. The animal was beneath her, alive and stomping. It was liberating. She dared to admit she liked it.

About half an hour later, the horse slowed to a walk as they reached a meadow.

"How was that?" Schue asked. "Fun?"

"Very. Aside from my aching rear."

He laughed. "Sorry about that. Wish we had a proper saddle for two."

"It isn't your fault. Thank you for the experience. I'm glad you invited me."

"*Gah*, she's perfect!" Schue moaned. "Be mine, milady, I implore thee!"

"I'm sorry, but I'd much rather focus on my work."

"Swing and a miss! Ah well, that's fine."

It is? The speed at which he'd gone from dejected to neutral left Melody dizzy. Apparently, it took more than that to faze a man who'd been turned down by every fair maiden in the county of Rudleberg.

"What now?" he asked. "Take a look around here more? We can go to one of the villages if you want."

"I'd like to see Gourges, if possible, to see what's become of the crops."

"Oh, yeah, there was a lot of commotion about that. All right, to Gourges it is."

"After that, we can have lunch. I made sandwiches."

"A date *and* a handmade lunch?! It's my lucky day!"

They made for the eastern village at a comfortable canter. That was another thing bikes lacked: stamina.

They arrived at the gate an hour or so later, and the lookout stopped them. Rand, pulling Schue aside and turning his back to Melody, whisper-yelled, "Schue! Who is this?! She's stunning! Stunning, I tell you!"

"Isn't she? She clung to my back the whole way here, you know."

"I ought to stick you, you fox!"

Rand and Schue happened to be birds of a feather. Melody tilted her head to the side as she watched them hiss back and forth from afar.

"She's Lady Luciana's maid from the capital," Schue told him.

"The capital? Hell, the city really is something else. They don't make them like that here at home."

"And she's kind and gentle and mild-mannered and cute. Did I

mention cute?”

“That you did. That she is.”

“Do I have to get involved?” a voice said from the village side of the gate.

Rand blanched. “Q-Qila!”

Schue cheered. “Qila! Long time no see! Did you come for me?”

“That’s one too many syllables in my name, Rand,” the girl said. “And yes, Schue, it has been a long time. But no, I did not come to see you. I just happened to be passing by, saw you two mumbling, and had a feeling it couldn’t mean anything good. And what do I find but a pair of mongrels slobbering at each other while a girl bakes in the summer heat.”

“M-Melody! I’m so sorry!” Schue said, instantly whipping back around.

Melody simply smiled, unbothered.

“Welcome back, Melody,” Qila said. “I hope you’re feeling well.”

“Thank you for your concern, Madam Qila,” the maid replied. “I’m quite well, as you can see.”

Schue froze like those words had knocked the wind out of him. He was not used to being handled.

“What brings you to our village?” Qila asked.

“Checking on the fields, actually,” Melody said. “I wanted to see how they were doing.”

"It's very kind of you to keep us in your thoughts. I'd be happy to show you to them."

"I'd be much obliged."

As they walked away, Qila shot over her shoulder, "Tether your horse somewhere near the gate, Schue. I'll be with Melody."

"Er, we can wait," Melody said.

"No, no, go on without me," Schue said. "I'll catch up later!"

Melody left it at that and followed her guide. Qila escorted her to the field they'd investigated the first time through this village.

"The spots really are gone," Melody said.

"It was a treacherous situation. We're thrilled to be rid of them, I assure you."

Melody had done her work as thoroughly as possible, but it was different seeing it in the light of day. The sight of so much green with not a patch of black set her heart at ease. It truly was over.

With a sigh, she concentrated mana in her eyes for one more unnecessary check.

"What?" she said.

"Yes? What is it, Melody?"

"Oh, um, nothing." She must have been seeing things. She'd nearly lost her composure but rescued it at the last second.

What she saw was most certainly not nothing.

It was all gone. It should have all been gone.

There, in the topsoil, she spotted it—the dark mana. Only traces of it, too little to materialize again as blemishes, but present nonetheless. When they inspected the wheat fields, Melody discovered more of the same. Particles littered the earth.

The dark mana was replenishing itself.

How? Where is it coming from? At this rate, things will get just as bad as before.

Melody was distracted the rest of the day, even as Qila escorted her and Schue about the village. Though she racked her brain, no solution presented itself.

Melody and Schue returned to the estate that evening. Leaving the horse in the stable, they headed for the back door.

"Wow, that was a lot of fun," Schue said. "Thanks for joining me, Melody."

"Likewise, Schue. I enjoyed myself thoroughly."

The boy grinned. "We've got to do this again sometime!"

Melody smiled in return. "Yes. Sometime."

They turned to the back door, at last noticing the group standing there waiting for them.

"Lady Luciana," Melody said. "I've just returned."

"Welcome home. Did you have fun?"

"I did. Schue here took me on a lovely horse ride."

“Did he, now? I’m happy for you. But you must be tired. Why not retire to your room and relax a while? Micah, take her.”

“Yes, my lady,” the young maid said.

“Micah? My lady, I know the way,” Melody said, puzzled.

“Don’t mind her, Miss Melody,” Micah assured. “Off we go.”

“O-okay then. If you’ll excuse us, my lady. Thank you again for the lovely time, Schue.”

“N-no problem. It was fun,” the trembling valet said. “Thanks for joining me.”

His trademark grin did little to hide the pallor of his complexion. Melody found that odd but simply bowed before excusing herself.

She could have sworn she heard screams shortly after she left.

Chapter 20:
Pup Marks the Spot: Garmr of the Dark

THE NIGHT OF AUGUST 13TH LAY HEAVY upon Gourges. But not so heavy as to consume the shimmering silver wings radiating from the girl in the sky. Those wings *would* have shimmered had Melody not cast Trasparenza on herself.

"Come, arcane winds—*Argento Brezza*."

A pleasant breeze rolled through the village, gales carrying particles of dark mana up, away, and toward Melody. The black bead in her palm soaked up every last drop of darkness.

"That about does it, but this isn't good."

Melody scanned the area with her enchanted eyes. Not a trace of dark mana remained. Her job was done.

So much returned after just five days, she thought. *I've got to find the source, and fast!*

She turned toward the next village with a sigh.

Five days ago, during her visit with Schue, Melody had discovered that the dark mana she'd extracted from the county's villages had returned. At the time, she found only traces, but a visit with her lady this afternoon had revealed a drastic worsening of the situation. In just a few days, enough dark mana had accumulated to quite possibly cause another outbreak of the blemishes.

So Melody went out and repeated her sweep. She flew over the villages, cleansing them as she went. It was mostly muscle memory at this point, so the work didn't take long, for a mercy, and she woke the next morning without issue.

Mostly without issue.

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

"Again."

Melody woke the morning after the cleansing from the same dream she'd endured every night since that first night. Was this just a dream? It was always the same. So simple. A voice. A voice she could only hear clearly moments before waking. She couldn't place the voice. It was androgynous. Ageless. But it always wanted the same thing.

It must all be connected.

Melody took the mana bead from her pocket dimension and gazed into it. It offered no answer to her suspicions. She ran her magic through it. It cracked. It healed.

Every morning since she created the mana bead, she woke to that voice. She scarcely remembered it the first time, but after close to a week of hearing its pleas, she struggled to push it from her mind.

"'Do not think ill of me.' Who is 'me'? Is it you?" she asked the bead.

The bead didn't reply. She gave it some time and waited patiently. When it was clear it would keep its secrets, she put the thing away and rose from bed.

After lunch, Melody used her break to spread out three sheets of paper on the table. Maps. Specifically, maps tracking the spread of the contamination in Gourges, Tenon, and Durnan.

Each of the county's villages shared a similar layout. Thanks to the density of the capital, vast farmlands sprawled beyond its walls. The comparatively less-populated villages could afford the luxury of spreading out as well. Broadly speaking, about half of the villages' outer territories, as defined by their encircling walls, hosted homesteads and fields for growing vegetables. The remaining half, lying closer to the villages themselves, grew wheat.

Melody updated the maps with her findings on the range of the area affected by the dark mana. Perhaps she could discover a pattern. She studied the maps…

But found nothing.

"I know one thing for sure: The infection affects all the villages to varying extents."

The dark mana canvased nearly the entirety of every settlement, even where no blemishes yet manifested. Left unchecked, it was only a matter of time before more of the speckles appeared.

"If I don't do something, I'll have to collect another mana bead in five days. I wish I had more information, but I may have to report

to my lady and Lord Hubert."

She'd yet to inform anyone of her discoveries, at first because she wanted to see how events developed. Things certainly developed yesterday, but she still lacked anything concrete to bring to her lady. There were too many unknowns. The only thing she knew for sure was that the dark mana lay at the heart of the matter. Melody still didn't understand the nature of the mana, its source, or how anyone could manage it without her own mana. Reporting this would do nothing but create a problem that had no solution—which meant it was up to Melody to find one.

However, that was easier said than done when, apparently, she was the strongest mage in the kingdom and even *she'd* struggled to get rid of the stuff. Not that it was much trouble now that she'd had some practice.

Currently, the next most capable mage in the county was Rook, but he'd lost his ability to use magic along with his memories. After him—*far* below him—was Dyrule, the guardsman, but he could not cast spells either. There were no others. Melody needed more information. Better information.

She would bide her time until she found it.

"Miss Melody, do you have a… Whoa. What are you doing?" Micah entered and took in the parchment strewn about the table, and Melody scowling at it.

"Ah, Micah. I was just putting together maps of the infection affecting the crops. I thought it might help me ascertain its source."

"No rest for the wicked, huh?"

"Did you need me for something?"

"Oh, yes! Have you seen Grail anywhere? I can't seem to find him."

"Now that you mention it, he wasn't present at lunch. I haven't seen him either."

"Okay. It's just that I don't think he ate, so I'm a little worried. Let me know if you come across him."

"I will."

Micah left the dining hall.

"That Grail," Melody mused. "Where's he gotten off to?"

Melody refocused on the maps. She'd finished defining the range of the infection and moved on to the severity. Not all villages were affected equally, so what she really needed was a distribution graph.

She conjured one up, and, at last, a pattern emerged from the chaos.

"More infections in crops closer to the gate…"

She discovered the same in every village, even accounting for standard deviations and variances.

"Thinking on it now, the wheat was certainly affected over a broad range, but the concentration of the mana in the soil was comparatively low. I'll have to take the differences in how the symptoms developed into account in my calculations."

She defined the wheat fields as the baseline: infection level one. With that as the foundation, she proceeded through each of the other

fields, assigning each a severity to the best of her recollection.

"Higher levels closer to the gate. It would then follow that the infection is spreading from there. Which would mean…"

She unfurled a full map of the county, ruler and pen in hand.

"Tenon's gate faces due south, I think. Following the data and assuming the source of the infection radiates from that direction…" She drew a straight line south of the northernmost village. "Gourges next. Its gate faces west." She drew west until the lines intersected. "But this is… No. No conclusions just yet. Southwest is Durnan, whose gate faces northeast." She drew. It intersected in the same place. "It…"

Melody triple-checked her work. Every single gate faced directly toward the Rudleberg estate. But that could only mean one thing.

"It can't be! Hide—*Trasparenza*! Flight—*Ali da Angelo*!"

Casting as she ran, Melody darted outside and flew up toward the sweltering summer sun on shimmering wings. High. Higher. Even higher. She soared higher than she'd ever flown before. She didn't stop ascending until she could see all three villages at once, then she flooded her eyes with mana.

"More! Stronger! As much mana as they can hold! I have to see everything!"

Her eyes surged with more magical energy than ever. She shut them, and when she opened them again, they seemed to burn, silver flames flaring out of the sides. She scanned the county from on high.

"That's it," she murmured.

She witnessed the flow. Rivers of black energy slithered along the three roads from all three villages, forming tributaries that met at the Rudleberg estate. Or so it seemed. The truth was even harder to believe—that the dark mana was, in fact, flowing *from* the estate toward the people.

That was the important part. While some mana branched off into minor tributaries, the primary flow moved toward civilization.

There were properties of the dark substance Melody could not understand as of yet.

"Is it drawn to people?" she said. "Is that even possible?" The flow seemed to follow the roads, beaten-down paths of packed dirt where no vegetation grew, so the mana could travel undetected until it reached a place where its ill effects could manifest. "The important thing is I know the source now, so I can do something about it at last!"

The question of *why* the estate was the source remained, but that didn't matter. Melody knew what she had to do, and where. She hurried back to the ground.

Stealthily dispelling her enchantments in the shade, she made for the site of the mountainous remains of the old estate. By some cruel irony, that was where she found the thickest, blackest concentration of the dark mana. Her sight returned to only slightly enhanced levels, but even that was enough to show her the truth. While she'd had to probe for the mana at the wheat fields, she required no such test here.

Melody had gotten a lot of practice seeking out sneaky energy lurking in the soil. Her eyes had learned the signs. Frankly, it was a testament to her talent, not just when it came to doing but adapting. If such a talent even existed.

"Reach—*Allungare la Mano—Mille*."

Quietly yet quickly, a thousand invisible arms of energy shifted the rubble, clearing a path to the center for Melody. The way opened for her as if she were parting a wooden sea with her mind. The sight might have inspired a whole religion among unknowing observers.

Eventually, she arrived at her destination. Late to the party, as it were.

"Grail?"

The pup barked. He was digging, and he'd been at it for a while, by the look of things. Five of him stacked on top of each other could have fit in the hole.

What's he doing? Pup marks the spot?

A whimsical but nonetheless nonsensical thought.

It struck Melody then that Grail had had a hankering for those spots on the tomato. The dark mana. He'd even slobbered on a leaf just to satisfy his craving.

"You know where the mana is, Grail?"

The pup kept barking and digging but did not seem to notice Melody's presence. Whatever he was after, it mattered an awful lot to him. More than that, though, he seemed positively assured that what he sought lay beneath him.

"You *do* know. It's there, isn't it? Right down there."

Melody lifted him with an invisible, magical arm, which finally got the pup's attention. He yipped, eyes widening in an awfully human expression of shock. Smiling, Melody cradled him in her arms.

"You were one step ahead of me all along. You knew where the infection was coming from and were trying to dig it up."

Grail whined and howled and barked and yipped. Translation: *Damn it all, she's found me! It's mine! It's mine, I say! The colossal negativity slumbering beneath this earth is mine!*

"You wanted to help us, didn't you? Because you love us. Sweet boy."

Melody was ever so slightly off the mark. She stroked the puppy's dirt-covered paws and felt the beans of his toes tenderly, as one might a delicate treasure.

Stop! Ow! Stop, not the cleansing! the pup barked.

Melody's love and kindness was purifying the pup, her saintly blessings hard at work on him. Of course, to Grail, actually the wretched Dark One, this attention was more curse than blessing.

"You've earned a break. I'll take it from here."

She set Grail down and stared into the hole he'd dug. It was down there, whatever it was. Deep down. The source.

"*Allungare la Mano—Mille*. Search!"

A few dozen of her magical arms gathered in the hole, diving through the soil and penetrating far underground. Some minutes later, they found what they were looking for.

"Up!" Melody commanded.

Fighting against the heavy soil, limbs of pure energy hauled the object up. They strained to push and pull against the pressure, but slowly, they neared the surface. Let there be no doubt that the item was buried so deep that this was, in fact, the most efficient method of extracting it, otherwise Melody would have had to explain an entirely new mountain of rock and dirt. Brute force was not always Melody's preferred solution, but in this case, it was suitable.

Given time, the strategy worked. The earth at her feet shifted, though the support of the arms kept the rubble from collapsing. More shifting and shaking later, the ground suddenly settled, and Grail's hole gaped open.

From it, carried by the force arms, emerged a basketball-sized metallic orb the color of tarnished silver. When Melody tapped it, it did indeed have the consistency of metal.

"This is the source?"

It had to be. Melody could see the dark energy emanating from it with her enhanced eyes.

That's mine! Grail barked. *Mine! I started the hole! Finders keepers!* He spun in circles and barked some more.

"I know. I'm happy we found it too." Melody beamed at him.

Her interpretation was less wrong this time than the first but, well, still a ways off.

"Grail! There you are!" came a voice.

"Micah? Is that you, my lady? And Rook too."

Luciana and the two servants made their way along the path Melody had cleared in the rubble.

"We were looking for Grail and heard barking," Luciana said. "Of course this is how we find him."

"That's a very judgmental way of putting it," Micah noted.

"This place is dangerous," said Rook, glancing around. "We should leave."

There were certainly better places for a reunion than a precarious pile of debris.

"Don't run off like that, Grail! We were worried sick!" Micah snatched the pup up, who yipped in displeasure. The usual scene.

"What were you two doing here anyway?" Luciana asked.

"You see…"

Melody explained everything.

"Melody," Luciana groaned. "Again?"

"F-forgive me, my lady."

The lady massaged her temples. That her maid had snuck out without her knowing, yet again, to collect mana did not please her. "Did I or did I not just tell you to inform me before you do these things?! Here are three C's for you. Remember them. Contact! Communicate! Consult! Got that? Contact, communicate, consult! Now, what did I just say?"

"C-contact, communicate, consult."

"Again!"

"Contact, communicate, consult!"

"Good! Now, the next time you think twice about doing any of those things because you don't want to worry us, think about how worried we'd be not knowing where you are!"

"Yes, my lady. I'm sorry, my lady."

She sighed. "So this ball here's the culprit, is it?"

"Yes, my lady. Given the dark mana emanating off of it, there can be no doubt."

"Miss Melody, what did you just say?" Micah blinked, still holding onto Grail. "Dark mana?"

"That's right. It's the cause of everything." Melody produced the black bead and showed it to her. "This is all of the mana I collected and condensed throughout the county."

Grail howled.

"Grail!" Melody yanked her hand back as the pup lunged for the bead. "No, Grail! Bad! Naughty boy. Not everything in front of your nose is food."

"You did *what* to all the mana?!" Micah said.

"Um, Micah?"

It was too late. She was already lost in her mind palace. *Dark mana can only mean one thing. But what's it doing all the way out here? I've never seen that orb in the game. What is happening right now?!*

"In any case, we can't stay here," Luciana said. "Let's continue

this in my room."

"Of course." Melody dispelled her magic helpers and took the orb in her bare hands.

Grail made his displeasure known very loudly. He lurched forward in Micah's arms and bit down on the metal sphere.

"No, Grail! How many times do I have to tell you?" Melody figured he must have been teething, but that didn't do much to make the fellow less exhausting.

And then the sphere shrieked.

Melody yelped, dropping the sphere out of surprise. "Wh-what in the…?"

The orb emitted a shrill, electrical keen. Light flickered across the surface like the lights of a circuit board.

"What's happening?" Luciana recoiled in fear. She had no concept of anything even remotely analogous to what she was witnessing.

The orb keened again, but in a warbly sort of way that resembled words.

> Emergency Boot Protocol commenced. Condition: Requisite mana signatures detected.

> Requisite Mana Signature: Wavelength—silver. Quantity—undefinable. Projected role: Saint.

> Requisite Mana Signature: Wavelength—black. Quantity—minimal. Projected role: Sangreal.

> Analysis: Silver Entity unidentified. Acknowledging new Saint. Probability: 87%.

> Analysis: Black Entity identified. Sangreal Project, subject number nine. Designation: Vanargand.

> Entity Status: Vanargand currently 89% purified. Parameters acceptable.

"Does anyone know what it's saying?" Luciana asked.

"I don't know, but I don't like it," Micah replied.

Though the orb seemed capable of language, no one could decipher what it meant. No *person*, that was.

Vanargand? It knows me? But that was all that Grail could make out. He could hear the words, but their meaning was lost on him.

> Unit Status: Functional life expectancy greatly exceeded. Operational efficiency below 20%. Blight corruption detected.

> Proposal: As prescribed in Clause 5, Article 6 of the Fetter-Sphere Emergency Provisions, immediate destruction of this unit is recommended.

> Booting Autonomy Protocols as prescribed in Clause 7, Article 3 of the Fetter-Sphere Emergency Provisions. Dialogue Mode engaged.

Subject nine, Vanargand's current purification levels suggest that a fully realized Saint stands before this unit. Unfortunately, this unit is not equipped with data pertaining to subject nine, Vanargand's realization, but would nonetheless infer from the Sangreal's presence at the Saint's side that this subject was a success.

"It sure talks a lot, whatever it is," Melody said. "Can anyone understand it?"

"It's still going, Miss Melody," Micah said.

It is with great regret that this unit must report that it can no longer sustain its original function. Environmental indicators are inoperable. Touch-based mana detection persists, though at suboptimal efficiency. This unit does not anticipate being able to maintain Dialogue Mode for long. This unit is lost and thus has a suggestion: Begin purification measures at once. In the event that the current setting is unsuitable, avoid prolonged contact with this unit. This unit will remain functional for as long as possible, but that will not be long. When ready, touch this unit with the Saint's mana, shut this unit down, and proceed with purification immediately. Decide quickly.

The orb went quiet, its light fading.

"Is it done? What do we do with it?" Melody asked.

"That's a good question," Luciana said. "For the time being, let's bring it to my room to investigate."

Wait! Grail howled. *Something's not right!*

But no one heard the warnings, only a pup's whines.

Melody knelt and touched the orb—the Fetter-Sphere.

Gratitude, Saint. Ceasing all Fetter-Sphere protocols. Commencing emergency ejection of Sangreal Project subject number three. Designation: Garmr.

Fight well. Blessings upon thee, o maiden of silver.

The moment Melody's fingers skimmed the metal, light streaked through the middle of the sphere. The top portion twisted like a capsule coming apart, and a dark haze poured out from inside it.

Shrieking, the maid hurled the orb away.

"Melody!" Luciana shouted.

The haze continued to billow out, warping and morphing until a dome encased them.

"Melody, we have to get out of—"

The light emerged faster than Luciana's words, black and blinding. For several seconds, no one could see anything, and when their vision finally returned, they found themselves somewhere they did not recognize. It certainly wasn't the Rudleberg estate.

"My lady!" Melody cried. "Everyone!"

They huddled together. This place was not reality as they knew it. The earth was as dark as obsidian and as hard as stone. Black and white smudges swirled through the sky, turning the atmosphere to liquid marble. This impossibly strange world seemed to go on forever.

And they stood in the middle of it.

Something about it rang familiar for Luciana. "This is almost like the place where I fought Luna."

Micah recognized this place as well, though for a very different reason. *Th-this place… It can't be. I mean, how can it? But it has to be.*

"Gateway—*Ovunque Porta*!" Melody said. "What? It's not working."

No door appeared.

Despair sank its nasty talons into Micah's heart. *I knew it,* she thought. *This is it. Not even the heroine can get out of this one. We can't run. Because this is…*

The ground thundered. Melody and her companions whirled toward the noise.

"It's a boss battle," Micah muttered. "What is the Dark One even doing here?!"

Grail howled. *What in the* hell *am I doing here?!*

The great, towering figure of a wolf cast in a shifting, dark, and magical haze glowered down at its prey.

Garmr challenged Melody to a battle. There was no escaping from the Dark One.

Chapter 21:
Maid Magic Masterwork: The Silvershine Raiment

THE BEAST LET LOOSE A DEAFENING ROAR. Everyone pressed their palms against their ears.

Melody peered up at the monster. Though it took the form of a wolf, this was no living animal. It had no flesh or fur or sinew, only a dark, insubstantial substance that looked suspiciously similar to her mana bead. Smoke billowed around the thing's body, only hinting at its canine form and ostensibly frail enough for a stiff breeze to carry it away. But Melody's eyes, with their arcanely enhanced sight, could detect the way the haze circulated. The ambient mana was concentrated on the wolf, the once-dispersed substance lazily finding its way back.

The circulation is weak, though, she observed. *It may evaporate over time.*

More gaseous mana fell away than managed to return. All they had to do was evade the beast and it would quite literally wear itself thin over time.

As if reading her thoughts, the wolf inhaled deeply.

What's it doing?

"Darkness Shout!" Micah yelled. "It's using a breath attack!"

Melody's brain cycled through her warning three times before understanding clicked. *It's going to expel something at us! I'll bet it's*

more of that dark mana!

"Come, arcane winds—*Argento Brezza*!"

A great gust of wind erupted before Melody. Like a massive, spontaneous updraft, it shot skyward, carrying anything in its path with it. This was wholly unlike the gentle breeze she'd used in the villages—this was a mighty gale.

With an ear-rumbling roar, the wolf ejected a stream of dark energy from its gaping maw like artillery from a cannon. Breath met gale, and the clashing mana reacted far more explosively than a mere change in atmospheric pressure could produce.

Melody skillfully contained the ensuing crash by conducting her winds, but still the shock wave sent Micah and Luciana reeling. Rook held them steady.

The beast howled.

"You will bring no harm to my lady! Not to anyone!" Melody shouted.

The onslaught continued, but Melody stood equal to the task. The winds never weakened. Not a single stray blast made it past her.

When at last the beast let up and the torrent of mana died down, Melody readied herself. "Now it's my tur—"

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

"What?"

The edge in Melody's glare dulled, and so did her focus, but the attack had not entirely abated. Though her wind redirected a majority of it, that lapse cost her, and a single blast just large enough for one person slipped past.

It consumed Melody. Instantly. Before she could even think to scream.

Reacting quickly, Rook scooped up the girls and leapt to the side, narrowly avoiding the tail end of the attack.

Luciana's breath caught in her throat. When she remembered how to breathe, she screamed, "Melody!"

The landscape cleared. Luciana's vision focused. And there, on the ground, sprawled the girl who'd laid her life on the line to protect them.

"No. It can't be," Micah said. "Miss Melody…"

"Melody!" Luciana wailed, throwing herself down at her maid's side. She cradled her in her arms. The maid fell back, limp, her skin ghostly white. "Melody! Open your eyes, Melody!"

She did not answer. Melody was silent as death itself.



"Melody!" Luciana continued to shout. "Please, Melody!"

Rook knelt next to her and placed his hand against the maid's lips. "Lady Luciana, she isn't breathing."

Luciana's heart lurched. "No. No! I don't believe you! Don't you know how strong her defensive charms are? Nothing gets through them! Not even if you get blown to smithereens! She told me herself! She… She's not…"

Luciana shuddered. Then the tears fell. She wanted to keep protesting, to keep denying the truth, but she could no longer find the words to do it.

"My lady…" Micah whimpered. "Miss Melody…"

Grail clutched in her arms, the girl stared down at her mentor's pale, motionless body. *It's not real. The heroine? Down after one hit? Someone as insanely overpowered as her? This isn't how it is in the game. It shouldn't… It should've… This isn't a game. I know that. It's not a game, but…!*

Heroine or not, all her mentor had wanted was to live her dream. To be a maid.

The ornament at Micah's neck shook violently. The Uovo del Mago heeded her heart and incorporated this into its being. Regardless of the tragedy, of its creator's state, the egg would continue to grow.

And indeed, regardless of the tragedy, the beast would continue the hunt. The wolf prowled forward audaciously, well aware that it

had disposed the greatest threat to itself. It raised its front paw, its eyes set on the grieving lady beneath it.

Micah noticed and tried to shout, but she was too late. *Lady Luciana!*

"Don't you"—Luciana whipped out her fan, snapped it open with a flick of her wrist, and swung it backhanded all in one fluid motion —"even start with me!"

When it smacked the beast's paw, it did so as the tortuously "harmless" Holy Harisen.

The wolf howled in pain as its paw vanished.

"You're kidding me!" Micah said.

How could she hold it in? She'd just witnessed a harmless paper fan parrying a giant wolf-beast. In no world should the harisen made by Melody, a mere comedy prop, have had the power to blow off a limb, much less halt a shadow beast. Yet Micah had witnessed just that.

The wolf recoiled. Its paw quickly rematerialized. It kept its eyes squarely on that weapon of mass destruction in the lady's hand.

Luciana pulled herself to her feet and wiped her tears. She glanced back at Melody one last time, then returned her gaze to her foe. Cold rage filled her eyes. She flicked the harisen with a snap.

"Are you scared? She gave this to me for my birthday, you know." She sliced the air a few times, as if warming up for an exercise. "Do you know what it's for? It's for putting fools and nuisances in their place. Allow me to demonstrate."

Luciana darted forward, fluid as water, graceful as a flower, with the practiced steps hammered into her by her beloved Melody during all those ballroom dance lessons. Wary and befuddled, the wolf attempted to track her as she zipped toward it.

"It's dead on the floor!" the lady roared.

Thwack!

The wolf roared. Its hind leg vanished. The leg might come back quickly, but the pain apparently did not fade so swiftly. The wolf whipped around to hurl a torrent of energy at the girl, but Luciana weaved around it. She quite literally ran circles around the beast. Danced, rather.

This was all just a dance.

"This fan's not the only thing she gave me," Luciana said. "She gave me skills, knowledge, warm food, a home! I never got the chance to give her anything in return because you…you…!"

Rage. Loathing. Regret. The emotions were directed as much at herself as at the beast, pushing her body to its limits and beyond. With every swing of the harisen, every flash of anger, another piece of the wolf disappeared.

"You'll pay for this!"

Micah took in this sudden change in awe. She'd never seen her lady like this before. "She's incredible…"

"I'm joining her, Micah."

She startled. Rook rose, drawing his sword.

"Rook?" she said.

"I…dislike that beast. It enrages me." The leather of his sword's grip groaned as he clenched his fist around it. Without it, his nails would have surely bitten into his palm.

"Do you remember something? Are your memories coming back?" Micah asked.

Rook shook his head. He did not need memories to feel these things. "I will not abide injustice. I will not abide abuse. I will not live beneath another's heel. No one should. The greatest freedom is life itself, and it is not for others to take!" Some things—some ideals—transcended experience. "Stay with Melody."

He didn't wait for a reply. Rook took off, mana coursing through his body. As it infused his muscles, his physical abilities swelled, and his gait widened, until eventually he leapt into the air.

The wolf growled and turned toward him, exactly as planned.

"Carry me, cradle of wind—*Respi-Dea*!" Rook said.

A gale blew at Rook in midair, changing his trajectory and sending him hurtling toward the monster. It failed to react in time and Rook's blade sank into its eye.

The wolf bellowed in pain and flailed with its forelegs, but Rook had already dashed away using the same spell.

Once he landed, he pointed his blade at his opponent. "I remember now. This feeling. The arcane."

Mana bubbled out of the wolf's eye socket, and before long an eye once again occupied it.

"Just another target," Rook said. "All the better for me to cut you down."

He and Luciana exchanged a look and a curt nod. Somehow, the untrained lady and the warrior who forgot knew their assignments. Together, they faced down Garmr, the Dark One.

Micah could only watch. "They're incredible, but I can't do a thing."

She sank to the floor with Grail. This was her assignment, to wait at Melody's side. Was that all she was good for in a crisis?

All this lore knowledge, and what good is it even? What was the point of being reincarnated with any of it? Miss Melody is supposed to be the heroine. How does…any of this happen?

She refused to speak the words into reality, refused to wonder aloud what any of this meant. Even such a petty fear induced the egg to shake, but Micah paid it no mind.

"Miss Melody…" she whimpered.

All alone now, the tears flowed freely. Micah loosened her grip on Grail and clutched at her skirt. It took every ounce of willpower to spare her pride and keep from collapsing into sobs.

Meanwhile, Grail huffed and puffed, sniffing around the fallen Melody. His nose led him to her closed hand, which fell open at a nudge. A black bead rolled free. She'd never put it away after revealing it to Micah.

Grail stared at it. Then at Garmr. *"Release me," you cry. Enough with your insipid sniveling.* The pup scooped up the bead and

swallowed it whole. *Return from whence you came, if that is your wish. But mine? Mine is to assume my rightful place. To bide my time, descend upon this world as a shadow, slay the Saint by my own hand, and sink the world into everlasting darkness! That you should undo the Saint before her time is…a hindrance.*

The black at the tip of Grail's tail spread along its length, staining his fur black. He sauntered on top of Melody, curled into a ball on her chest, and shut his eyes.

"Grail?"

Micah's tears only fell faster. The poor pup. He could not know.

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

That voice again. Pleading. Desperate. And yet, all the while, resigned.

It's that dream again…

Replying was a waste of effort. The voice never answered. Would this time be any different?

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

Who are you? Where are you?

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

I don't. Show yourself. Let me see you, so we can talk.

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

It occurred to Melody then that she wasn't actually speaking. The voice did not answer because it could not hear. Perhaps the voice could not see her just as she could not see it. Melody could not even see herself, much less her company.

"Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

What do I do? How do I…?

"The cup of darkness runneth over with the souls of the forsaken."

Suddenly, a weight seemed to leave her, like someone had washed a layer of thick oil off of her. All at once, a burden dropped from her shoulders.

"What just…? My voice. I can talk. I can see."

The darkness had not gone, and yet she could see herself. How was such a thing possible? How did she have sight where there was no light?

Melody stepped backward, staring at her hands, and found herself enveloped by something soft.

"What is—what?!"

There, behind her, stood a great, silver wolf. Sat, rather, but its stature had fooled her. Melody had stumbled right into its chest. She studied the creature. It was missing a leg and one ear, or so it seemed at first glance. Both were simply tipped in black and vanished into the surrounding darkness. Its tail was entirely invisible.

"You look a lot like my Grail. Except for the tail, that is."

The wolf started to heave.

"Wait, no. No, not here! No, no, no!"

The wolf hurled, but from its mouth came not a mess of chunks but something black, something difficult to discern among the gloomy environment. It seemed about the size of a pup, whatever it was.

"Please," it hiccuped. "I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

"What?"

"Please," it whimpered. "I beg of you. Do not think ill of me."

"Are you…?" Melody cautiously approached the thing the wolf had regurgitated. It *was* a pup, its fur dark as night, and it was crying. "What's wrong?"

The pup faced her, tears streaming down its face, hiccuping and sniveling. "Please. I beg of you. Do not think ill of me. I only want to go. I want to go back."

"Back? Home? You want to go home? Where is it? I'll take you

there."

"Release me!" it wailed. "I want to go back!"

Melody picked it up and cradled it against her chest. The pup clung to her, ceaseless in its pleas. "You want to go home, but you don't know how to, do you? Poor thing. I wish I could help you."

The pup suddenly quieted and stared at her with its beady eyes. "You'll help me? You'll send me back?"

Melody stroked its head with a smile. "I will. Let's go where you ought to be, shall we? Together."

"Finally," it breathed. "I can go back."

That appeased the creature, and it quickly drifted to sleep. As she gently patted its back, the pup began to glow. White light consumed it, transforming its obsidian fur. Somehow, Melody recognized this phenomenon.

It was going "home."

"Please. Never forget yourself. The love in your heart. Carry it with you always."

Melody whipped around toward the voice but found nothing. Not even the silver wolf. She'd recognized the voice that time. But from where? Whose was it?

The pup turned to mere glimmers in the air and drifted upward. Purposefully. As if showing her the way.

"Let's go," it said. *"Back."*

Such beautiful light. How pure. How pristine. A luster that would undoubtedly make even the most tarnished metals shine.

In the world of darkness, the battle with the wolf raged toward its conclusion. Luciana gracefully wove in and out of the creature's range with a dancer's poise. Rook, with his revived memories of spell casting, harassed the beast with a variety of attacks. Together, they'd dealt a great deal of damage, all without suffering a single scratch, but that by no means meant they were winning.

"For goodness' sake, the scoundrel won't go down!" Luciana said.

"It's healing faster than we can hurt it," Rook said. "I'd hoped we could wear it down nonetheless, but it's certainly stubborn."

The wolf regenerated any time they managed to wound it. They were going in circles, and though they still had some fight left in them, soon enough they would reach their physical and magical limits.

Losing was not an option, but they would succumb to this war of attrition unless something turned the tide.

"We owe it to her to win," Luciana said. "We owe it to Melody! After what this thing did to her…"

She dared not speak the words aloud. As soon as they became real, her spirit would crumble.

"We need a strategy, though," Rook said. "At this rate, it'll wear us down. I'll retreat and—"

Interrupting Rook and taking advantage of its opponents' lapse in focus, the wolf bounded backward, hovered in midair, and inhaled. Dark lightning crackled in its jaws.

It can't be, Rook thought. *Again?!*

It was going to fire that energy-filled roar, the very same one that even Melody couldn't defend against entirely. Rook and Luciana certainly had no hope of repelling it themselves. The only thing they could do was try to evade it.

Luciana and Rook spread out, darting left and right. The beast took aim—but not at either of them.

"What is it…?" Luciana gasped. "No!"

"Micah!" Rook said.

The beast took aim—at Micah.

Maybe I can deflect it with my harisen! Luciana thought. *But I won't make it in time!*

Respi-Dea?! Rook's thoughts whirled frantically. *No, she's too far!*

Their positioning couldn't have been worse. Micah lay out of reach for both of them—and the wolf knew it. It had orchestrated this attack accordingly, taking the path of least resistance and targeting the weakest member of the pack.

"Micah!" Luciana and Rook shouted.

"Oh…"

It was too late. She didn't have time to react. The wolf's maw was opening.

Micah threw herself over Grail and Melody. One last futile act of resistance. *Well, this was a waste of a life. Still. At least I can…*

The beast began to roar. “Darkness Shout,” she had called it, Vanargand’s ultimate technique. It hurtled toward Micah in a black blur.

“Wind, melodious and pure—*Argento-Bia Brezza*.”

A tidal wave of darkness consumed Micah and everything around her. Luciana dropped to her knees, that suffocating feeling returning. Rook gritted his teeth as his nails dug into the palm of his free hand.

When the incredible blast cleared, Micah was…

“What?” Luciana and Rook said.

“Huh?” Micah was completely fine. Even Grail whined in surprise. “I’m not dead?”

Micah picked herself up. No scratches. No bruises. Nothing broken.

Grail made an odd gagging noise.

“Oh. You’re up. Wait, what in the world did you eat…? It’s white. Why’s it white?”

A white bead fell from the pup’s mouth. Micah knew about the black bead but not any white ones. This one looked identical aside from its color. Was it not the same?

Grail descended from Melody, promptly giving her the cold shoulder.

“What’s your problem? What did Miss Melody… Miss Melody?” Micah cocked her head. Something was different about Melody. But what? “Is there some color in her cheeks again?”

She reached out to feel her, but the wolf bellowed. Micah whipped around just in time to see it charging at her.

"So much for miracles!" she shrieked.

"Micah!" Luciana and Rook shouted. They'd been too dumbstruck to react, and now it was too late again.

This was it. Lightning would not strike twice to spare Micah.

"You're safe, Micah. *Argento-Bia Brezza*—restrain it."

Streaks of silver zipped past the young maid before she could process who had just spoken. The air was like shimmering ribbons. It flitted by and wound itself around the pitch-black wolf, pinning it in place as it howled in rage.

"It's okay. You're okay. They won't hurt you."

Micah couldn't believe her eyes. She stuttered as she attempted to turn her emotions into words. "M-Miss Melody!"

She flung herself at her mentor as Melody slowly rose from the ground.

"Sorry for the, er, scare," Melody apologized.

"Miss Melody!" Micah said with emotion.

"Melody! Micah!" the others cried.

With the threat under control, Rook and Luciana came running.

"So? What's the plan for *that*?"

Luciana glared at the captive. Melody's magic held the wolf firmly. It couldn't so much as twitch, let alone open its jaws.

“Stop furrowing your brow, my lady. It’s unbecoming,” Melody said.

“But Melody! Melody, what it did to you was…!” Luciana said.

“No cause for concern. As you can see, I’m hale and hearty. I promise you, my lady.”

“Oh, Melody!”

Luciana threw herself at her maid. Melody returned her embrace, smiling tenderly.

“It’s a question that needs answering,” Rook said.

Melody faced him. “Don’t worry. I’ve thought about it already.”

Rook could not even begin to guess where this confidence came from.

Gesturing for everyone to stand back, Melody approached the wolf.

“I thought you were our enemy at first,” she said. “For what you put my lady and her family through. For repeating it after I’d fixed what you’d done. I thought you were trouble.”

The wolf stared. The maid stared back.

“But someone told me, begged me, not to think ill of them. It was you, wasn’t it? It was a part of you.”

Melody showed the wolf the pure white bead resting in her palm. It fixed its gaze on it.

“They told me they wanted to go back. I understand now. Who wants to go home knowing people hate you? It was a happy send-off

you wanted."

A single tear fell from the wolf's eye. Melody chose to take that for affirmation.

She clutched the bead to her chest. Beams of light trickled through the gaps in her fingers. "I understand now. You. What you need."

Micah's heart pounded out of her chest as she observed this interaction. *Is this really happening? This mood. This quiet reverence. Miss Melody, the heroine, the* Saint—*she's being reborn before my eyes. Her eyes have opened to her true power! Oh my god, this is totally different from in the game. I've never been so glad to have been reincarnated!*

Now that the danger had passed, Micah's otome gamer tendencies ran rampant.

"There's a…power inside me," Melody continued. "A power I've never felt before."

I mean, she pops out new spells like it's nobody's business all the time, but this feels different!

"This magic—it's my magnum opus. My masterwork. I can feel it. It can save you."

Magnum opus? Does she mean the Silver Raiment? But that'd be weird.

The ultimate technique in *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, the Silver Raiment, was an all-powerful transformation that sent the player's stats through the roof. It was not only literally invincible but

could reflect damage as well. It was, in short, extremely unfair, but undoubtedly the sort of ace meant for combat, so maybe this version would manifest differently. It had never crossed Micah's mind that Melody already wore a cheap, easily replicated version of the Raiment.

Melody shut her eyes. The light in her hand faded, and a serene calm descended. In a celestial voice, somber and divine, she said, "I made an oath to my mother. I swore to her I would become the most perfect maid in the world. That was when I awakened to these powers. My magic. They came with a voice. 'Blessings upon thee, o maiden of silver,' it said. Who they are or what they meant, I do not know. But one thing I do know is I've been blessed. Blessed by silver."

Micah's heart skipped a beat. If ever there was any doubt that *this* was the heroine, it vanished. Melody's words came straight from the protagonist's awakening in the game. *Little weird that the oath was about being a maid and that it happened so early, but whatever.*

"I ask that you trust me. Trust that I can save you," Melody went on. "That dark power is what's held you here. If we dispel it, it will release you. And I'll do just that. Because I…"

Here it comes! Tell us, o Saint! Show us who you really are, Cecilia Leginbar—

"I have the sanitizing power of elemental silver cations on my side!"

"You what?" the onlookers resounded. The wolf settled for cocking its head.

The light radiated from Melody's fist once more. Beams shot through her fingers, moving on their own, weaving around Melody like

thread. Still clutching the white bead, she thrust her fist up. "By blessings silver, let there be purity! Maid Magic Masterwork—Silvershine Raiment!"

Okay, that's new!

And then the unbelievable happened.

"Eyes shut, Rook!" Micah squealed. "Eyes shut!"

"Wha—huh? What's going on?!"

Magical girl transformation sequences were not for the eyes of men.

The instant Melody finished her incantation, her clothing exploded into threads. They were now reforming, rearranging themselves into new garments more befitting their wearer. Melody twirled and danced among the loose strings of fabric. How very impractical yet in-genre that the transformation began at her hands and feet as opposed to those areas in most dire need of concealment.

Luciana's focus was razor-sharp. "You can never see any of the good bits when she does this."

"That was extremely weird, Lady Luciana!" Micah said. "You sound like some pervert!"

"I-I do not!"

"I would like to know what's happening," Rook said.

"Keep that back turned!" Luciana and Micah shouted.

Rook only grunted apathetically.

At last, the transformation concluded, and Melody landed gracefully. A dress of brilliant silver and a pure white apron draped over her figure. Her boots, too, were white, and a curtain of glistening silver hair spilled from beneath a white cap. In her hand, she held a square, silver bag filled with a number of cleaning tools decorated with platinum of such high quality it would make one hesitate to use them.

Melody stood before the wolf and slowly opened her eyes, revealing pools of lapis lazuli. This was Melody as her truest self. No camouflage spells, just a divine and heavenly bearing. Maidly.

Taking a knee, she smiled at the wolf. “This,” she said, “is my magnum opus. The Silvershine Raiment, housemaid form. On my honor as the bearer of the silver blessing, I will cleanse you of this taint.”

From her bag, Melody produced a bar of soap, an expensive-looking one bearing an elaborate design. She held it aloft, and it emitted an argent glow.

“Hear me, silver suds! Let’s show this pooch some tender love and care and make it shine!”

She hurled the bar over the wolf. It hung in midair, glowing as suds spilled from it to envelop the beast. Meanwhile, Argento-Bia Brezza shifted and churned to spread the suds around.



"It's like a washing machine," Micah muttered in disbelief.

As the winds swept this way and that, lathering the wolf, they threw the wolf to and fro, like a fur rug tossed about in a spin cycle.

"Is she drowning that thing?" Micah asked.

"I-I don't think so. Surely not." Luciana looked away. She did not care to verify her theory.

"If she's doing laundry," Rook pointed out, "wouldn't that make her a laundry m—"

"Hush!" the girls snapped, slapping their hands over his mouth. Neither wanted to witness the aftermath of a new, all-powerful Melody overhearing someone nitpicking her passion.

"Now for a brushing!" the maid maniac said. A number of brushes emerged from her bag and started scrubbing. "And don't forget the ears!"

"L-look, see? A housemaid would do that," Luciana argued. "It's not laundry at all."

"Exactly!" Micah concurred. "The brush puts it squarely in housemaid territory."

"Well, technically, sometimes you would use a brush on clothes with particularly set-in—"

"Shut it!" the girls snapped again.

He did.

The cleaning proceeded. When the suds were gone and the job was done, the brushes returned to Melody's bag. A great, albeit

thoroughly exhausted, white wolf lay before them.

"Wow," the audience said, encapsulating a wide range of emotion in that single word.

Melody, personally, was quite happy. "All clean! Isn't that better?"

"I… I thank you. At last, thanks to you, I can…return. Urp…"

"I'm happy to be of service. All in a day's work for a maid."

"A 'maid,' you say? This is what you are? A formidable people these 'maids' must be. Truly. Hurp…"

"It keeps *urp*'ing," Rook said. "Is it okay?"

"Gases," Micah deduced.

"A-as long as Melody's happy," said Luciana.

Truly, a *very* wide range of emotion.

"Will you have any trouble going 'back'?" Melody asked.

"No. No, I don't believe so. Before I depart, however, I would have a word with them." The others approached at the wolf's behest. *"My apologies for the trouble I've caused you."*

"Well, er, I-I guess it's water under the bridge," Micah replied.

"Not for me!" Luciana said. "But, well, if Melody's fine with it, I suppose I can let it go."

"Noted," Rook said.

"Thank you. It gladdens me that my final moments can be shared with humans as kind as you." The wolf lay there unmoving, its eyes wandering to Grail off in the distance. Its expression softened, as

best a beast's could, and peace filled its gaze. *"And how glad I am to see the Sangreal has at least been realized. This world can yet be saved. I can rest easy, knowing its fate lies in your hands. The hands of the Sangreal and the Saint."*

Suddenly, Micah's chest gleamed. "Huh?! It's the Uovo del Mago."

The egg-shaped ornament glowed, lifting itself out of her shirt all on its own. Everyone gaped at the ornament—except the wolf, who merely chuckled. *"It seems my return has been delayed."*

"What? What do you—" Melody began.

But just then, Micah's egg split apart at the middle and opened up like a pair of jaws. Air flowed into it, as if it housed a vacuum or a black hole.

"What the heck is going on?!" the girl squawked.

The flow didn't seem to affect anything—until the wolf itself fell apart. Its body disintegrated into silver particles and gravitated toward the egg until nothing remained.

Silence ruled the dark world for several seconds. Until it didn't.

"What the *heck* is going *ooon*?!"

The world they inhabited lay neither dark nor silent any longer—the Rudleberg estate rarely was, it seemed.

Epilogue

ON AUGUST 15TH, THE DAY AFTER THE birth of Melody's Silvershine Raiment, Prince Christopher and his old friend the marquess's daughter, Anna-Marie, convened in his room in the palace to discuss the narrative to come.

Anna-Marie contributed to the discussion with a sigh.

"What? Something eating at you so bad you gotta make it my problem too, Anna?"

"Just thinking."

"That answers my question."

"It's just, we've already lost two whole weeks of summer vacation."

"Ah, yeah, I guess I feel you there."

"It's nothing but curtsies and 'good day' and 'how do you do' with dignitaries during the day, and scrambling to study for next semester in the evening, and meetings with you any other time. This is *not* how a fair maiden is meant to spend her precious youth!"

"Hey, I don't have it any better."

"If only Luciana and Melody had stayed in the capital. We could have had tea parties, or I could have gone on ice cream dates with Melody as Anna the Commoner."

"Don't you have literally any other friends?"

"Not that I can let my guard down around, no!" Anna-Marie covered her face with her hands and wept.

"Fair point. Lord Rudleberg's a pretty straitlaced man. Only ever concerns himself with doing his job at the Chancery, as opposed to climbing the ladder. Networking definitely isn't his strong suit."

"Exactly. The lord chancellor called his own daughter the Hero Princess, and he hasn't even tried to milk that for what it's worth. To say nothing of Lord Maxwell's invitation to the ball, which he *still* hasn't breathed a word about to anyone."

"And after his display following the attack on the last ball, I hesitate to believe it's out of a lack of care for his daughter. He might really just be that humble. The fact that he could use her to elevate his own status probably hasn't even crossed his mind. This is the same guy who ruins his house by turning to crime in the game?"

"He was a victim of circumstance. It's not in his nature, which is why he was caught almost immediately. Trust me, if the count wasn't trustworthy, I'd have crushed him beneath my heel and rescued Luciana from him myself! Hmm, Luciana Victillium. I like the sound of that. I think our peers would too. In time. They'd celebrate my new sister as if she were born into the family." Anna-Marie giggled to herself.

"You seriously need to take a day off."

She glared at him. "You know I can't after this report."

"Fair enough. I'm still scratching my head over it, personally."

"As am I. It wasn't the second imperial prince but the prin*cess*?"

In the second semester of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, the fifth and final love interest transfers at last into Royal Academy: Schroden van Rordpier, the second prince of the hawkish Rordpier Empire. A cold and calculating man with a mission to undermine the kingdom in preparation for an invasion.

"But here we are, getting the second princess," Anna-Marie grumbled. "God, I bet she's pretty. Er, wait, no man means no love interest! How's that going to work?! Someone get the showrunner on the line, dang it!"

"Anna-Marie, you have *seriously* got to take a nap or something. And what makes you so sure she's a hottie anyway?"

"Uh, have you seen the prince? If his younger sister *isn't* hot, then I don't know, something's wrong."

"They're only half siblings, aren't they?"

According to the information they had, the second princess was the daughter of the emperor's third concubine, a woman of rather low standing. They had received word of her attendance only recently, so the prince must have suffered extenuating circumstances. Doubtless the princess was coming out of necessity.

"I'm willing to bet she'll be given the same orders the prince would have been," Anna-Marie said.

"I thought their backup might be the older prince, but if making sure we're in the same year is a priority for them, that explains why it'd be the princess instead," Christopher said.

"For the record, this means a change of plans. Seeing as she's a girl, *I'll* be the one keeping an eye on her."

"Be my guest."

Anna-Marie nodded. Then sighed again.

"Just can't help yourself, can you?" Christopher said.

"If the prince is getting replaced, that means all his CG events'll be canceled. I really wanted to see those."

"Your obsession borders on a liability. This guy's supposed to be dangerous."

"I realize that, but his horse-riding scene with the heroine was just so pretty. Oh, just imagine it: A pretty girl with her arms around a handsome young man atop a noble steed."

"Oh. Oh! It's one of those! With all the squishing! And you're all, 'Hey, what's so soft against my back? Is she doing it on purpose?' Do I get one of those? Tell me I get one of those!"

"Boys always have to make it sound gross. Moving on. The context is he wants information on the prince, and he knows the heroine is close with him, so he invites her out for a ride. So really it's more, 'Heh, I'll squeeze this girl dry. Wait, she's actually really cute!' It goes something like…"

"How do you like your first ride?"

"It's curious how much the world can change from a different vantage point. I could gaze from here forever." The heroine smiled at the prince, blushing prettily.

The prince's heart skipped a beat. "W-well then! I suppose you can gaze a while longer."

"Huh?" The heroine yelped and tightened her grip around the prince's waist as the horse kicked into a gallop.

"Like that, more or less."

"It should have been me," Christopher lamented. "How can I be the poster boy for the game and still get so little action?"

A knock sounded a moment before Maxwell joined them. They offered him a seat.

"I hear you've something new to report," Maxwell said.

"Right, well…" Christopher passed along all they knew regarding the second imperial princess's plan to study abroad at the academy.

"Not the prince, then, but the princess." Maxwell ruminated. "Well, you got the 'second' element right."

"But we got the entire individual wrong," Anna-Marie said.

"I jest. Without a doubt, all that matters is that someone from the empire will attend the academy. Their identity is secondary because now we can be all but certain our northern neighbors have their sights set on us. But why the princess? Your dreams made more sense. Sending the prince would have been far more beneficial to the Rordpiers."

"That, we can't say, but there are hints," Christopher said. "Word is their second prince is gone."

"Gone? To where?"

"That's the part we don't know. There are possibilities, of course. He may have gone abroad elsewhere. Maybe he's on business. Fallen ill. Maybe he ran away from home?"

"Not likely," Maxwell and Anna-Marie said, shaking their heads.

"Didn't think so. It wouldn't be a good look on the imperial family, that's for sure."

"At any rate, next semester is turning out to be a hectic one," said Maxwell. "You first-years are a rowdy bunch."

"By the way," Anna-Marie said, "have you heard anything from Luciana regarding your offer? Has she given you a reply?"

"I can't say she has."

Christopher huffed. "You of all people, left out in the cold for two whole weeks?"

Maxwell's calm expression flickered for just a moment.

"Maybe she's forgotten about you, my friend," Christopher said.

"Don't be silly, Your Highness," Anna-Marie said. "Why, no one would snub an invitation to accompany a Reclentos to the Summer Ball."

"True enough."

"She'll give her reply when she's returned. We need only be patient."

Maxwell sipped his tea. Judging by his sour expression, it must have been a bitter brew indeed.

Meanwhile, back at the Rudleberg county estate, in Luciana's chambers…

"Achoo!"

"I hope you're not coming down with a cold, my lady."

"No, no. Someone must have been talking about me, I'm sure," Luciana explained.

"I imagine the Fae Princess crosses many lips," Melody said.

"You mean the Hero Princess, Miss Melody," Micah corrected.

"Can we not do this now?!" Luciana asked, red in the face. Her maids giggled. "Anyway, how exactly do we explain to Uncle what happened yesterday?"

"That may be difficult," Melody said.

"And we don't exactly have proof," added Micah.

A mysterious orb beneath the remains of the estate had given rise to a mysterious wolf and sparked a life-or-death battle of dramatic proportions. That they had come out alive was nothing short of a miracle. Naturally, Luciana believed they ought to report the whole thing to Hubert, the county's acting bailiff, but when all was said and done, nothing remained of their epic struggle, not a scrap of physical evidence to corroborate their story. The dark world had vanished, along with the orb that birthed it. It had turned to ash and scattered on the wind like dust.

On top of that, Melody said all traces of the mana plaguing the land had vanished. So what was left to report?

"I suppose it's hard to explain what we can't even grasp ourselves," Luciana said. "That white wolf might have enlightened us, but, well…" She side-eyed Micah—or the Uovo del Mago around her neck, to be precise. "Micah."

"Micah," Melody concurred.

"Hey, I'm innocent! Miss Melody's the one who made this in the first place!"

"That's the curious thing," Melody said. "I did not design it with that function. I can only theorize that its time learning and synchronizing with you has changed it somehow."

"Don't eat us, Micah," Luciana teased. "We aren't tasty."

"I'm not eating anyone! Don't be mean!" Micah pouted, which only made the others laugh.

"Anyway, something the wolf said is still stuck in my head. It mentioned something about a Sangreal and…a Saint."

"A Saint," Micah repeated.

Their eyes went to Melody. The maid tilted her head, confused.

"I'm almost positive it was talking about you," Luciana said.

"I'm inclined to agree," Micah added. "But what's a 'Sangreal'?"

"You think I'm a saint? Oh, you two and your jokes." Melody tittered tastefully behind a dainty hand. She did not even attempt to humor such an outlandish suggestion. "I can assure you, I'm no saint. I'm Melody, all-works maid for House Rudleberg!"

"She sounds very confident about that, Lady Luciana," Micah

said.

"That she does, Micah," Luciana agreed.

"She was a *house*maid yesterday," they said together.

"Stop putting my own foot in my mouth!" the maid cried.

"My goodness, Melody, wherever did you learn to speak that way?" Luciana led the room in yet more laughter. Three was a crowd and certainly made for a boisterous cacophony. "By the way, I feel like I'm forgetting something important. Does anyone know what it might be?"

Meanwhile again,
at the Rudleberg estate stable…

Rook tended to a horse, accompanied by Grail, who was no help whatsoever as he lazily idled in the shade.

It's quiet with this one. Not like the ceaseless clucking of those women. I like it.

Lazily indeed did the pup idle. But minds were given to wandering when they had nothing else to do.

Why did I do what I did? he wondered. *Why did I save the Saint?*

A mystery of the highest order. Had the pup left her, she surely would have perished. She never would have made it out of that dark realm. Then the Dark One could have bided its time. Restored its powers. Risen.

I suppose I…thought it my *place to lay her low. Is that how I would have once thought, though?*

Surely not. Before, he would have scoffed at the girl's pitiful state and left her to die.

Something was changing inside of him. Something he could neither place nor reject.

Why is it that these changes are not altogether unwelcome? I've noticed that I don't tremble before her as I once did. Ever since spitting up that pale bead, Grail no longer feared the girl. The Saint, that was. Melody. She could embrace him and he would not quiver one bit. *I don't understand. What changed? Why? What's more, why did that…*thing *know my name? Why did it call me a "Sangreal"? Do the answers lie in these long-lost memories of mine?*

Grail had lived a long, long life as the Dark One, though he'd forgotten the vast majority of that time. Now, he could recall little beyond his struggles against the previous Saint. What, then, of the hundreds—nay, *thousands* of years that preceded this time period?

The blanks never much burdened Grail in the past, but that wolf—it knew something, something that had to do with those lost ages.

If perhaps there are more of that wolf's kind, methinks they would make excellent fuel for my great return. The pup cackled quietly to himself, which was not at all something a pup would normally do.

But then he fell asleep, which was very much something a pup would do.

That's one weird dog.

"Here. Cleaning time," Rook said. "*Fare Acqua*."

Water sprang from the valet's hand, sprinkling a light shower over the horse. Rook used his free hand to scrub the animal down with a brush.

Knowledge had returned to Rook. Not memories, but understanding and awareness of the arcane. From those context clues, however, he could piece together some things about his past. Primarily that it had not been a peaceful life. That made him wonder: Who had he once been? How different was that person from who he was now? Perhaps he'd been a brutish man, blunt and hotheaded, quick to anger. Or perhaps he hadn't been all too different from his current self, quiet and stoic.

As he drew the brush along the beast's body, he found himself repeating the questions plaguing him of late. Did he deserve this life? This contentedness? Yesterday's chaos notwithstanding, Rook's days as a servant were pretty ordinary. Would his past self approve of such a fate? Would he rage at the prospect? Was he not raging now, screaming at the fool to remember who he was?

Faces flashed through his mind. Micah's. Melody's. Luciana's. He was with good people now. Surely he could indulge in their company for a while longer. Doubtless there would come a time when, much like his spell casting, the past would rear its ugly head, but until then, Rook decided he was allowed to bathe this horse and many more without demons plaguing his conscience.

His lips curved up on their own.

"Whoa, hey, Rook. I didn't know you could cast spells."

Rook turned to find Schue behind him, decked out in his usual servant's garb. A wooden pail stuffed with weeds and dirt dangled from one of his gloved hands.

"Weeding?" Rook said.

"Yep. Those suckers spring up everywhere in the summertime, I swear! But forget that, we're talking about magic! You're a mage?"

"To an extent."

"I'm so jealous. Wish I could use magic."

Rook gathered mana in his eyes and examined Schue, much in the same fashion as Anna-Marie used her Analysis Vision spell. "You do have some mana, from what I can tell."

"You can tell?! With just one look?! Wow! Is there, like, a trick to casting you wouldn't mind sharing with me?"

"Practice."

"Yeah, not happening!"

Rook stumbled and very nearly fell. Couldn't fault the boy for honesty.

With a flippant goodbye, Schue got on with the rest of his duties.

Maybe there's something to be said for blitheness. Rook watched the boy go, his gait bouncy, and did his best to understand.

"Whew. It's a scorcher!"

His tasks at the flower beds complete, Schue made his way to his room for a quick rest. He couldn't rightly stroll about the estate as a sweaty mess.

Throwing off his vest, he loosened his tie with one hand and dexterously undid the buttons on his shirt with the other, then threw the dirty clothes onto his bed. He snatched a towel to wipe himself down as he approached a mirror hanging on the wall.

"That's better. Already feelin' cooler," he sighed. "Pretty snazzy, these mirrors. Awfully fancy that every room gets one!"

Schue ran the towel over his sweat-drenched body with that goofy grin of his while he observed his reflection.

But then the mask fell.

A handsome visage emerged beneath his bright, golden hair, intimidating in its perfection, unmarred by silly expressions, and complemented by a pair of razor-sharp, golden eyes. That gaze could chill to the bone, even beneath the blazing summer sun. He cut an immaculate figure, tastefully muscular without much bulk, as if some great master had chiseled him out of amber.

He scrutinized himself in the mirror. *My face and body are getting a little imbalanced. I'll have to do another thorough tan soon.*

Had his skin not been so carefully maintained, had it been white as porcelain and pure as snow, his face not so constantly spoiled by a grin with the consistency of pudding—had he carried himself in this

cold, calculating manner in her presence, perhaps Micah might have realized.

Realized who Schue truly was.

The grin returned. “This is me,” he told himself. “None of that stoic nonsense. It isn’t my image. The world’s way too fun a place to live your whole life frowning! Nah, that’s for idiots!”

Once done wiping himself off, Schue changed into a fresh uniform and left his room. The door shut behind him as his footsteps echoed down the hallway.

“Oh, Melody! You’re here to change too? It’s pretty hot out there, huh? I can help wipe your back if you—hello, Lady Luciana! I was just going, very busy, things to do. Please no, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it was a crime of passion, I swear, not the harisen!”

His voice gradually weakened, growing farther and farther away, until it died completely.

And just as silence fell—screams began.

Count Leginbarth's Plight

ON THE TENTH OF AUGUST, IN THE ROYAL capital of Paltescia, two men met in the Leginbarth estate. On one end of the desk sat the grizzled, silver-haired celebrity himself, Count Cloud Leginbarth. In testament to his genetics, he was indeed the biological father of Melody Wave, otherwise known as Celesty McMarden.

On the other end of the desk stood Viscount Lyzack Froude, Lectias Froude's older brother. The resemblance was strong. He had Lect's fiery hair—though he grew it out a tad longer—and gold eyes, but he lacked the hardness in his expression that Lect had earned through knighthood.

"It's been some time, Your Lordship," Lyzack said.

"Too long. Please, have a seat."

"With pleasure, my lord."

Pausing his work, Cloud rose to sit with his guest on the sofa in his office. A butler arrived with tea, and they sipped as they talked.

"How long has it been?" the count wondered aloud. "Half a year now?"

"I believe so. I was unfortunately absent from the Spring Ball, so certainly longer than that."

Cloud grunted. "I apologize for my absence. Administering the county keeps you busy, I'm sure."

"Not nearly as busy as it keeps the bailiff, my lord. I'm but a clerk."

"True," Cloud chuckled. "True."

They kept the conversation light, sticking to pleasantries for the moment.

House Froude were Nobles of the Robe and had long served House Leginbarth. Though technically not the head of the count's offices, their title afforded their family a measure of authority, and they had earned their lord's trust via generations of loyal clerks, an honor that did not come easily from the vice-chancellor. Lect was, in fact, an outlier in his house for choosing to swear himself to knighthood rather than clerical work.

Lyzack enjoyed a particularly close relationship with Cloud, being just two years younger at thirty-one. They'd been schoolmates at Royal Academy, as it happened.

"I've brought with me a number of documents, my lord," the viscount said. "Most are standard, though some may require your attention. At your earliest convenience, of course."

"Let's take a look."

Lyzack's attendant passed the papers to Cloud's butler, who then handed them to the count.

Cloud flipped through them. "No causes for concern, it seems."

"Nothing urgent, my lord. I'm visiting primarily for personal reasons, I'll admit. I intend to make detailed reports at a later date."

"Just as well."

Cloud's speedy judgment and swift grasp on everything presented to him was a testament to the man's administrative talents. Lyzack was not the least bit taken aback by how swiftly his lord concluded their business—he'd expected no less.

"On another note," Lyzack said, "how has Lectias been? He's being of use to you, I hope."

"Very much so, yes."

Lyzack could not help but note the face Cloud made as he spoke. "My lord?"

"Well, lately he's been taking on clerical duties on top of his knightly ones. He's been a great help, truth be told."

"I see. Yes, he always was a man of many talents. Had his heart not been set on the sword, I'm certain he could have made a career for himself back home with the pen."

"On that, we can agree. A veritable whirlwind's descended on the Chancery recently, and if I didn't have Lect to ease the burden, I dare say you'd have found me drowning in paperwork. I have to present myself at the palace this afternoon, as a matter of fact."

"Oh? I thought you had only county matters to attend to. Has something happened?"

"It's something all right. Next month, the Royal Academy is playing host to a new student—a Rordpier princess. It's being rushed through as we speak."

"An imperial princess? At the Royal Academy? What does this mean?"

"That our nations are ready to bury the hatchet on a century-long rivalry born out of a war long ended. The emperor suggested it himself. The first step, they proposed, was the hasty enrollment of Princess Ciestine van Rordpier."

"Surely not this coming semester? 'Hasty' would be quite the understatement."

"His Majesty shared your doubts and is observing this proposal with a healthy dose of skepticism, rest assured. Regardless, should the Rordpiers' intentions to better relations prove genuine, let it not be said we didn't give them every opportunity."

"Is it true? Do you think we'll really see an end to hostilities, my lord?"

Cloud took a deep breath. "We can only hope. The proposal's been accepted and preparations are being made to ensure Her Imperial Highness receives a proper Theolan welcome. As proper as we can manage on such short notice, anyway. She intends to present herself at the Summer Ball."

"That's certainly an excellent stage for an introduction, but I struggle to believe a scant few weeks is enough time to cobble together accommodations for a princess of the empire."

"You'd be right. Which is why I have to apologize to Lect in advance for the amount of sitting he'll have to endure in the interim."

"Hardly. Work the boy to the bone." The viscount and his lord guffawed. "Incidentally, my lord, I heard my brother attended the Spring Ball. Escorted a young woman, no less?"

Cloud's cup froze halfway to his lips.

"My lord?" Lyzack said.

"It's nothing. Excuse me. Yes, you heard right. He did indeed attend as an escort."

"Well, well. I was beginning to worry after his decidedly uneventful school life, but here we are. He fancies someone, does he? This is good news."

"I-I suppose it is."

"I've never once gotten him to meet with any potential suitors, so yes, it truly is. He always has some excuse or other. I must say, it fills me with pride to know he's finally taking some initiative."

At my direct order, Cloud thought. A fierce debate about whether to reveal this crucial tidbit raged within him. It would put an awful damper on his old companion's mood, after all, to shatter his dreams of a brother with any semblance of a spine.

"If you'd humor me, my lord," Lyzack went on, "what was she like? In truth, Lady Christina's regaled me with some of the details by letter, but you have firsthand experience I'd love to hear about. Tell me, do you think they might wed?"

"Not on your life!"

Lyzack recoiled. "Oh. I-I see. I suppose not."

Cloud blinked, surprised at himself. *Why in the world did I…?*

"M-my apologies," he said, clearing his throat. "No, marriage didn't seem on either of their minds."

"O-of course. It's just that, Lady Christina wrote quite the opposite. It seemed only a matter of time to her."

What, pray tell, has possessed you, dear sister of mine?

"I'm certain Lect would be happy to resolve the discrepancy," Cloud said.

"Oh, I intend to question him. Though, given his lack of communication, I expect I already know the answers he'll give." The viscount smiled wearily. It seemed he was well aware of his brother's spineless nature.

With Lyzack gone, Cloud resumed his work. The scratching of pen against paper filled the office as he wrestled with a seemingly endless mountain of busywork.

Some time later, he stopped.

Cloud sighed, turning his gaze to the window. *What got into me, raising my voice like that?*

He remembered the girl, the commoner girl Lect had escorted to the Spring Ball. Cecilia, she'd called herself. After hearing of the passing of his beloved, Selena, and subsequently the existence of his daughter, Cloud had given some thought to a name for his offspring. What he ultimately settled on was that very same name—Cecilia.

She had not looked like Selena. Selena's hair was golden, not brunette. Her eyes fiery, not serene. So why did Cloud see his beloved in her? Why, upon first laying eyes on her, had he seen Selena?

That mirage must have explained his reaction to the prospect of the girl marrying Lect.

Foolish, he thought. *I'm not her father.*

He was, really. He *was*, in fact, her father dearest. But lacking that knowledge, that oh-so-important context, these unconscious feelings Cloud bore for a stranger of a girl appeared as something familiar.

Can it be? Have I…fallen for her?!

A nauseating thought indeed. A father entertaining such thoughts about his daughter was a father in dire straits.

No. No, absolutely not. I can say with certainty this isn't love.

By a hair's breadth, Cloud successfully evaded the greatest peril of his life, and he didn't even know it.

The count reached into a desk drawer and retrieved a framed portrait. The sight of his one true love set his heart aflutter. He breathed a sigh of relief. *This* was the rhythm of love. Cecilia conducted an altogether different melody. *Then what is this I'm feeling?*

The girl had infested Cloud's thoughts. He had not stopped thinking of her since he first laid eyes on her at the ball. She did not hinder his work, thankfully, but whenever he thought of her, he froze, and it took him some seconds to set his pen moving again. How was this possible? They'd hardly spoken a few words to each other. A greeting and nothing more. And yet, months later, that smile of hers lived permanently in Cloud's mind.

It's not love, he repeated. *Not…romantic love. So then what is this pain in my chest?*

Years of tempering in the fires of politics had forged the count's psyche into a machine of logic and reason. It served him well as a lord, but it cast a pall over his instincts, those impulsive gut reactions he often had to squash. Though he knew in his heart the truth of this quandary, it lay jailed behind walls of pragmatism.

The girl, Cecilia, was indeed the one he sought, the last thing left to him by his Selena. Cecilia was his daughter, but he could not know it.

Incidentally, Melody's oblivious nature was less hereditary and more a statement on her as a person.

Would that I could simply…

Cloud shook his head. He would not let that greatest of desires take root inside him, but oh, how he wished it.

How he wished he could see her one more time.

Cloud commanded his subordinates like a conductor, setting them on task after task. The palace buzzed with frantic energy as preparations for the Summer Ball and the upcoming semester at the Royal Academy proceeded at a blistering pace. Normally, the academy itself would handle such duties, but the arrival of the imperial princess upended any sense of normalcy. This required the careful coordination of the Chancery.

Needless to say, the business freed Cloud from stray, Cecilia-related thoughts.

That evening, when the day's chaos ended, the count's carriage rolled through the Upper District. For a mercy, Cloud had managed to slip away and head home before nightfall.

He watched the shadows cast by opulent buildings as the carriage made its way. He had the answer. He knew why Cecilia had plagued him for so long.

She reminded him of her. Nothing more, nothing less.

We walked these very streets together, he ruminated. *Didn't we, Selena?*

His chest ached at the memory.

He thought back to the first time they got to spend any real time together. Selena had gone shopping, and he'd concocted some scheme to "coincidentally" bump into her. Nerves left him nauseated, and she seemed equally shy. Consequently, they didn't speak much that time. Such was their very first day together. Cloud had been eighteen then, and she seventeen.

Their time together had been so fleeting, so short. So painfully, agonizingly short. How Cloud had searched for her, praying that they might continue where they'd left off, loving her all the while. Fifteen years hadn't dulled his feelings one bit. But he'd been too late.

She was gone now. Their time together had been brief, and it would forever be brief.

Cloud's father, the former Count Leginbarth, had discovered their relationship and swiftly put an end to it. Try as Cloud might to find her, his father stifled his efforts at every turn. Cloud eventually learned that Selena had returned to her family in the capital after her expulsion. Then she'd moved on. Cloud often found himself wondering what might have been if only she'd stayed. If only she'd waited. But she must have had her reasons.

Indeed she did. But Cloud would only learn of those reasons at the same time that he learned of her death. He had a daughter. That was why she'd left the capital. She'd learned she was pregnant. If one inappropriate relationship had resulted in her expulsion from the estate, what might have befallen her if people learned she was with child? And out of wedlock at that. Doubtless she feared for her life. For her *child's* life. House Leginbarth could have taken the child in, separating Selena from her daughter, as easily as they could have done the unthinkable and taken much more permanent measures to erase their shame.

Cloud clenched his fists fiercely. For all their disagreements, he did not want to believe his father capable of such a thing. But neither could he blame Selena for considering every possibility and pitfall.

Her trail went cold beyond the capital, and with his father constantly in his way, Cloud never found another clue until he at last inherited the countship and could officially sanction a search. It was too late.

The memory of the day he learned the epidemic had killed his beloved was hazy. A mess of emotions. Snippets of time. Had the

notice not come coupled with news of his daughter's existence, doubtless he would not be in this carriage right now. His daughter was all he had left, the one thread holding him together. Just enough to give him hope yet not enough to close the fissure that Selena's loss had rent in his heart.

Selena was gone, forever lost to him.

Did you loathe me? he asked her ghost. It did not matter to him how they reunited. She could have rebuked him, snubbed him, spat at him, and told him she never wanted to see him again. Cloud did not care. *I only wanted you to live. Could you not have granted me that much?*

His knuckles went white as he clenched his hands. He blamed this new, revived passion on the twilight, the sentimentality of the fading sunlight.

If only he'd been faster. If only he'd pressed his father harder. If only. If only. If only…

Cloud took a breath, and his fists gradually relaxed. The logic machine churned, returning the man to his senses.

Selena, he prayed. *My love. How I miss you. How I yearn for you. But I mustn't linger on these feelings. I won't. For our daughter.* Now was not the time to let despair make a prisoner of him, not after Selena had left him something so precious. He would not repeat past mistakes and brood until it was too late.

He went over what he knew once more. His daughter had supposedly traveled abroad following her mother's passing, a

pilgrimage of sorts to soothe her broken heart. *Celesty was her name. Celesty McMarden.*

One of Cloud's knights, Sable, had crossed the border with a number of trusted individuals to search for her, but their efforts had yet to bear any fruit.

Fifteen years. He'd already lost fifteen years he could have spent knowing her. Fate must have found it amusing, he thought, to continue to hide her, to dangle time before him so tantalizingly.

Cloud chuckled at himself. This was his divine punishment for taking things for granted for so long and for having failed to protect the one he loved. *But this time will be different. I will not be too late. I will find the treasure you've left me, Selena.*

Regrets and self-loathing still hung over the count, impossible to ignore, but for his daughter, he could face forward and press on.

Just as he dragged his gaze away from the window, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her—Selena.

"Stop the carriage!" he bellowed.

The wheels screeched as the driver hastily stopped them in the middle of the road. Cloud threw open the door and flew out onto the street.

He gaped at the stretch of road behind the carriage. "Selena…?"

An intersection there lay before him, but no Selena. No one at all. As the count stood frozen, staring blankly into the distance, the sun sank deeper. Shadows elongated like creeping vines.

The driver eyed his lord curiously.

Am I…seeing ghosts? But I'm certain. I'm certain I…

It had only been an instant, but he'd seen her. She wore her maid uniform and looked just as young as the day they were separated. She hadn't aged a day, in fact. Cloud would have recognized her out of a crowd of a hundred.

He ran to the intersection and looked left, then right. Still nothing.

Perhaps the deep yearning in his heart *had* produced a ghost, but that didn't matter. He would have given anything to look upon Selena one more time, even as a ghost.

But, as was reality's cruel wont, it seemed but a trick of the eye. It always was. Always an illusion. Never what one hoped. So it was for Cloud as well.

"M-my lord?" the driver said.

"Right. My apologies," he replied. "Let's depart."

With a grim expression, the count reboarded the carriage.

Two days later, on the twelfth of August, in the royal capital of Paltescia, two men met at the Leginbarth estate. At one end of the desk sat the grizzled, silver-haired celebrity himself, Count Cloud Leginbarth. As genetics might lead one to believe, he was indeed the biological father of Melody Wave, otherwise known as Celesty McMarden.

On the other end stood the imposing Sir Lectias Froude.

"You summoned me, Your Lordship?"

"That I did," the count said.

It was a morning like any other for Cloud, a busy one full of paperwork. Lect had been busy himself, seeing to clerical duties in a separate room, when a servant appeared with orders to bring him to the count. The count, however, was not his usual self.

"Is something the matter, my lord?" Lect asked.

"Y-you see, well…"

Lect did not see much except for many blank, thoroughly untouched documents sitting before his lord. By the look of things, the count hadn't completed a single task today. They were late into the morning. Surely he'd done something other than sit and stare blankly at paperwork.

Is something preventing him from working? Lect wondered. Perhaps that was why he'd been summoned. *Trouble?* The knight drew himself to attention.

A wasted effort, perhaps.

"Lect, do you have any plans to…attend the Summer Ball?"

"I'm sorry? Th-the Summer Ball?"

Cloud nodded firmly. Where in the world had this come from? Lect blinked and attempted to collect himself.

"Not particularly, no," he said.

"Preposterous! You will attend."

"What? My lord, I did my due diligence at the Spring Ball. It was my hope that—"

"I won't have it! The only woman you danced with was M-Madam C-Cecilia, but what do you think I sent you there for? Because I was up to my ears in requests to see you! Yet you attend, hardly pay any of these fair maidens any attention, and then off you go."

Lect grunted. He recalled the greater reason for his attendance. Cecilia, or, rather, *Melody* had insisted they get in and out quickly, however, and the knight did not care to argue.

"You're to go to the Summer Ball," Cloud ordered. "And dance with many a maiden." No reply. "Understood?"

"Yes, my lord," the knight answered through gritted teeth, as if this were the most heinous mission he'd ever undertaken. Trouble, it seemed, had found him, but things would only get worse.

"Also, I want you to bring Madam—er, Cecilia with you again," Cloud said.

"Cecilia? But she's a commoner, my lord. It was my understanding she only attended that function as a special exception."

"Lect, my boy, don't tell me you've forgotten the consequences of attending a ball by your lonesome."

Lectias Froude was handsome, fit, knighted, trusted deeply by Vice-Chancellor Leginbarth, young, *and* single. Though only petty nobility, the man quite possibly had a baronship or even a viscountship in his future.

Which was to say, of course, that the man was a keeper.

"I'll repeat this for your benefit," Cloud said. "If you attend alone, you'll make yourself a target for droves of young ladies looking

to steal you for themselves."

Lect croaked.

"Have you any other potential partners *aside* from Madam Cecilia?" Cloud asked.

"No," Lect admitted, "but she's away from the capital at present. A proposal letter would surely not make it in time."

"Well, there's no time like the present. If you know where she is, then make haste."

"Pardon? Go to her? Now, my lord?"

"I don't believe I stuttered, boy. We're halfway through August. Rest on your laurels and you'll lose your chance. How long a journey is it?"

Lect considered. Cecilia (Melody) was in Rudleberg territory with her lady right now. He unfurled a map in his mind and ran some numbers. "Five days one way by horse, I'd say."

"All the more reason to hurry. You're dismissed. Off you go. Make like the wind."

"My lord, I've still work to do."

"Leave it a while longer then. I'll see to it. Return home and make preparations to depart at once."

Lect failed to hide the bewilderment on his face. This was unbelievably sudden, but his lord meant what he said. Despite appearances, Cloud was fully lucid behind those hard eyes of his. Knight that he was, Lect had only one course of action open to him.

"As you wish, my lord. If you'll excuse me."

He bowed and promptly left the office.

Silence lingered in Lect's absence, until Cloud sighed at himself. "I've done it now." Regret and self-loathing reared their ugly heads as he hunched over his desk. "No amount of lovesickness or meager resemblance to Selena excuses the absurdity of what I've asked of him. That I should be that lonely… What I'd give for a grave to bury myself in."

Still, he thought, *I do miss my Selena dearly.*

And Cecilia was the closest thing he had to feeling her presence, even though he did not love her like Selena. So what *did* he feel for her?

It's as if she's there by the girl's side, smiling at me.

It was as if Cecilia were his long lost—

"Excuse me. My lord?"

Cloud shot up and restored his count-like countenance to its proper, stoic form. He faced the butler who'd entered as if all was well. "Yes?"

"I've a missive from Sir Pufontis."

"Pufontis? From Sable?"

Sable Pufontis, one of Lect's fellow knights, had embarked on a long journey to the west—a quest to seek out his lord's daughter and retrieve her from her supposed pilgrimage. He'd been keeping Cloud apprised of progress by letter, or rather the lack thereof, once every two weeks like clockwork. Occasionally he'd turn up potential leads, but typically the reports were painfully short.

Cloud was not in the mood for such a report at that moment. With another sigh, he handed the letter back to the servant. "Apologies, but I'm very busy. Tell me what it says."

Hesitating, he replied, "Yes, my lord."

The count turned his gaze down to a document that, all of a sudden, seemed far more interesting to him as the servant tore open the envelope. He was pondering what to write when the butler gasped.

"M-my lord!"

"Yes?" Cloud jerked his gaze up. It was not typical for the butler to lose composure like this.

The servant stammered, eyes bulging. "Sh-she… He found her."

"Surprise, surp… What did you say?"

"Y-your daughter. Sir Sable. He's found her. He's found the young lady!"

"I see. Has he now? He's found my…"

The pen slipped from the count's hand and fell to the desk with a clatter.

Two days prior, Serena was strolling through the Upper District. She'd forgotten something during her last shopping trip and had gone out to remedy that. Now, she was headed home. Though a great and magical maid automaton, she still had the disposition of a human and so was not above slippages of the mind.

"I'd best hurry," she muttered to herself. "My lord will be home shortly."

The Royal Chancery had evidently been inundated with work, and Count Rudleberg now wore heavy bags under his eyes. The least Serena could do to ease the burden was ensure dinner was prepared on time.

Holding back the urge to run, Serena strolled down the opulent Upper District road. She could not behave in such a slovenly manner. In public, she represented her master as well as herself, and gracelessness would put his taste into question. Serena could not have that. So she hurried—with grace. Not that the streets were particularly populated at this hour. A single carriage rolled by.

Just past it, Serena reached an intersection and turned left. She was truly alone now, or so she assumed. Someone could always be watching, and so long as that possibility persisted, she had to mind her conduct.

If only I could hop through Ovunque Porta, but that would be improper while Gentlesister is making an effort to use magic less. Oh well. Best get a move… Oh?

A wild neigh followed by a screech shattered the calm. She turned, but the carriage was out of view. Maybe there'd been an accident. Or maybe she was simply hearing things. She considered the possibilities before shaking herself and remembering the task at hand.

With quick yet graceful steps, she hurried on her way.

And then she was gone.

Bonus Story:
They Scream for Ice Cream

"I'D BEST BE OFF, THEN," ANNA-MARIE SAID.

"As should I," Maxwell concurred. "Until next time, Your Highness."

"Here's hoping it's under better circumstances," the prince said.

On the afternoon of August 15th, Maxwell and Anna-Marie were taking their leave from Christopher after discussing the Rordpier exchange student with him. Parting ways with Maxwell, Anna-Marie retired to her chambers in the palace. That she possessed her own chambers in the first place as a mere suitress of the crown prince displayed favoritism of the highest degree, but that no one objected was a testament to the couple's popularity.

She briefly scanned the room. No visitors. She might have expected her lady-in-waiting, Claris, though Anna-Marie lived alone in the palace, so she ought not have. She'd had to fight strenuously to convince her parents to allow this, of course. Had she brought Claris along, her clandestine meetings with Christopher would have become twice as difficult to arrange. As a young girl, she'd stressed that the things she and the prince had to discuss were far too important to allow for Claris's company.

Claris, as well as her parents, had grinned with amusement at that.

Ick… Anna-Marie shuddered.

Thus began all the de facto fiancé nonsense. Somehow, by the skin of her teeth, Anna-Marie remained a mere suitress, but the threat persisted.

"No time for a trip down memory lane. Have to get ready."

The lady got to changing. She bound her chest and threw on a plain commoner's dress. She turned her hair from bright crimson to a ruddy bronze, thanks to some of her handmade dye, then tied it up in a ponytail. After a touch of light makeup to emphasize some of her more boyish features and a pair of glasses to dull the sharpness of her eyes, the look was complete.

"And here she is! Anna the Commoner!" Anna(-Marie) combed her fingers through her freshly done-up hair as she examined herself in a mirror. Satisfied, she set off for the secret passage that connected to Christopher's bedroom. They'd created it themselves with magic. Not a soul but them knew of its existence. Had it been a particularly wise thing to do? Probably not. But the royal couple guarded the knowledge of how to enter it closely.

Once safely inside the prince's bedroom, Anna sat on his bed before promptly flopping over. A few lazy seconds later, a knock came. "Come in," she replied dully.

Christopher, precisely the man she'd expected, entered. He wore commoner's garb as well. "Hey."

"Hey yourself."

Christopher shot her a glance that elucidated all of his thoughts regarding her use of his bed. He left it at that. It wasn't like this was

anything new.

Some boys might have relished the sight of a young woman sprawled on their bed. This one didn't, and the young woman in question would have scoffed at the implication. Being old friends from not just one but two childhoods came with a side of shameless irreverence at times like this.

"Done?" she asked.

"For the most part. I told my valet I'd be resting and not to disturb me. Just have to be back by evening."

"Good. We need a healthy breather every now and then."

"It's a little more than 'every now and then' in your case."

"Not the same. I can only entertain myself for so long."

"Women," the prince grumbled.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing!"

"That's what I thought. So, Chris, is that to be your outfit for the day? Really?"

Anna-Marie and Christopher's summer recess had hardly been a recess. From socializing to public obligations to plot meetings, the royal couple had hardly had a second to themselves. And now the recess was halfway over.

They thought to remedy this with a little outing to the city. So Anna-Marie had become Anna, and Christopher had become Chris. Chris, however, was a little lacking in identity. All Christopher had

thought to do was throw on cheap plain clothes without altering his actual face.

"I'm covered. Don't worry." Christopher turned his back to her and fussed with himself.

Anna-Marie raised an eyebrow until he finally turned around. "Wow, that looks uncomfortable."

"Those are the first words out of your mouth?" He wore a brown wig styled in exactly the same way as his normal hair, as well as a big, bushy, full-faced beard. "A little facial hair works wonders for hiding the profile. And it hides my age too. Am I a genius or what?"

"I mean… Whatever. It's your funeral."

Chris flashed his companion a thumbs-up.

"Lord, it's hot."

"Told you."

The commoners had successfully escaped the palace and made it to the Lower District, where the still-scorching summer sun beat down mercilessly upon Chris's two sets of hair and stuffy beard.

"Before you ask, no, you can't take any of that off," Anna said.

"I know, but I'm still gonna complain. Oh, hey, let's check that place out." Chris pointed to a fancy little café bearing a sign with an ice cream cone. "That's just what I need to cool down."

"Not a bad idea. I'm feeling a little warm myself."

"Yes! Let's go!"

Snatching Anna by the hand, Chris hurried off.

Judging by the bustle within the café, everyone else had the same idea today. The staff dragged chairs outside to handle the influx of patrons, and the commoner couple only barely managed to snag seats.

Chris plopped down with a heavy sigh. A merciful parasol set in the middle of the table spared them from the sun.

"Don't ever pull me again," Anna spat between pants.

Chris shrugged. "We had to hurry or we wouldn't have gotten any seats."

To his credit, those who had not thought to rush as he had were currently stuck in a long line.

"Fine. You're still paying, though. For reparations."

"Yeah, yeah." Chris flagged down an employee, only half paying attention. The gesture came with a natural kind of grace that attracted the glances of several women nearby. The wig and facial hair could do little to conceal His Highness's lean figure, or regal posture, or those features the beard did not cover. Those possessed of a keen eye began to take notice.

Anna, too, attracted her share of attention. Though the promise of sweets meant the café primarily drew female customers, a not insignificant number brought male companions. When they turned to see where their partners were looking, they would find a beautiful young lady sitting across from the handsome Chris. Anna did not need

to be a marquess's daughter to be beautiful. Even disguised, Anna-Marie could only do so much to hide her allure.

"Welcome," the employee said, handing them menus. "I can take your orders whenever you're ready."

They studied the menus, and Chris knew his order immediately. "Iced tea and vanilla ice cream, please. Double scoop. Anna?"

"I'm thinking," she mumbled, absorbed in considering her options. Chris hadn't had to think much, being a fan of the classics, but Anna's taste was not so simple. "Vanilla. Mint chocolate. Strawberry. There's even tea flavor. Or this new orange sorbet. I just can't decide."

Said every girl ever, Chris thought (and thankfully did not say).

"Okay, I'm ready," Anna finally said, beaming. "I'll take the All-In-One Mega Cup."

The employee repeated their orders, then left to prepare them.

Chris checked the menu. The "All-In-One Mega Cup" was a combination of all five ice cream flavors topped with whipped cream, bite-sized fruit slices, and even biscuit cookies just to offset the inevitable brain freeze. It was a very parfait-esque ensemble. He summarized his thoughts thusly: "Sounds caloric."

His intentions were pure. It was indeed not the healthiest of snacks.

Anna smiled a fake smile. "Then you'll just have to help me burn them off with some exercise later."

"G-gimme a break." Chris averted his gaze. A gesture that, to onlookers, seemed an act of bashfulness. Some of the observers blushed. "P-please just go easy."

"Oh, but that would be no fun. I've practiced for you and everything."

The blushers blushed harder. Their imaginations ran wild. Chris's did too, but his fantasies were of the nightmarish variety. His excess of hair helped hide the cold sweat breaking out on his brow.

If she gets that ice cream, I'm as good as iced! What the hell is she practicing anyway? Her stabbing technique? What's she got to practice that for?! God, there's no winning with her!

Chris kept all this to himself, of course. The sight of his head hanging in fear, again, appeared to the audience as a very different, more lascivious emotion.

But Anna ended their assumptions with a smile. An actual one this time. "I'm only kidding. I'll let you off the hook this once. Stop sulking."

"W-we're good?"

"Just because I feel so bad for you. I don't want to get sweaty all over again when we're here to cool down. That said, for future reference, you'd better watch your mouth."

"R-right. Will do."

"This is your one pass. Pull something like that again and I'll follow through. I mean it. I'll chase you to the end of existence."

"Duly noted." Chris bowed. His intentions *had* been pure, but sometimes comments were best kept to yourself. He'd learned an important lesson this day.

As had the onlookers. Their blushes deepened, though out of shame this time. What were they doing, getting so worked up over the private lives of complete strangers?

"Pardon the wait," the employee said, returning. "Iced tea, vanilla ice cream, and one All-In-One Mega Cup."

Anna cheered.

A large cup of vanilla sat before Chris. Now this was a serving size he could get behind. There was at least twice the amount he would expect back home in Japan. It still paled in comparison to Anna's Mega Cup, of course. Five flavors plus whipped cream plus fruit plus cookies ended up looking a lot larger in person than it sounded on paper.

No way she's not regretting that later, he thought. To himself. He was learning.

Anna dug in. She took a bite and wiggled in her chair with delight. "It's *so* good!"

The orange sorbet struck home. Still minding her manners, Anna feasted. Chris vanished entirely from her world, replaced completely by ice cream.

Chris sighed and focused on his own treat. Already, the ice cream dripped, and his spoon glided through it with ease. The gentle

yet full vanilla flavor spread over his tongue, the ice cream melting away in his mouth along with the heat bearing down on him.

"Not bad."

They didn't talk for some time, sitting in comfortable silence. Content in the quiet, they savored their humble treats.

"From now on, I'm having ice cream every day during summer break!" Anna declared later that day. "Everyone needs breathers, after all."

Chris said nothing. Rumors would later spread of the shriek that issued from the lady's chambers during her dress fitting for the Summer Ball.

You love to see the young folk live their best lives, he thought. To himself.

He was learning.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING VOLUME 3 of *Heroine? Saint? No, I'm an All-Works Maid (And Proud of It)!* Atekichi here, the author bringing you this book two and a half years after the previous volume's Japan release. I really never intended for it to take so long, but time has a way of getting away from you, doesn't it?

I hate to sound like a broken record, but I have to repeat the exact same apology from last volume. I really can't stress enough how sorry I am for the wait! Setting the schedule for this with my publisher really was an incredibly laborious process of meeting after meeting, and I still missed every last deadline and put everybody out as a result. But at the end of it all, we made it, and now here we are!

A huge thank-you to everyone involved. And to all of my readers who are here, reading this, even after our two-year hiatus.

Anyway, let's talk actual content. This time, I want to touch on the calendar.

You may have noticed we've started using specific dates finally. I've waffled over this since Volume 1, to tell the truth, and obviously sat on it until just now, but frankly, it just started seeming more convenient to me to pull the trigger.

I've kept dates in my noggin since the beginning—general time frames of when Melody and co. get up to what they get up to—but I kept thinking about how our modern-day calendar being present in a fantasy world might be a little anachronistic. So I mostly kept time

frames vague up through Volume 2. But going back and rereading my own work, it hit me that…boy, is that convoluted and hard to read. And I have to keep track of it all! This could not continue.

So long story short, I'm using a calendar now. The world itself is a fabrication from a modern-day company making an otome game, so just assume it functions on real-world time. Turns out it really doesn't matter all that much! I hope I've convinced you as well as I've convinced myself.

That said, I'm still going to avoid days of the week.

In any case, thank you again for reading! I'll see you again in Volume 4, and in a timely enough fashion that you don't forget everything by then!

From the Creators

ATEKICHI

More trials await our oblivious, oops-did-I-do-that heroine! Perhaps even the end of her marvelous maid life?! Decisions loom!

Ahem. So advertises the author who made said heroine the way she is despite her supposedly being Japanese with Japanese sensibilities. Don’t ask me for answers. I don’t have them.

YUKIKO

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