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The Hired Heroine
Wants the Villainess to Gloat

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The Hired Heroine Wants the Villainess to Gloat
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The Hired Heroine Wants the Villainess to Gloat

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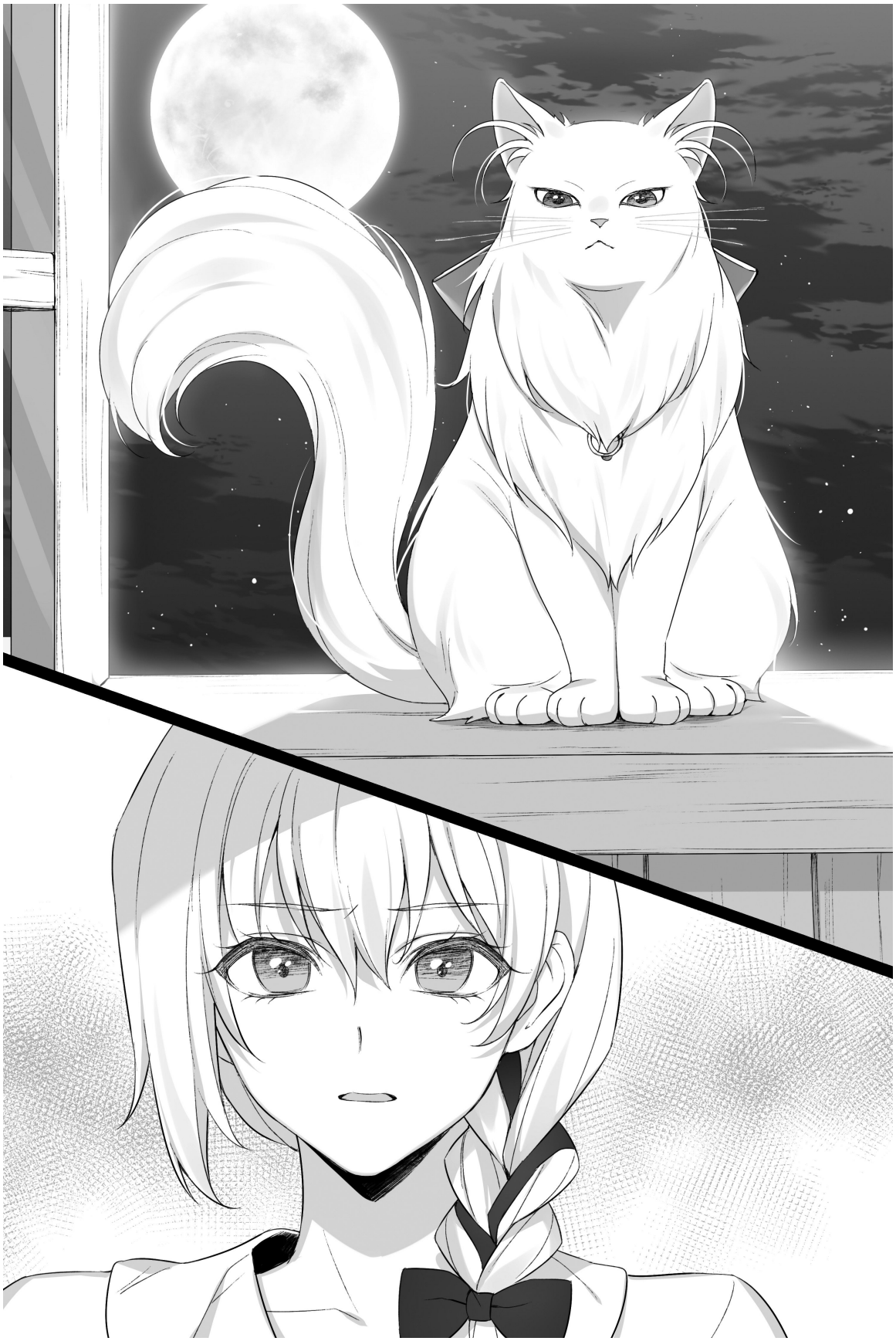
Prologue

"WOULD you like to be the heroine in an otome game?" asked the cat, outlined in the light of the moon shining through the window. "The catch is…you must have a downfall so the villainess can gloat."

Its glossy fur was as white and beautiful as freshly fallen snow, and its mismatched eyes of blue and gold glittered more brightly than any jewel.

Nina looked at the creature with its divine coloration and sighed slowly. "What the? That sounds terrible."

With that, the white cat's eyes narrowed as it sparkled in the moonlight.





NINA Scaglione had been reborn in this world with the memories of a Japanese person. The world was an imitation of the European world set in the Middle Ages.

This sort of story setup typically meant Nina was destined for a fateful encounter with a prince or perhaps to embark on a thrilling adventure, but she had absolutely none of that. She was reborn as a simple commoner with absolutely no connections to swords, magic, or princes.

No Japanese person could ever have the ivory color hair she did, and her pale coral eyes seemed a bit otherworldly, but that didn't mean anything special happened to her. And just because she wasn't living in Japan didn't mean her life was all that different or exciting.

Her father died when she was younger, and her mother was bedridden with illness, which meant Nina spent her days earning a living for them at part-time jobs. In a way, this life was far harsher than living in Japan since there were no social support systems or health insurance.

Her reality was that of a life simply continuing, plodding forward with no dreams and no mercy.

Yeah, reality, she thought. That was why there was no way something as fantastical as a talking cat appearing at her bedroom window was actually happening.

She stared at the cat like she was trying to correct a fault in her vision, but the white cat really was there in her window.

The window was cracked open, letting the night breeze slip through and rustle the moss-green curtains. As the cloth swayed back and forth, it sometimes brushed the cat's tail, which would whip back and forth to push away the fabric. It was so adorable that Nina couldn't stop herself from staring.

The cat's mouth moved. It looked like it said, "Good evening." Wait. Maybe she actually heard it say that. But what was with this weird offer the cat had brought? It made absolutely no sense.

Opinions were surely divided on whether cats could understand what people said. Still, the vast majority of people would agree that cats did not, in fact, produce correctly pronounced human language. Apparently, she wasn't just seeing things; she was hearing them as well.

It was clearly shocking and must've manifested from her working non-stop several days in a row at her part-time jobs.

"So…what? Are you the messenger from a god or something?" asked Nina, sitting on the edge of her bed, not feeling like sleeping at all anymore. She did have a chair in her room, but she couldn't be bothered to move at this point.

The cat slipped into her room through the window and plopped onto the chair instead. The incredible white cat with its soft, fluffy fur waved its tail back and forth as it talked to her.

Not only was it a weird situation, seeing as a talking cat was in her room, but Nina couldn't decide if the weirdness was created by the cat itself or her head. She might even be asleep already and just enjoying an encounter with a cat in her dreams. Lately, she'd been so busy with work and didn't have much time to interact with the free-roaming cats. Perhaps she lacked vitamin cat, which was the reason for these dreams or hallucinations or whatever.

She had heard that insufficient amounts of nutrition could cause illness. Now, she knew insufficient amounts of cats could cause hallucinations.

This new piece of useless information didn't matter right now, however. She didn't often get the opportunity to talk to a cat in the same language.

Unless…meowing at the street cats counted.

"That is one way of looking at it," said the cat. "I also know you were reborn into this world. That's why I'm here."

The cat's mouth motions synced perfectly with the sober appeal coming from its lips, making it hard to believe it really could be anything but a talking cat. Seemed like you got higher quality hallucinations the more fatigue you had piled up.

Nina's deeply ingrained love of cats was also at play because this white messenger of the gods had the most beautiful fur. A really

great choice for a hallucination, if she might say so herself.

Black and tabby cats were both great, of course, but a pure white cat was a rare and valuable sight to Nina since she mostly spent her time fussing over cats without owners. Usually, a cat like that would have dirtied paws, but this one didn't have the slightest tinge of discoloration.

On top of its dazzling white fur was its long, slender tail and its mismatched eyes of blue and gold. This was a cat of luxury jam-packed with all of Nina's dreams and desires.

If you're going to hallucinate, you can't choose anything but this beauty of a cat, can you?

Nina reached out and scratched under the cat's chin, but it didn't react.

Hm.

Well, it was the messenger of a god. Maybe standard cat-petting procedures weren't going to cut it. She must be going all in on the details despite it being her own hallucination.

Anyway. For the moment, she was enjoying the fur on the cat's back while she considered how to approach petting it next.

"Pardon me, but…what are you doing?" asked the cat.

"What do you mean? If there's a cat, you give it attention. That's like a fundamental rule of human life."

Nina loved cats.

If there was a cat on the side of the road, there was no way she wouldn't talk to it, and she, of course, wanted to pet it too. Soft fur, smooth to the touch, eyes like gems, beautiful legs, adorable mannerisms, aloof attitude. Every part of a cat was incredible. She was rewarded regardless of whether they came over in a good mood and rubbed against her leg or they were in a bad mood and smacked her hand away.

That was how obsessed Nina was with them, meaning this white cat was quite the gorgeous animal in her eyes.

"Next, let me squish your toesies," she expressed.

"Uh, no. We're in the middle of a conversation."

"Let me tickle you between your toe beans. Oh, then I want to stroke the short, fuzzy fur on your back feet." Nina let her heart take

the lead as she petted the cat how she wanted, but it slipped out of her hands and ran away.

Ooooh, he's so graceful!

"Would you please listen to what I'm saying?" demanded the cat. "I would like you to become a heroine."

"Huh… Considering this is my hallucination, you're really into this fantasy-themed stuff."

"This *isn't* a hallucination. This is real. There was a Lucky Reincarnation Raffle where the winner could live their chosen reincarnated life." This sounded even more detached from reality than Nina expected a hallucination to be, but the white cat looked serious.

Nina thought that name was so unimaginative that it pushed the limits of boring. However, maybe something good was really going to happen after being reborn. "All right, then heal my mom," she stated.

Nina's mother suffered from an illness, and the doctor had already told them she didn't have much longer left to live. She was still just about able to continue her day-to-day life, but there was no telling when her body would suddenly deteriorate.

The cost of the medicine that lessened her pain was also nothing to sneeze at, so even if this raffle thing sounded fishy, Nina was going to cling to whatever lifelines someone threw her way. She would do anything if it meant her mom would live for one day longer if it meant she wouldn't suffer as much.

But the white cat shook its head. Despite being a cat, its mannerisms were quite human-like; even that was cute. "You misunderstand. You're not the winner of the raffle."

"But you just said you want me to be the heroine. Doesn't the winner of the raffle take that r0le?"

"Lately, the villainess role has become quite popular. The winner of this raffle would like to be the rival, and she wants to gloat when the heroine falls from grace."

Nina knew the cat was discussing important matters, but its swaying tail was very distracting. If only it'd stop. It was so cute;

after this was all sorted out, she just wanted to watch as it waved back and forth.

She managed to drag back her meandering thoughts. Still unable to pull her eyes from the cat's fuzzy fur, Nina settled to nod as she collected herself.

"While this isn't particularly important information, there weren't many girls who were interested in being the heroine to lose her popularity only for the raffle winner to gloat," continued the cat. "Which is why you have come up as a candidate."

Kitty, what are you talking about? Why do you look so serious?

Though, cats always looked serious.

It was so unbearably adorable how they looked as solemn as little philosophers while they pooped.

"I don't really know anything about otome games," responded Nina. "And I'm not pretty enough to be the protagonist. It won't work out. Besides…what sort of thing would have to happen so the antagonist can gloat? I haven't even done anything."

"The raffle winner requested a life in the style of an otome game set in a world similar to medieval Europe," the cat explained, thrashing its tail like it was just waiting for Nina to ask before continuing.

"The request was something along these lines: The villainess is a girl of noble birth, perfect in every way, from her beauty to her pedigree. She does have fond feelings for her fiancé, a marriage arranged by her family, but the days go on as she is unable to express her feelings to him.

"Then, the heroine transfers into their school and quickly becomes close with the villainess's fiancé. The fiancé and everyone around become prisoners to the heroine's hard-working, commoner charms. Therefore, the villainess is driven into isolation after she says some poorly chosen things.

"After a series of misfortunes, the villainess bullies the heroine, which is used as convincing material to isolate the villainess further. However, the villainess puts herself in harm's way to protect her fiancé from danger. He then witnesses her tearfully accepting and

supporting his love with the heroine, only for him to realize who he truly loves finally.

"At the graduation party, where the fiancé would normally have broken off the engagement, he instead reveals to everyone the heroine's evildoings, confesses his love to the villainess, and the two live happily ever after in a luxurious life as royals."

The white cat was so good at speaking that Nina did listen to all of it, but there was so much that Nina wanted to poke fun at. "So basically," she began, "I will nearly steal the fiancé but end up being the one he tosses aside? How is that role a heroine? Like…it's basically just an evil rival?"

"Apparently, that's what makes it romantic. The raffle winner said she loves the incongruity of the villainess appearing to be an evil character but is, in fact, good."

Nina could sort of see the romance and surprise in that setup, but wouldn't it be much simpler if they just swapped the roles? This was a romance story; maybe that didn't fit her bill.

She personally thought it was a waste to take a long detour when you had a path directly to happiness right in front of you. This raffle winner must be some starry-eyed girl who's never known hardship. Or maybe a little kid? The opposite was also possible, that she'd been through all sorts of trials and just wanted to escape from reality.

"What's the name of this otome game anyway? I don't think I'll know it, but I kinda want to hear it," asked Nina.

"It isn't a real otome game."

"What do you mean?" The raffle winner wanted an otome game setting, but not an actual game? That's pointless."

"It seems that she only wants an otome game—*style* setting in a school reminiscent of medieval Europe. There were no real games that quite matched what she was after."

"What the heck? Okay, so, everything goes how the raffle winner wants? Nothing about this makes it sound like I get anything from being the so-called heroine. I'm not gonna do it. Why'd you come to me?"

There was nothing good about being forced to be a rival just so someone could gloat when you lost the rivalry, but it was even scarier to think everything would go exactly as the raffle winner wanted it to. That wouldn't make Nina a heroine; it'd make her a sacrifice.

"Normally, candidates for the roles are selected through a lottery of volunteers," explained the cat. "However, no one wanted to sign up for this lottery. We've been unable to select a heroine for quite some time, meaning we weren't in time to have her begin school at the same time as the raffle winner. Now we're rushing to hire one."

Nina's eyes darted back and forth every time the cat's tail swayed from one side to the other. Everything it did was adorable. Her thoughts kept running away, making it difficult to focus on the conversation.

"Hire?" she asked.

"Yes. There will be significant compensation if you can successfully perform the role for the winner to gloat over."

Nina's eyes snapped wide at the one word she couldn't let slip past. "Compensation? What sort of compensation?"

You might expect money normally, but she doubted a cat had any human money. Though…all-she-could-pet cats for a year would be pretty tempting.

"I wish I could say it could be anything you want, but it can't be a cure for your mother's illness. Only the contractee themselves can have an illness cured. The best offer for anyone else is to reduce their suffering."

In this situation, the person agreeing to the contract would be the heroine, who will have some downfall so the arch-rival can gloat. Obviously, Nina's mother was too old to fill the position since it would involve attending school, and Nina couldn't allow it anyway because she didn't know what this downfall entailed.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any convenient solution. Even knowing that in advance, Nina couldn't help feeling disappointed. "Okay…so then, take away her pain. And give me money for her medicine. Can you do that?"

"Yes, that is doable."

"I'm not gonna wait until it's all over, and I can't trust you anyway, so I want some of it upfront."

"Of course. I was also told you'll receive additional compensation upon successful completion," expressed the cat as it took a small piece of paper out of nowhere.

Nina gasped at the number written on it. It was enough that she'd never have to worry about paying for her mother's medicine, and she could even go to the doctor more regularly. She could never make that much money with her part-time jobs. Nina was elated at being able to spend more time with her mother because she wouldn't have to work as much.

"Will you accept?" asked the cat.

Nina shook her head. "Consider this provisional acceptance. I'll only accept the official contract once I see it and can check everything."

"Very prudent of you."

"Of course."

If this wasn't a dream or a hallucination, then it might very well be an opportunity.

For the first time in Nina's life, being reborn was actually going to benefit her.

Chapter 1: Here Begins the Hired Heroine

"IT… wasn't a dream."

The sight of a small glass bottle filled to the brim on her table the next morning jolted Nina fully awake. She took out one of the small white tablets and popped it into her mouth. The pill lost shape as she rolled it over her tongue, leaving a faint sweetness in her mouth.

"He really got me sugar pills."

This was one of Nina's requests. The white cat said the god would relieve the pain for her mother, Aida, even though Nina had only entered a provisional contract since she didn't fully believe in its power.

The problem was that Aida would be suspicious if she suddenly felt better despite having been diagnosed with only a short time left to live. People wanted a cause to come with their effect, a firm explanation for things, even if only superficial.

That's why Nina asked for some pills as a placebo so things would be easier to explain.

Nina assumed the god made these pills, but she couldn't help imagining the white cat industriously crafting the little pills. It would be hard work keeping fur out of them. An image of the cat wearing a mask and gloves and getting to work popped into Nina's mind, and a smile spread across her face at the cute sight.

But anyway, even if the cat was a beauty in a class of its own, the important thing was whether these pills—or rather, the god's power—were real.

The cat said it would be back tomorrow evening, which meant Nina should start to see some effect by then. What sort of change could she even expect, considering Aida didn't have much longer to live?

Nina stepped out of her room to see Aida already up and having a cup of tea.

"Good morning, Nina. You seem busy this morning, both smiles and frowns," greeted Aida, looking at Nina with puzzlement. Her complexion didn't look very good, which was normal.

They were lucky they didn't need to worry about rental fees since Nina's father left them the house when he passed, but that wasn't enough to support them. Aida was always working hard at the little jobs that needed doing, such as sewing, cleaning, and laundry.

When Nina grew a little older, they discovered the illness plaguing Aida, but it was already too late for the town doctor to do anything because her mother had hidden how unwell she felt in the beginning.

She became less active as she weakened, using medicine to dull the pain that racked her body. Existing medicines weren't even enough to ease her symptoms despite Nina wanting to do something about Aida's condition as she waited for her death.

If this would improve Aida's state, even just a little…

Nina took a deep breath and said, "So, Mom…"



"GOOD eve— Ah!"

The next evening, the white cat appeared out of nowhere, and Nina pulled it into a tight embrace. Its soft fur was as pleasant to touch as fluffy dream clouds.

Obviously, she couldn't restrain her urge to rub her cheek against the fuzz. "Thank you," she said. "It really worked."

Aida had been visibly wasting away, but Nina barely recognized her now that the color was returning to her cheeks. She never could

spend much time out of bed before, but earlier that day, she'd even gone outside and had some fun tending the flowers.

Nina was so happy she could cry at the sight of her mother smiling without pain. "Thank you" alone wasn't enough to express her emotions.

"Uh, well, it wasn't my doing, and remember, she isn't cured," replied the cat.

"I know. But I'm still happy."

Her mother never looked this well, no matter what medicine she took. Even if this cat wasn't the messenger of a god, and even if it wasn't a god's power that did this, it didn't change the fact that they helped Aida.

Nina stroked the cat over and over, from its head to the end of its back, and scratched it under the chin with all the gratitude she felt. But, despite Nina's overflowing emotions, the white cat still didn't respond to the petting.

"By the way… Why do you keep stroking me?" it asked.

"The cats in the neighborhood seem happy when I do this. I guess a cat sent by a god is different."

"That's not quite what I mean."

"You should tell me what feels nice, then I can use that technique on other cats I meet."

The cat slipped out of Nina's hands and slowly waved its tail. "First, let's discuss the contract."

1. The villainess is the daughter of a marquess and is both smart and beautiful. She's engaged to a prince. The heroine is a commoner.
2. The heroine goes to school and gets friendly with the prince.
3. Both the villainess's fiancé and everyone around are captivated by the heroine's charms. People find out the villainess bullied the heroine, and everyone stops being friends with her.
4. The villainess protects the prince. True love blossoms.
5. The heroine goes to the graduation party with the prince. Everyone learns of the heroine's deeds, and then there's the love confession scene.

The terms were notated on a sheet of rainbow-colored paper the white cat presented. Depending on what angle you looked at it, the paper changed color and sparkled with faint light. It clearly wasn't made with any technology of this world and must've also been made by the god's power.

As Nina carefully studied the contract, the white cat's paw appeared before her face and traced along the words. "This is the contract with the raffle winner," it said.

It looked like the winner had written it herself. The letters were cutesy, but Nina was curious why the handwriting looked a bit messier nearer the end.

"The details are up to your discretion," continued the cat. "In the end, the contract is fulfilled as long as these five conditions are met."

With that, Nina took another look over the contract. It was pretty bare bones. She'd have to make a lot of decisions about the details at this rate. "Why didn't she bother putting in more details?" She seemed picky after all, considering she chose a villainess for the romance aspect.

"She said to just go by feel. Also, raffle winners are only allowed three minutes for negotiation as part of their special treatment. I think she did rather well, considering."

Nina was about to sigh at how half-measure it was of this person to tell them to just go by feel, but something the cat said caught her interest. "Why three minutes?"

"Apparently, the time limit was put into place after a previous raffle winner spent ages negotiating."

"But why *three* minutes?"

"I was told that aligned with the wait time."

The white cat was probably referring to what the "god" said, but what were they waiting for? Maybe they were waiting for their cup ramen to cook? It wouldn't be that weird, considering Nina reincarnated into another world and had a cat visiting her on orders from a god.

"But I don't wanna deal with complaints if what I do isn't what she wants because I had to make my own decisions," countered

Nina.

She didn't care what happened with the villainess's romance. Nina just wanted to avoid nullifying the contract because she failed to fulfill it, which would result in Aida's pain coming back.

That meant she had to make sure she *really* understood what the raffle winner wanted.

"I'm sure the raffle winner has a clear picture in her mind of this otome game in a medieval Europe-esque setting, but we don't know the details," assured the cat. "The god's powers do extend to anything that falls under these five conditions."

"The god's powers?"

"This contract won't be nullified if the contracting party cannot fulfill the conditions. If you formally enter the contract, you'll receive a ring. The god's power held within will make corrections if anything goes too far off course from the contract. Essentially, you can't make mistakes. There's no need to worry."

Anyone claiming god's power would help you was usually met with suspicion, but Nina already knew this power was real. She didn't have to worry about any snags or contract violations caused by her mistakes.

While she was grateful to hear that, it only created a new question. "Does that mean it doesn't matter if I try hard to be the heroine because it won't make any difference in the end? It's all well and good to say 'Go to school,' but there's all the time I'd have to spend going through the admission process and getting things ready. And the money, I don't have that."

Assuming this school wasn't going to be built from scratch just for the raffle winner, they would use a pre-existing academy that the noble children attended. All the students would be real nobles and royals. A commoner like Nina could never get into a school like that, no matter how hard she tried, and she couldn't get the money together for it either.

"We'll provide the necessary funds, don't worry," the cat continued. "And we will also go through the steps to enroll you. I will be coming to visit you every once in a while, so please do try. Do you have any other questions?"

If getting in and paying for school weren't issues, then there was no doubt she would be able to get in.

But there was one issue remaining.

"About this 'captivated by the heroine's charms' part. I'm not exactly bewitching. I can't do that. Or will I suddenly turn into a jaw-dropping beauty when I sign the contract?"

Nina's ivory hair and coral eyes were beautiful in their own way in terms of color combination, but the most important part was her actual features. There, she wasn't lacking, but not exactly blessed—she was utterly average. Nina has had people say she was cute while out and about, but they were just being nice. If she stepped amongst the throngs of refined noble ladies who had committed themselves to their appearance, Nina would be no more interesting than the backdrop.

The contract specifically said "captivated by the heroine's charms," and that would be the most challenging part. But if they changed Nina's appearance, then what about everyone who'd known Nina up until now? Aida's heart might stop from shock if her daughter randomly changed into a beautiful lady she didn't recognize.

"…I think you'll be okay in that regard," the white cat asserted.

"Come on, saying that isn't a good enough guarantee. The villainess is both smart and beautiful, right? There's no way I can rival her."

"Why not?"

Nina sighed. This cat might be capable of easily talking in detail about difficult issues, but it was pretty slow to pick up on other matters. "I mean, she's a noble girl and beautiful. The story can't exactly go ahead if the heroine is utterly bland, can it?"

"But you're cute enough," the cat said without hesitation.

A gulf of silence gaped between the white cat and Nina. "Yeah, so," uttered Nina, "I guess that's my mistake for asking a cat to make judgment calls on human beauty." She shook her head and rubbed her temple. Nina wasn't sure what cat standards were for determining beauty, but it was likely different from human measures.

"I'm not unknowledgeable about these things," replied the white cat, its tail lashing back and forth in annoyance. It was adorable when it did that.

Aaaah, I really want to pet him. Pet him all over, squish him, and cuddle as much as I want! she thought. "All right, well, thanks. Good to know cats don't think I'm ugly. That gives me confidence for when I talk to the cats outside. I'll become a wandering cat chaser."

"Before you do that, would you be the heroine?"

"Wait."

"…There's something else?" Despite being a cat, its expression was clearly exasperated. This messenger of a god really did have human-like mannerisms.

"What's your name?" asked Nina.

"What?"

"Not, like, 'Messenger of the Gods,' or whatever. Your personal…uh…felin-al name. If you're going to be helping me out, I'd at least like to know your name. I'm Nina. Nina Scaglione."

Introductions were a cornerstone of interpersonal…interperson-felin-al relationships. Sharing names was basically a requirement.

It would be hard to talk with the cat if she constantly had to call it by saying "Messenger of God" or just plain old "Hey, you." Besides, she wasn't about to lose this opportunity to be on a first-name basis with a cat as beautiful as this. Both for their work and because she loved cats, she really wanted to be able to use its name—and to have it use hers.

The cat's eyes went round. After a moment of thinking, it quietly murmured, "Ed."

"Ed? That's a nice name." She grasped Ed's paw for a handshake, secretly getting a feel of his toe beans while at it. She couldn't get over how soft and squishy they were. "I'm not sure I can be a charming heroine, but I'll work hard and make sure the winner can gloat as much as she wants. I look forward to working with you, Ed."

Nina put her all into a huge grin, and Ed waved his tail in satisfaction. "Okay. The contract is complete then," he said with a nod, and a faint light gathered around Nina's right ring finger. "This

is a contract ring. You won't be able to remove it until the contract is fulfilled."

The light faded, leaving a ring in its place. It was very pretty, simple, and silver with a tiny blue stone.

"And I look forward to working with you too, Nina," continued Ed, his beautiful blue and gold eyes slowly narrowing.



"I came to deliver your uniform," announced Ed, the white cat, as he sat in the window the following evening. The only thing outside the window was a wall, so it wasn't like he climbed up there, even if he was a cat. And it definitely wasn't feasible to imagine a cat climbing up while carrying something. Ed also didn't look like a super beefy cat, so he probably just popped over using the god's power or whatever. "Did you receive permission to attend the academy?" he asked.

There probably wasn't anything wrong with Ed sitting on the table, but Nina was a cat lover, which meant she wanted to show some hospitality when she knew a cat was coming.

She'd prepared a cushion for him and placed it on the table. He hesitated a moment, then sat on it, and she let out a mental squeal at the little ploop sound it made when he settled onto the cushion.

"Yep," she answered. "I told Mom they're letting me attend while working there part-time as a cleaner. She seemed worried, but I think it'll be okay."

It was a fishy story, to be honest, being allowed to attend an academy for nobles in exchange for some cleaning work. Aida was obviously concerned, but Nina couldn't meet the villainess if she didn't attend the academy, so she was pressured to convince Aida to let her go.

"I imagine she would be. Commoners don't often attend the academy," stated Ed.

"You do know a lot, don't you? Guess you are a messenger of a god, after all."

"No, that's not… Um, anyway. Do you have any concerns?"

"Basically, I've just got to captivate everyone with my charms and get bullied occasionally by the villainess, right? I think I'm fine with that. Until this…final downfall thing."

After reading the contract, Nina couldn't tell what exactly this downfall was that the adversary was supposed to gloat over. Still, since it would involve causing trouble with a prince and noble girl, the punishment would likely be harsh. In the games and manga Nina could think of, the character was usually convicted of a crime and either exiled or executed.

She wasn't about to claim she wasn't afraid to die, but she was even more afraid of what would happen to Aida once she was gone.

"If something happens and I end up dead or forced to leave home for a long time," began Nina, "can you use my reward money to put my mom in a hospital? And also…make her forget about me."

Since Aida's illness had no cure, she wasn't going to live much longer, no matter what did happen. Nina didn't want to break her heart by making her live the rest of that short life with the sorrow of losing her daughter.

"…If that does happen, I'll do as you ask," Ed said quietly.

Nina let out a sigh of relief. "Then I don't have to worry. Thank you."

This way, Aida would be okay no matter what happened. All that was left was for Nina to give the villainess a glorious opportunity to gloat.

Nina happened to glance toward her bed and saw a uniform laid out. She didn't think she could have even bought the uniform with the money she made from her jobs. It was made from a clearly high-quality-looking material, which excited Nina when she touched it.

"This is the uniform, right?" she asked. "I should try it on."

"Hm? Ack!"

Just as Nina went to unbutton her blouse, she heard what sounded like the strangled cry of a frog someone stepped on. "Ed? What's wrong?"

"H-Have you no sense of decency?" exclaimed Ed, looking almost panicked with his fur standing on end. He might be the

messenger of a god, but he was still a cat. What was there to be so embarrassed about? It wasn't like she was going to get completely naked anyway. Nina didn't see what the big deal was.

Thinking about it now, though, she realized she wasn't sure if Ed was a boy or a girl; she just guessed boy. Now curious, Nina picked up the oddly behaving white cat and checked between his legs, where she saw two cute little pompoms.

"You really are a boy, Ed. Guess even god's messengers have a gender," she noted out loud.

"Wh-What are you looking at?!" Ed squirmed and twisted around, leaping from Nina's arms.

"What's the big deal? There's nothing wrong with looking at what's already out there in the open. They're cute anyway."

A human male who walked around with their privates out in the open would end in nothing but an incident, but seeing pompoms on a cat just gave Nina the warm fuzzies inside. Cats truly were incredible creatures if you thought about it.

Ed froze for a while as if he was going to say something but then just sighed. He seemed embarrassed. Being embarrassed about something that was always publicly visible must be a hard life.

Nina couldn't see because he was covered in white fur, but she imagined his face was likely bright red. "You divine servants can have delicate sensibilities, I guess," she stated.

"It's just— Agh!"

Nina undid the buttons of her blouse again to get undressed finally, and Ed made another strange noise. "Oh, come on! If you don't want to see, just look away."

Ed lifted himself, turned to face the other way, and settled back on the cushion while Nina quickly undressed. She slipped her arms through the sleeves, and the high-quality fabric was gentle and comfortable on her skin.

It was very classy and cute with its forest green blazer and skirt, finished with an orange bow.

Nina lifted Ed—who hadn't moved a muscle since facing himself the other way—and set him back on the table. She held her skirt up

in pinched fingers and posed to show the uniform off to him. "Whatd'ya think? Do I look a bit like the heroine now?"

Nina usually dressed like a peasant worker, so even she could get an appearance boost with a uniform like this. You could also say the only thing worth relying on here was the improvement the clothes provided.

"Yes, you look very cute," Ed replied flatly.

Nina gave a frustrated sigh. "Even cats who work for gods can give false compliments." She sat on the bed, impressed by his ability to interact like a human. "By the way, what will I learn at the academy?"

She'd studied at church and a bit on her own before, but this world didn't have compulsory education like Japan, meaning commoners weren't used to school.

"Entirely standard history and such," answered Ed. "It's actually more of a setting for noble children to mingle with each other. The academy even hosts soirées. There's only one left this year, though."

"Soirées? That's like some sort of party, right? I've never been to anything like that, and I don't have a gown. I can't even dance. Do I have to go?"

While Nina was a reincarnated Japanese person, she had been a perfectly normal person in that life too. She was never involved in things as elegant as that. And dancing? The only dance she knew was the Japanese bon dance they used to do at festivals.

"I would imagine that, as the heroine, going will bring you closer to your downfall," Ed disclosed.

That made Nina realize she wasn't very good as a hired heroine. This was obviously going to be the biggest event at the academy. The villainess would be there, and, in otome games, you needed the protagonist there in order to complete an event.

"I should probably go then," she resigned. "But I don't have a gown."

"I know. I'll handle everything. You don't need to worry."

Nina marveled at how immediately Ed replied. "Things must be tough on you, too, Ed. Must be a pain coming here and listening to me, even if it is your job as a messenger."

"Not at all. I'm receiving compensation as well."

Even though it was nearly buried in his fluffy fur, Nina looked closely and saw a contract ring hanging from his neck—Ed was a promisee, just like Nina.

"Oh. Well, that's good, then," she said.

What sort of compensation did a cat want though? A year's worth of meat? All-you-could-lick cat nip? Maybe a life's supply of high-quality scratching posts?

Nina imagined the white cat buried in meat, high on catnip, and sharpening his claws, and she couldn't stop the smile spreading across her face, going almost slack-jawed enough to drool. She quickly ran her hand across her face.

"How is your mother?" asked Ed.

"Her complexion is a lot better. She seems pretty good."

With the god's help relieving Aida's pain, she could now water the flowers and weed the garden. It truly was an improvement, as her limit before was a little stroll through the garden if she pushed herself.

Most people were happy to see her like that, but others wondered what doctor she was seeing or what medicine she was taking now. Nina didn't hide the existence of the pills Ed gave her. She even gave some to people who were curious. They were just sugar pills, after all, so they wouldn't have any effects. That should be enough to convince them she didn't have some sort of miracle drug.

People could become scary when they were envious. Nina was already making her own plans to make sure no group of lawless ruffians came after the non-existent medicine.

"I'll just remind you…" started Ed.

"That she's not cured, right? Don't worry. I haven't forgotten."

Yes. This was nothing more than pain relief. Aida's illness hadn't been cured, and progression hadn't stopped. Her remaining flame of life, which they knew was close to burning out, was still fading.

Nina cast her eyes down, unable to say anything more.

“So long as you know,” said Ed, his long, elegant tail swaying back and forth.



“IT’S surprisingly peaceful,” Nina murmured to herself as she walked through the beautifully manicured courtyard garden.

She was a few days into her academy enrollment, having started in the boldest way possible: as a commoner entering an academy only for nobles partway through the year. People were curious about her, but no one had caused issues so far. She was surprised at how calm things had been.

But she did literally live in a different social world from them, so they didn’t have much in common to talk about. Apparently, when a noble girl saw a cat, she didn’t shove her face in its fluffy belly or sniff its cute toe beans.

Did they have the willpower of gods? Or were they just not interested in cats? Either way, she clearly had different tastes and thought processes from them.

A bit stressed, she decided to stroll through the courtyard and found herself standing in front of what looked like a vegetable plot. She thought at first it was a flower bed, but the beautifully neat furrows didn’t seem to be for flowers.

“What beautiful soil. I wonder what’s growing here,” she observed. Vaguely interested, Nina crouched down and started pulling weeds out. If you only pulled the leaves, you’d leave the roots, and the weeds would keep growing. It’s essential also to get the roots.

“If only I could weed out Mom’s illness like this…”

She sighed. Saying something like that wasn’t going to accomplish anything.

If weeding could cure Aida, Nina would spend days doing nothing but pulling out the unwanted plants. Obviously, no such convenient solution existed. Her only option right now was to play her contracted role. If you thought about it, even that was a rare opportunity, and she was grateful for the chance.

She sighed again, shaking off all the dirt clinging to the roots of the weed she just pulled out. It would be a shame to waste such beautifully cultivated soil.

"…What are you doing?" came a voice, interrupting Nina as she had gotten lost in her weeding. It was only then that she realized someone was standing next to her.

She looked up to see a handsome boy with ultramarine blue hair and ochre-colored eyes. He was probably vying for first place for the most attractive boy Nina had ever seen since reincarnating into this world. He wore dirt-covered gloves and carried a bucket, but that didn't sully his elegance.

"You don't often see an academy student weeding, and you seem to know what you're doing," he observed.

"I am pretty experienced," she replied. Nina weeded around their house and even had a part-time job that involved weeding the gardens at a noble's mansion. She wasn't particularly fast or skilled at it, but your average academy student had probably never touched a weed, being nobles and all.

Nina dropped the weed she was holding, stood, and brushed off her skirt since it would be odd to continue this conversation while crouching the whole time.

"My name is Dino Mento, and yours?" the boy asked.

"I'm Nina Scaglione."

She only realized after she responded that Mento was also the country's name. Having that last name meant he was royalty. He might be the prince mentioned in the contract. She felt somewhat emotional thinking about growing close to this attractive boy only to be thrown aside by him later. It was a little like looking at the fish in a restaurant's tank, knowing they'd someday be eaten.

Though actually, the positions were reversed. Nina was the one destined for the oven this time.

"What do you think you're doing?!" suddenly came a loud voice.

Surprised, Nina spun around and saw a beautiful girl with plum-colored hair and jade-green eyes standing with her hands on her hips. Nina felt the glare boring into her, but she was actually grateful to be given the chance to bask in the gaze of such a pretty girl.



“Clarissa, what’s wrong?” asked Dino.

“Your Highness, you should hardly be stooping to working in the dirt, should you? And you,” demanded the girl called Clarissa, a wrinkle between her brows. “You are speaking to *Prince* Dino. Don’t you think it’s discourteous to address him while looking as you do?”

Nina looked down at herself and realized her uniform and shoes were covered in dirt. Contrastingly, Dino had even more dirt on him, but Clarissa wasn’t going to point that out.

“This is why you’re a commoner,” Clarissa huffed.

“You know who I am? And, may I ask who you are?” said Nina clumsily.

Clarissa’s eyes gleamed like she was waiting for Nina to ask. “I am Clarissa Tessarini, Prince Dino’s fiancée.”

All right. This meant she was the villainess and the Lucky Reincarnation Raffle winner. Nina was told she’d be both smart and beautiful, and she definitely was beautiful. Nina found herself nodding at Clarissa’s perfect job of highlighting her relationship with Dino while belittling a commoner at the same time.

The ring on Clarissa’s finger had a sparkling red stone and looked fairly similar to Nina’s. Did the raffle winner get a red stone? Or were everyone’s rings different?

This was apparently the event that introduced both the heroine and the villainess. However, Nina questioned if having it happen at a vegetable plot was really best.

The question then was how should Nina, the protagonist, respond?

“I apologize for my lack of decorum; I didn’t realize I was speaking with the prince,” she began. “Though, it is fun to work in the dirt, isn’t it?”

She tried for something safe: apologizing while showing she accepted what Dino was doing.

“What are you talking about? I have nothing to say to that,” said Clarissa.

Welp. She completely shot that one down. Did that mean she’d prefer a response that made her want to bite back?

Nina had the vague feeling that Clarissa was looking at her expectantly. She was going to be one demanding customer. Nina needed to respond to her demands and set up the perfect gloat for her.

"Fine, then maybe you shouldn't ever eat vegetables again," tossed Nina. "You'll learn to regret not knowing the value of vegetables—grown in dirt—when your skin becomes rough and you can't get a normal bowel movement anymore."

Oops. She had been aiming to show that she embraced Dino and this vegetable patch but accidentally ended up saying something more suited to the evil role.

"Do not underestimate the steely strength of my skin." Clarissa put her hands on her hips, looked down her nose at Nina, and sauntered away.

Nina didn't really get it, but at least Clarissa managed to end the scene with something resembling an evil attitude, which Nina was grateful for. Despite being a villainess and all, she was probably a perfectly nice person.

As Clarissa left, Nina sort of waved her off as Dino laughed. "Nina, was it?" he asked. "You're funny. It was nice meeting you."

As she might've expected from the love interest of this story, she had no complaints about his pleasant smile.

She felt a smile grow across her face too and felt relieved that the first encounter event was completed successfully.



"WELCOME home, Nina. Dinner's ready," welcomed Aida with a smile, greeting Nina with satisfaction.

"You seem like you're feeling good," noted Nina. She took off her blazer and went to help with dinner, but the cooking was already finished. The only thing left was to set the table.

Apparently, Aida even baked bread. The house was filled with its pleasant aroma.

Aida brought over a pot of one of Nina's favorites: stew with loads of vegetables poking out from the broth. Her mom hadn't

cooked it in a long time, not since her condition had worsened, because it took quite a lot of time and effort to prepare.

"It's incredible how much better I feel," relayed Aida. "It's all thanks to that medicine you got for me. Just don't push yourself too hard for me, okay?"



Aida ladled the stew into bowls, cut the bread, and placed it on the table.

Nina was happy to eat one of her favorite meals, but she was even happier to see Aida so full of life and enjoying things.

"It's okay," said Nina. "I'm pretty lucky since this cleaning job even lets me go to the academy."

She was indeed lucky. Before, she had been barely scraping by just buying the medicine to lessen Aida's pain. Nina had to put in the work if it meant letting Aida continue as easily as this.

After finally meeting the villainess and the love interest, the real work was going to begin. She would play the perfect heroine for the perfect downfall and the perfect gloat.

It was all for Aida, after all.

Chapter 2: The Heroine Buff Definitely Works

"GOOD evening."

"Ed! Hello!"

With just that short greeting, Nina picked up the white cat as he entered through the window and buried her face in his soft belly. It was odd, but his fuzzy fur smelled a bit like soap. Nina also liked the fresh, sun-dried scent of normal cats, but she couldn't get enough of this.

"Nina. That tickles. Please stop," requested Ed.

"Ah, you said my name! That's the first time other than when we made the contract."

"Is it?"

"It is."

Nina felt like they were growing a little closer. That made her happy, and she shoved her face into his belly again. Getting fur in her eyes was a tiny bit of a calamity, but it was so irresistible that she couldn't stop.

"I said, could you please stop that?"

"Oh, come on. It doesn't hurt anything, does it?"

"Maybe not, but it's just…about my personal state, I suppose. About…being prepared."

Oh. So, did the one being squeezed need to get ready too? That was something Nina did not know.

"So, I just have to say something first?" she asked.

"That's not really what I'm trying to convey."

"All right, now I'm going to grab your front paws and squish your claws in and out, theeen feel all the bones in your tail."

“N-Not the tail!” Ed scrambled out of Nina’s arms.

“What? It won’t hurt. Trust me, just let me lead. I have petted so many cats. I’m a pro.” Nina held her hands up and wiggled her fingers, but Ed’s reaction wasn’t positive.

“That’s not the problem. Just…please don’t touch the base of my tail.”

“All right. Then, I’m going to play with your front paws and make you do quiet applause.”

Apparently, that was acceptable since Ed didn’t resist as she pulled him into her arms.

“I met Lady Clarissa, the raffle winner,” she relayed, patting Ed’s front paws together in silent applause as she did. “Does she know the heroine’s been hired?” She just could not get enough of the ploop sound his toe beans made when they came together or the springiness she could feel in her hands.

“No, she doesn’t know,” answered Ed. “The only interactions with her were when she met the god once and when I met her at the start of the contract. She doesn’t know there are others who have been reincarnated like her. She believes everyone involved was born and raised in this world.”

“It’s probably better to make sure she doesn’t find out I’ve been hired then, right?”

“The contract says nothing about that, so it’s not strictly forbidden. However, I imagine she won’t be happy if she knew.”

True. It would probably be easier for Clarissa to get a satisfactory victory if she believed Nina was a real heroine. If she knew Nina was also reincarnated like her, she might hold back, which wouldn’t go well.

Nina wanted this triumph to be genuine—a good, proper gloat.

“But, Ed, I don’t really understand what sort of heroine picture Lady Clarissa has in her head.”

“What do you mean?”

“Is the protagonist innocent? Ditzy but sweet? Passionate? Starry-eyed? Tsundere? Yandere? There’s only a few I can pull off well, and it’d be easier to do if I at least knew what sort of way to lean with it.”

The villainess could end up confused if the heroine acted differently every time. Nina wanted to be careful with her consistency.

"She didn't lay out many details regarding behavior. All the winner said was that the heroine captivates those around her with her charms," recounted Ed.

"That's hard. That actually makes it harder. I'm not charming. That's the hardest part!" Nina lamented.

"If you do what you can, that will become charming," explained Ed, and a lightbulb turned on in Nina's mind.

"Are you talking about, like, a heroine buff? Does that exist?"

"Likely."

"I hope so."

The heroine enhancement in these sorts of games and manga was scary. It could reform the most wayward of attractive men or even open the heart of a rampaging monster to bring peace to the world.

That wasn't the sort of outcome Nina wanted, but she was relieved to know it wouldn't be her hard work that needed to put the charm on everyone.

It basically sounded as if no matter what she did, it would be fine.

This god's power was also scary, seeing as it was just going to go and make her charming and captivating.



"WELL, if I'm gonna have to do something, might as well make it something useful."

And that was how Nina got started cleaning the next day.

Seeing as the academy was full of nobles, she couldn't keep up with their conversation, which meant cleaning was about the only thing she could do. The academy grounds were already manicured, but there was nothing wrong with giving them a little extra beauty oomph.

She didn’t want to be a weirdo wandering around cleaning, so she at least got permission from her teacher. He was incredibly surprised when she said she wanted to clean, but that was likely because no one had ever asked such a thing before, seeing as all the students were from noble families.

When her teacher asked her why she wanted to do something like that, she just stated it was part of a contract, which he immediately accepted. He seemed to misinterpret that and assume she had a contract with the academy for cleaning, which she just left it at that since it wasn’t too far from the truth anyway.

Perhaps it was the heroine buff that kept him from poking his nose in any further.

“Alrighty. Guess I’ll start by polishing the banister on these stairs.”

Nina stood in front of the grand staircase in the center of the academy building, pumped herself up, and rolled up her sleeves.

A general rule of cleaning was that you worked top down, but the ceiling was as high as an average house’s roof. She decided cleaning that wasn’t happening since there was no way she’d be able to reach it.

She set her bucket of water down, took out the rag, gave it a good wring, and dove into cleaning. After wiping away some grime, she switched to a dry cloth.

It was simple work but required a surprising amount of force. Even with that, there was something enjoyable about watching the banister get more and more shiny. She didn’t hate it, even if it was just the same thing over and over, rubbing and rubbing.

“Excuse me, Nina?”

“Yes?”

Nina got so engrossed in her work that she lost track of time until a voice called her from behind. She turned around and saw a male student she didn’t recognize. She assumed he was a classmate since he knew her name, which made her feel bad because she didn’t know his name.

“That looks difficult. Would you like my help?” he asked.

“Nope. I’m okay. It’s actually kind of fun,” she replied.

"Oh, right…" he said weakly, then walked away with his head hanging.

What was that all about? Maybe that noble's son is interested in cleaning?

She didn't worry about it too much and just went back to cleaning, but people kept calling out to her. They were all, "Oh, you'll dirty your uniform," or, "Someone like you shouldn't be cleaning." Basically, just constantly nagging her.

And they were all boys for some reason.

"Wait… Is this because of the heroine buff?" she asked herself.

Typically, a heroine would enchant the boys by watering flowers, singing in her beautiful voice, making sweets, or being kind to small animals—you know, the sort of thing that would make a good picture book. She felt sorry because a picture of her on her knees with a rag in hand as she polished the banister would make one questionable illustration.

"…And I'm gonna start being wary of boys if they still think that's good."

Ed said that whatever she could do would become charming, but she was still surprised at how many more boys were approaching her today compared to yesterday's seemingly normal number of them.

So, essentially, she was becoming more charming just by polishing the banister.

Nina wasn't entirely convinced there was a strong connection between cause and effect there, but at least this seemed to prove that the heroine enhancement did exist.

And knowing that made Nina want to test how far it went. The noble girls had pulled back in disgust when she mentioned burying her face in a cat's belly and sniffing it, but maybe with the enhancement, even that would send hearts racing.

After that, she couldn't help noticing Clarissa peering at her from the shadows. She was also a little concerned about Clarissa's huge grin but more curious about how she was "hiding" in plain sight.

She was most likely watching Nina as she successfully acted her part.

"What do heroines even do once they've captivated everyone with their charms…?" wondered Nina.

Assuming she was going to develop a romantic relationship with only one boy, in this case, Prince Dino, what was the correct way of dealing with all the other boys? It seemed a heroine wouldn't just give them the cold shoulder, but Nina also questioned one who was super friendly with everyone.

Regardless, it didn't matter what Nina thought. All she had to do was play the perfect part to give Clarissa the perfect gloat.

Nina set down her rag and beat the dust from her skirt before moving toward Clarissa lurking behind a pillar.

"Hello, Lady Clarissa."

"D-Do you have business with me?" Clarissa looked so panicked that Nina almost felt bad. She must not have thought Nina would come over to talk to her. She was still pleasant to look at, beautiful even when panicking.

While saying it now wouldn't accomplish anything, Nina really did think it would've been better if Clarissa had just made herself the heroine so she could go through a standard otome game setup. All the same, this setup meant Nina had the opportunity to relieve Aida's pains. That was something to be grateful for, at least.

"Um, I wanted to ask you a question about etiquette, just for, you know, general situations," continued Nina. "If a girl is liked by many boys, what should she do?"

"What?"

"Should she give any guy who isn't her love interest the cold shoulder? Or should she be nice to everyone equally?"

Clarissa looked confused at the sudden question. Her mouth worked up and down as she struggled to get any words out.

"This is just in general, you know, not any specific person," continued Nina. "I don't know how to deal with anything, being a commoner and all." She cast her eyes down and acted bewildered.

Clarissa eventually regained her composure, cleared her throat, and crossed her arms. "I-I see. As a general rule, you don't have to

act friendly toward anyone but Di—um, the person you have feelings for. But you also don't want to be unfriendly to them. Just keep them hangi— I mean, keep interacting with them like you always do."

Maybe it was because she was put on the spot, but Clarissa accidentally almost said Dino's name and let slip that she would prefer Nina to lead the other boys on so that they stayed.

It was a bit careless of her, but it would be rude of Nina to point it out. She needed to act like a heroine, and embarrassing the raffle winner was not part of that.

"That makes sense," Nina pondered. "Thank you so much!" She smiled, acted like she hadn't noticed the slip-ups, and returned to cleaning.

More boys kept coming up to her while she did, but she had confirmation from Clarissa on what to do, making her feel much more at ease dealing with them.

Her slogan would be: Other than Dino, keep 'em hanging.

She personally didn't know how she felt about that treatment, but this was for the contract. If the villainess wanted this sort of adoration-showered protagonist, then Nina had no right to say otherwise.

"It's important to ask questions when you don't understand. And it is important to keep it general," Nina thought out loud.

She was very satisfied with herself once she polished the banister. She took her bucket and walked through the academy grounds to put it away.

While walking, she caught sight of Dino's vegetable patch. He was a prince, but was he really allowed to take over part of the grounds in the academy to grow crops? Or was the vegetable patch the academy's in the first place, and Dino was just working on it?

"Either way, you don't see a prince farming too often," she muttered aloud.

As she came closer, she could see weeds poking up here and there. It would be such a shame to let them overrun the pristine furrows.

At first, Nina lightly started to weed, then found herself engrossed. All she'd done that day was clean and weed. That was

less a hired heroine and more a hired cleaner. But boys were trying to chat her up—like they would a heroine—and Nina also managed to confirm with Clarissa how she should handle them, so maybe it was fine.

"Nina, what are you doing?" came a voice. At some point, the boy with ultramarine blue hair stood behind her, looking at her in confusion.

"Hello, Prince Dino," she greeted. "I'm weeding."

"You seem to like weeding." He crouched down beside her.

Nina looked at his hand, and her eyes opened wide. A simple golden ring with a small blue stone was on his right finger. It was exactly the same as the ring on Nina's finger. "…Is that a contract ring?" she asked.

"Huh? You have one too." They looked at each other's rings and chuckled awkwardly. "That means you're a contractee, too, doesn't it?"

"Just like you, Prince Dino."

"Why don't we sit together for a bit?" Dino suggested, and the two moved to a bench beside the vegetable patch. "So, I bet you were reincarnated and entered a contract. Probably from Japan?" he asked.

"Yes. Are you also from Japan?" The thought of sitting together on a bench with a prince made Nina's heart race, but knowing he was also from Japan gave her an odd feeling, a sort of longing and familiarity, like meeting a family member after a long time.

"Yep. A cat sent by a god came and threatened me. I had no choice but to take the contract," he recounted.

"Th-Threatened?" Nina didn't know if this particular feline messenger of the gods was Ed, but being threatened was no laughing matter.

"Yeah. He said if I didn't accept the role of the main love interest, he'd make me king."

"…That's a *threat*?" Normally, that would be more of a boon than a threat.

Dino, however, grimaced in complete disgust. "It's the worst threat ever. All I want to do is have a peaceful life out in the country.

I don't want anything to do with this downfall and gloat or whatever. I just want to keep farming and make rice."

"Rice?"

"Yeah. I really, *really* want to eat some Japanese rice." His eyes sparkled like a child's.

Nina, as a fellow Japan native, could understand that desire. Bread was nice and all, but nothing beat a bowl of fresh, warm rice. "Oh, so you don't want to make *indica* or even *javonica* rice. You want *japonica* rice, right?" elaborated Nina with a nod.

Dino lunged forward and took her hand. "Yes! That's exactly it! Nina, you do know a lot about rice."

Having such beautiful ochre eyes looking directly at her made Nina's heart race. It was really something that he could throw her, the heroine, into such a tizzy. Maybe this was the result of some sort of main love interest buff?

"I think I was the daughter of a rice farmer back in Japan. Probably," she pondered.

"Really? I wish we'd known each other in Japan!"

"I was just a rice farmer from the boonies, though…"

"That's incredible. You're like my ideal girl."

None of that mattered; Nina just wanted him to let go of her hand. Having a gorgeous boy that close to her was like sitting next to a bomb. She might end up burned if she got too close.

"Wouldn't growing *japonica* rice be difficult with the climate in this country?" Nina redirected.

This country had four seasons like Japan, but the base rainfall, humidity, and temperature levels were all completely different. It almost felt like all long periods of rain, extreme heat, and extreme cold were eliminated in order to make living here pleasant, which meant it would be near impossible to farm rice in the same way as in Japan.

"Nina, I want to have a long discussion with you about this," suggested Dino.

His eyes, staring earnestly into Nina's, made her want to nod in agreement with everything, but she wasn't at the academy to help start a rice farm—she couldn't lose sight of her real goal.

"I don't mind, but right now, I'd like to ask about the contract," Nina admitted.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." Dino finally let go of Nina's hand and cleared his throat. "I'm Clarissa's fiancé. My role is to fall for the heroine, then expose her deeds in the end."

"My role is to captivate everyone around me with my charms, get bullied by Clarissa, then in the end have some downfall for her to gloat over."

After they explained their roles, they exchanged glances and broke into grins. Nina never imagined she'd find someone she could talk to about this ridiculous situation.

"But I feel better now," she expressed. "If you're also working to fulfill the contract, that means the hardest part is already done."

"What's the hardest part?"

"Captivating the love interest and everyone else with my charms. It's absolutely ridiculous asking me to do that. I did confirm there was a bit of a heroine buff active, but I was honestly still a bit uneasy about whether or not I could do it."

"Really?"

Dino was gorgeous even when he looked confused. He was probably attractive even before any amplifications he got. It was utterly unreasonable to expect her to captivate such a handsome prince.

"Just look at Clarissa," she continued. "Plum-colored hair, jade-green eyes. She's beautiful by any standards: the perfect heroine. Uh, actually, villainess. It's not like my appearance changed just because I have a buff. I was worried things wouldn't go well." That said, she also didn't want the boost to change her appearance suddenly.

"I'll agree that Clarissa is incredibly beautiful, but this sort of thing comes down to personal preference, doesn't it?" he questioned. "You're cute too, Nina."

Nina was practically blinded by his brilliance when he smiled, a halo of light glowing from behind him.

"Well, I've just confirmed your main love interest buff works. And don't worry, it's pretty powerful," acknowledged Nina.

"That's good to hear," Dino laughed.

She was feeling a bit relieved. Life at the academy looked like it would be easier than expected since she confirmed her advantage and that she could talk with the love interest.

Indeed, at that point, Nina didn't understand the genuinely terrifying power of the heroine buff.



NINA'S current job was primarily cleaning, but she was technically a student, so she did, of course, have to attend classes.

But that was where the difference in birth and education became most apparent.

For a commoner, she was rather good at reading, writing, and arithmetic, but she could only do what she needed for her day-to-day life. It differed from what nobility learned at the academy since they studied the subjects they would need later as lords and ladies.

Nina was confident she could beat everyone else in the class when calculating discounts on bread and vegetables, but there were many times when class didn't go very well for her.

"I'm sorry, I don't know the answer."

The teacher called on her in class, but she didn't understand the subject matter. She had no other option but to apologize.

And that was fine. Well, it wasn't *good* that she didn't understand her classwork, of course, but she wasn't nobility; she couldn't really be expected to understand it perfectly.

The problem was this:

"Professor!"

Nina had had the weak hope that she could get through this situation safely, but it happened. A boy shot to his feet, his cry shattering her hope.

"Miss Nina may be a commoner, but she thoroughly understands the problem's foundation. I feel you're pushing her too fast by requiring her to apply these concepts immediately."

"Exactly!" came—to Nina—frustrating cries of agreement from all across the room.

Putting aside what he said about her being a commoner, she simply didn't understand the class material. The only person to blame was her. She could understand if they were going to demand the professor teach things in a more easily understood way, but that wasn't quite the argument the boys were trying to make.

"Miss Nina comes to school early and cleans. You are insulting her pure spirit," cried one.

"I saw her weeding the gardens. You should be proud of what she does! Butterflies visit the gardens; flowers bloom more beautifully after she weeds."

"Have you seen the banister that Miss Nina polished? Its sparkling luster is like the shine of her hair: utterly beautiful!"

Here it goes again.

In the end, the boys didn't care at all about how well Nina understood the class material. They just wanted to sing her praises. Or, more accurately, they wanted Nina to acknowledge them and perhaps grow closer to her.

Nina would usually be disgusted by such an arrogant assumption of what they wanted, but she wasn't just a commoner right now. She was a walking heroine carrying the power of a god.

They were utterly drunk on infatuation, swimming in feelings of joy just because she was there, and they changed to believe that anything and everything was okay.

Generally, the heroine would appear in a series of scenes that anyone could accept as charming, like caring for flowers or being kind to animals. But Nina was just cleaning and weeding.

It was a bit strange to be laden with charm from the very beginning, but now that things were moving to the later stages, it was moving toward the height of absurdity.

"Oh, how fragrant is the water that Nina wrings from her rag, sparkling with grime!"

"I want to be reborn as a banister so Nina can polish me!"

At this point, the noble boys were crying out things that could be considered bullying or perhaps perverted fetishes, their cheeks blushing. It was sheer madness.

The scary thing was that it wasn't just the boys in the end. The girls and even the teacher got swept up in this tidal wave of love. Nina was like a lone sapling atop a mound of sand, helpless as the waves crashed into her.

She didn't think the reaction was this overt when she first came to the academy. Maybe the heroine boost had developed?

The teacher, who had been sitting there motionless as he listened to his students, slowly placed his textbook on his desk and dabbed his handkerchief at the corners of his tear-filled eyes. "You are absolutely right. Miss Scaglione is hard-working and adorable. I, too, have dreamed of her delicate little feet stomping on me on several occasions!"

"Professor!" The entire classroom shouted at the teacher's bordering-on-illegal statement.

Obviously, it wasn't to reprimand him. It was a cry of agreement and praise.

The students listened, tears streaming down their faces as the teacher exclaimed, "I understand, I do. Her mud-caked shoes are the best!" Nina wanted him fired on the spot.

And if they were going to get themselves all worked up on their own, it was best to ignore them. The troublesome part was when they inevitably tried to drag her into things.

"Miss Scaglione, what do you say?" asked the teacher.

"What do I say about what?" This whole conversation began because Nina didn't understand the teacher's question, but she was certain that wasn't what he was asking about now.

"Would you…step on me? Just once?"

"No."

Nina's immediate response drew a cry of admiration from the girls. "That's right!" one expressed. "You have to be worthy to have the pleasure of feeling Nina's feet."

What sort of person was worthy of a kick? No, Nina definitely didn't want this professor teaching her anything. She wanted him fired—now.

"But Miss Scaglione," claimed the teacher, "I prepared a black silk jacket to wear when you stomp on me so the shape of your foot

is forever preserved! And I swear I won't take even the slightest peek at you while you're doing it!"

And that might very well be the most disgusting vow to God anyone had ever made in all history. It wouldn't be surprising at all if this god rained divine fury down on the teacher.

But the girls seemed to be coming around to the idea since he was going to put that much effort into it after all, while the boys cried tears of overwhelmed admiration that the teacher could have such a strong will that he wouldn't look up Nina's skirt while she was stepping on him.

This happened every time. This wasn't a heroine buff; it was a pervert buff. Either that or everyone became a pervert when their emotions were so strong they became twisted. If so, Nina never wanted a romantic relationship, ever.

She let out a sigh so heavy her very soul threatened to slip out with it, and a quiet laugh came from behind.



Dino, the single person not participating in this excitement over Nina stepping on someone, stood up since no one else would rein things in. “Well, it’s the end of class. Should we go to lunch? We wouldn’t want to keep Nina from eating…would we?”

That was enough to make the students break up their huddled crying fests and start moving. They waved at Nina, their eyes sparkling as they told her they’d be waiting in the cafeteria. The best she could manage in response was a strained smile.

“You are as popular as always,” noted Dino.

“If you’re the only one who can stop them, could you please step in sooner, Your Highness?”

Dino, being a prince in addition to the main love interest, was immune to Nina’s pervert—er—heroine buff. That meant he could end those types of scenes. That forced cancel ability of his was one of the reasons she’d been spending so much time with him lately.

“But you could solve everything just by giving one a little stomp on the foot,” Dino teased.

“I absolutely refuse to do that.” She didn’t like a leading lady who stomped on boys with a smile on her face because they asked, and she had no obligation to comply unless Clarissa wanted her to.

“I’m beat. I need to refill my energy stores,” Nina announced as she stood, stretched, and left the classroom.

Her destination was the cafeteria. She slammed the doors open with a battle cry and took a deep breath.

While it was called a cafeteria, the food was of high enough quality to please children of nobility. Essentially, it was a smörgåsbord of drool-inducing dishes for a commoner like Nina, who had become enchanted by the cafeteria from the day she learned that students of the academy ate free.

“I know I say this every time…but you really can eat,” murmured Dino as he sat across from Nina and sipped his cup of tea.

They weren’t eating together because they were particularly close friends or anything. It was more so that sitting with the prince made it more difficult for other boys to try to sit with Nina. He was kind of like a totem for warding off evil.

Dino also said he was happy to avoid getting dragged into things with other girls. They entered a sort of "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" kind of relationship, as they were both people with buffs because of the contract.

"'Cause it's so good!" exclaimed Nina. "The tomato harvests haven't been good lately, and prices are skyrocketing, but there're still loads used here. It's ridiculously luxurious!"

She devoured the soup with all its tomatoes while bursting with excitement. Next, she reached for the bread with her cheeks stuffed with roast duck.

When she was finished with a plate and set it to the side, it disappeared. Servers worked in the cafeteria, of course, but it was a regular student who cleaned away Nina's plate. Another student was practically joined with that one at the hip, and the two returned to the kitchen. Then, yet another ordinary student brought her a new plate of food, also with a second student by their side.

"It's not any less incredible to see it, even though I see it every day," remarked Dino.

"Things would be a lot easier if you just ordered everyone to stay away," Nina returned.

"I don't want to do that. It would be boring. I mean, everyone would hate me." He flashed a gorgeous smile, and Nina could hear the female students swooning.

Despite having the same boost, he was also a prince, making him harder to approach despite the effects. That made Nina jealous. Really jealous.

In the beginning, the servers took care of Nina's dishes, but they couldn't keep up with how fast she ate. The students were unable to bear the horror of such a situation and started serving her to take advantage of the opportunity. This way, they got to interact more closely with her, watch her eat from nearby, and even get thanked by her sometimes. And so began the boom in the food transportation industry.

At the same time, students began showing up to clear away her dishes, and that's where the big problem arose—students tried to smuggle the plates Nina had eaten from to keep for themselves.

"Ugh, that's gross."

"I can't believe anyone would do that."

"Still, I do sort of understand."

"I want one too."

"Can I just have a bread plate?"

That was the rapidly changing result of the situation, which was why each student was accompanied by a guard student for both the plate and Nina's safety.

"I always imagined nobility to be super refined, but they're really all just perverts," remarked Nina.

"Uh, I think this situation is atypical. Just so you know, they're not actually all perverts," countered Dino.

"And I'm not even in the same class as Lady Clarissa, the most important person. I haven't had many chances to interact with her. It makes things difficult." Nina sighed as she wolfed down some meat before noticing the girl with plum-colored hair at the entrance to the cafeteria.

When she saw her, Nina held up a piece of bread and called, "Lady Clarissa!"

Even from that distance, Nina could see how tense Clarissa looked when she heard her call. Here was this girl waving a chunk of bread at her, sitting with her fiancé, while hordes of students scurried around with plates of food for her.

Honestly, any sane person wouldn't want to go near that. But she was the heroine.

Clarissa walked boldly up to their table with her head held high. Her swaying plum hair and jade eyes gave her an innate air of nobility. Seeing such a feast for the eyes only made Nina want to feast on food even more, her hands and mouth never stopping.

"Prince Dino, why in the world are you sharing a table with *this* person?" proclaimed Clarissa.

"There're many people after Nina's plates. I'm on guard duty," answered Dino.

"Her plates…?" Clarissa watched as a male student lovingly lifted the plate Nina just finished eating from while a female student glared daggers at him.

Even without understanding the situation, Clarissa seemed to realize this wasn't something she should be poking her nose into. She cleared her throat and turned her eyes toward Nina. "You, Nina, was it? Prince Dino is a royal of this kingdom and *my* fiancé. You do understand that, don't you?"

Ah-hah, this was the classic "Keep your paws off my man" bit.

Things had only begun, and Clarissa was still utterly confident that the prince belonged to her, so this was a warning for Nina—a warning against the indiscretions of a commoner.

The best thing here would be to respond like a heroine, with something that would make Dino want to defend her.

Something that would make him want to defend her…

…At the moment, he didn't protect her even in extreme situations, so what sort of thing would have to happen to make him want to protect her?

"I'm sure Prince Dino would happily steal my bread if it meant having the plate you just finished eating off of, Lady Clarissa," she suggested.

"…What?"

Oh no. She mixed up her two battles. She'd caught sight of the fresh bread being brought over. It looked so delicious that her thoughts strayed. She just made Dino sound like a plate thief.

It was not a good example for others to see the main love interest act like that.

"I bet you'd also scream with pleasure if Prince Dino hand-fed you some sizzling hot meat," she claimed next.

"What?!"

Oops. This time, a bowl of soup with huge chunks of meat caught Nina's eye.

It wasn't like it was Nina's business if a betrothed couple decided to share a bowl of meaty soup.

She wanted to salvage the situation, but…what were they talking about again?

She thought hard, her cheeks stuffed full of herb-roasted fish, as Clarissa's expression grew darker and darker.

"Are you mocking me?" demanded Clarissa.

Nina didn't care if she was angry, but she couldn't let her leave yet. This was such a rare chance for her to interact with the villainess that she needed to earn some more heroine points.

"I'm not trying to get between you two," Nina disclosed.

"I wonder. Prince Dino, do you prefer Nina's company over mine?" Clarissa inquired.

Ah, yes. Now, they were headed into tedious jealousy territory.

Whether Clarissa was hot or cold toward Dino, Nina could always go the "I can tell you like him" route, but it was still too early in the game for that. If Nina didn't get a chance to show off as the heroine more, and Clarissa didn't have the opportunity to show off as the overbearing fiancée more, Dino would look like a cheater when he switched to Nina.

Nina waved Dino to stand, then made him face Clarissa.

"Uh, what *are* you doing?" stammered Clarissa. Even she, the adversary, lost some of her bluster when confronted up close with the prince's beauty.

Nina grabbed a piece of bread and pressed it into Dino's hand. "Okay, Prince Dino, please feed Lady Clarissa."

"Wh-What the heck?!" Dino exclaimed.

"…What is this about?" squeaked Clarissa.

Since Nina needed to act like a heroine right then, she decided she would demonstrate by giving her blessing for their relationship. They needed Dino, as the main love interest, to behave favorably. To accomplish that, Nina wanted them to do the tried-and-true flirting technique: boy feeds girl.

Clarissa wanted to show that her love with the prince was a given. Once that was done, Clarissa could rest on her laurels with pride. It was the perfect solution.

"I want to watch you two lovebirds being all lovey-dovey until I can't take any more!" Nina exclaimed. The request did sound somewhat perverted because she had to gloss over her real reasoning for this, but, well, that wasn't something she could worry about.

Clarissa's jaw dropped, and she froze in place. Dino sighed, holding the piece of bread, and stated, "I think seeing the things you

do every day is starting to give you a dirty mind. But…I guess it's not entirely the wrong direction."

He shrugged, tore off a tiny piece of the bread, and popped it in Clarissa's mouth.

"Wow?!" The students surrounding them let out squeals of joy on Clarissa's behalf.

She chewed several times, swallowed down her bread, then locked tear-filled eyes on Nina, her face bright red. "H-How dare you subject me to such pleasurable and embarrassing treatment. You better watch your back!"

With that last word, half threat, half thank you, Clarissa stormed from the cafeteria.

Nina was filled with a sense of accomplishment at having achieved…something…and sat back down. "Okay, jobs done, and I'm hungry again. Let's eat!"

Cheers filled the cafeteria again, and students formed lines with plates in hand.

"…I don't think a heroine's supposed to act like that. But I guess the villainess is strange too, so maybe it's just about right," sighed Dino.

Nina glanced at him sideways, then dove back into her lunch.

Chapter 3: The Heroine Buff Goes out of Control

"GOOD evening."

"Ed! Long time no see," greeted Nina when she saw the white cat in the window, his fur as beautiful as always.

Without thinking, she went to pick him up and cuddle but stopped herself short. She really wanted to let her instincts take over and run her hands all over him, but there was something she couldn't forget.

"That's right, I need to give you an advanced warning. Ed, I want to rub my face on your belly, then see how far I can stretch your scruff," she explained.

The white cat looked at Nina with his beautiful blue and gold eyes and let out a very un-cat-like sigh. "…Go on. As you wish."

"Thank you!"

And, just as she'd said she would, she buried her face in his belly fur. She laid him on his back on the table cushion and arranged their positions. This way, her arms wouldn't get tired while holding him, and it should be less stress on Ed since he'd be in a stable position as she felt his fuzz.

After a bout of belly-fur enjoyment, she sat him up on the cushion and played with the skin on the back of his neck, but it somehow didn't feel like enough.

"Hey, Ed, do you mind if I play with you a little more? Your ears, maybe? I want to play with your ears."

"That's fine; pet me however you like," he sighed, sounding exasperated.

Nina rubbed his head and, getting swept up in things, brushed her lips against his ear.

"Uwaaah!"

The moment she did, Ed yelped and leaped into the air. He flopped down far from the cushion and tumbled off the table. Being a cat, he did manage to twist himself so he landed properly on the floor, but he was on edge, perhaps shaken up. His tail had turned into a giant white poof several times its normal size.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" he demanded.

"What? I just…touched your ear with my lips."

It was basically like a light kiss. She was certain she hadn't accidentally caught him with her teeth or drool on him or anything. Nor did she think she hurt him; perhaps he didn't like how it felt?

"I'm sorry. Obviously, you don't like being touched by me," she apologized. "I got so carried away with petting you that I did something bad. I won't do it anymore."

Honestly, though, she wanted to pet him more. She wanted to feel the warmth and springiness of the cartilage in his ears with her lips.

But cats had their own opinions on things. It's a crime to push yourself onto someone or some-animal who doesn't like it. She just had to restrain herself.

"N-No, it's not that I don't like it or that I don't want you to," stammered Ed. "And it is certainly not because I'm embarrassed. It's just, simply, that it…feels… Oh, what am I even saying?!"

He was clearly still shaken up, his tail lashing back and forth as he babbled something Nina didn't understand.

"I know. That's why I'm apologizing. I won't do it again. Would you let me rub your belly instead?" she asked.

"Well, no, it's just, I'm trying to say you did nothing wrong…"

"So, you don't mind if I rub your belly? That's great!"

"Wait, that's not what I… Oh, never mind." His shoulders slumped in a very human-like way, and then he jumped up on the table and sat on the cushion. He did it with a string of sighs, which were adorable in their own way, leaving Nina frozen as she watched him. "So then," he continued, "how are things going as the heroine?"

"Not bad. I'm getting closer with the main love interest, the prince."

"Dino?"

"He's a promisee too, which you probably knew. He mentioned a cat sent by a god. Was that you?"

"Yes."

Which meant Ed threatened Dino. The nature of the threat meant Ed was well aware of Dino's thoughts. It wasn't surprising at all that a messenger of a god would have that deep an understanding of things.

The god might even have sent a cat messenger because they knew how obsessed Nina was with cats.

"We talk a lot, actually," continued Nina. "Since we're both contractees and have the same goals, it means we have a lot in common to talk about."

Ever since they discovered they were both under a contract, Dino would wait for Nina simply so they could discuss rice. They were constantly together during breaks and at lunch, and there were even rumors running about that she was growing close with the prince, to which Nina wanted to declare that it wasn't she he loved but rice.

As the heroine, growing close with the main love interest was the right move, so it wasn't off the mark to say this wasn't a problem. She only wondered how obsessed Dino was with eating *japonica* rice. Rather than running out of topics relating to rice after talking about it for days, their conversations had actually become more passionate.

With that passion and the financial backing of a prince, he was sure to reach his dream someday. Nina was grateful to share in that bounty when he would someday achieve his most fervent wish.

At this point, she was starting to want seaweed, dried plum, and an onigiri, but those were things a prince could get somehow with his status.

"Though…I don't know what'll happen to me after the downfall," she pondered.

It hurt to have powerful hopes only for them to go unmet. Aida was the most important thing to Nina, so she decided to avoid thinking about anything else.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. I'm just glad Prince Dino is nice and attractive. He's not so bad to look at."

"I…see."

"I'd like to rub my face on your belly one more time, then pat your paws together. Is that all right?"

"…Go on."

Having received permission, she joyfully plunged her face into his floof. His fur was seriously the best ever. No matter how many times she stroked him, it brought her endless joy.

She was grateful to cats purely for existing.

"This…isn't exactly funny," muttered Ed.

"Hm? What'd you say?" She lifted her face from his fur, but he shook his head.

The gesture was as human as always, but he was so divinely adorable that everything he did made Nina's heart flutter.

There was that saying, "I'd take even a cat's paw." She knew it meant that someone was so busy that they would accept help from even a cat, but she was certain there was a little bit of a different meaning in there too, that the person was so busy they couldn't do it without the soul-soothing help of a cat.

"It's nothing. Pay me no mind," dismissed Ed. "Speaking of Dino, what do you talk about with him?" He settled back on his cushion and glanced at his disheveled fur but must have decided to leave it because he hadn't started grooming himself.

"Prince Dino wants to eat rice," stated Nina.

"Rice…? As in, white rice?"

"But it has to be *japonica* rice. It's not something you can find around here, so he's thinking about cultivating it himself."

If the rice had already been sold throughout the country, he would have found it by now, thanks to his royal advantage. But apparently, he hadn't been able to find a matching grain even after

investigating nearby countries, so he gave up on trying to import and instead decided to focus on cultivating it.

"*Japonica*? Why has that become a topic of conversation with you?" Ed probed.

"You don't know about *japonica* rice, do you?" Even in Japan, few people knew much about the type of rice commonly eaten there. Even if Ed was the messenger of a god, there was no way he'd know anything about rice varieties. "I think I was the daughter of a rice farmer back in Japan. Prince Dino talks to me for advice on growing rice."

"Advice…on growing rice?" Ed's expression practically screamed, "What the heck?" Apparently, even cats could look exasperated.

And, of course, even that expression was cute.

"There's no way he can grow it without being careful, considering the climate here. The first thing is making a rice paddy," she explained. They hadn't yet found the most essential component—the rice plants—but Nina planned to tell Dino everything she knew since he was so dedicated to it. "Prince Dino is trying to turn a part of the academy's fields into a rice paddy. It's crazy. Oh, a paddy is a type of farm field used for growing rice, by the way."

"I know what a rice paddy is."

"You do?" She wondered why a cat would know about the farm fields necessary for growing different grains in different worlds. Maybe he knew a lot because he served a god, or perhaps a similar grain already existed in this world.

Regardless, a farming prince might not be your usual main love interest, but everyone these days wanted more variety in their heroes. She could see herself enjoying an illustration of her and Dino, standing before his completed passion project and smiling as they looked out over the drooping heads of golden rice stalks in their paddy.

It was in no way fitting with the feel of an otome game set in an academy in a country resembling medieval Europe, but Nina personally didn't think it would be bad.

"Oh, and Prince Dino…" Nina started, gesturing in an attempt to express Dino's excessive love for rice, but Ed didn't seem amused. "I'm boring you, aren't I?"

"No, that's not it. You said…Dino is attractive, didn't you?"

Nina nodded, and Ed's white tail lashed faster.

"Which means, essentially, that you…like him?"

"Well, if I'm going to have to look at a boy, I'd prefer a nice-looking one. So yeah, I guess I like him."

It wasn't like she *liked* him. To Nina, it didn't matter what the main love interest looked like; she had a job to do. But if she was going to have to see him a lot, she was grateful that he was so easy on the eyes. Anyone would feel the same.

She nodded, which made Ed leap to his feet. "Not Dino!"

"Not Dino what?" She couldn't imagine any reason why his voice would go so raspy. What was up with him?

His eyes darted about like he was uncomfortable. "You're the heroine, and he's the main love interest…"

"Are you trying to tell me not to fall for Prince Dino?"

His tail jerked, then slowly sank like a wilting flower.

"That's it, isn't it? Prince Dino is basically just my work partner. Don't worry."

"I-I'm not exactly… I mean, I don't want to see you hurt in the end."

"Aw, Ed, thank you!"

Having taken on this role, Nina was destined for a downfall, which didn't bother her, but it still made her happy to know this beautiful cat was concerned for her. Before she could think, she reached out to cuddle him, but then quickly pulled back.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't give you a warning. Um, I want to cuddle you and stroke you from your head to the end of your back for a long time."

"Go on. So, in terms of Dino, you're really not…?"

With Ed's permission granted, Nina picked him up and devoted herself to stroking him. His warm fur soothed her soul in this fleeting moment of enchantment where she was so relaxed that drool threatened to spill from her lips.

She was half drawn into a dream world, but her hands never stopped petting Ed.

"Um? Oh, it's fine," continued Nina. "He has a pretty face and is generally a good guy. He's exactly like a prince who stepped out of a picture book."

"And that…means you're fine?"

"Oh, I feel so much better. Hey, can I squish your toe beans? Front paws first, then your back."

Ed gave a non-cat-like sigh and set his front paws in Nina's hand. "No, this isn't funny at all…" he murmured, but Nina was far too entranced with his toe beans to hear.



"I think I have to quit…" Nina sighed heavily on a chair in the break room.

She worked several part-time jobs to help with her and Aida's finances, and this restaurant was one of them. Working as a waitress didn't pay that great, but her boss understood when she had to take a day off on short notice when Aida's health took a turn for the worse and even let her take home any ingredients left over that they couldn't use—and for that, she was grateful.

Her work hours were reduced now that she was going to the academy, but she still kept up with this job as much as possible. That was how attached she was to it, but her coworkers had been acting strange lately.

Put simply, they kept coming after her. It was particularly obvious with the men.

Before, she was the girl who worked hard for her ill mother. Now, she was suddenly being treated as a young woman.

Nina never expected the buff to be active outside the academy, nowhere near the villainess. She started to get the impression that the effect was getting more powerful based on the students' behavior at the academy, which proved it wasn't a figment of her imagination.

Her own feelings toward her coworkers grew more distant as she realized the people she saw as kind older brothers or cute younger brothers were trying to close the distance between them and her.

The older girls in her neighborhood sometimes complained about how much they hated it when they could see what the guy really wanted, and Nina was finally starting to understand what they meant. It was even worse and more powerful in her case since a god was forcing their desires to the forefront.

After the academy and now this, Nina started to think she could never trust anyone of a male persuasion.

She sighed again, and her fellow waitress chuckled. "Hang in there. You can't blame them; you have gotten way cuter lately."

That's the issue: she hadn't gotten cuter. She just got a heroine boost.

Since everyone in this setting was supposed to like her whether they wanted to or not, it had nothing to do with her appearance or personality. In the beginning, when the students at the academy saw her, they would say they wanted to help her clean, but now… some of them wished they were her rag. That was even more absurd than the person who wished they could be reincarnated as a banister. Less human, too.

Nina made the mistake of telling them that a rag was thrown away when she was done using it. That only ramped up the depravity, and people desired to be used and tossed aside by her. After that, she had no choice but to give up.

She was at a complete loss as to where this buff was headed and could only assume that everyone involved with this setup, including the god, was a pervert.

It made sense that the boost would be active at the academy since she needed it to set up her downfall, but she wished she could turn it off anywhere else. It started to cause problems in her daily life and even started to wear her down.

"…Maybe I should ask Ed for help," she mused out loud. The source of her problems derived from the power of a god, so the god

should be able to do something about it. She really wanted to beg them just to do *something*.

"Huh? Is he your boyfriend?" asked her coworker. Her face suddenly lit up, and her eyes sparkled.

Why did girls like talking about that sort of thing so much? Nina was so busy with work and had zero experience with that aspect. She wasn't all that interested either.

"No, he's a cat. A pure white cat," explained Nina.

"Oh, it's just more of your crazy cat talk." The waitress's shoulders slumped in disappointment that she guessed wrong, and then she poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher and drank it down. "Now that I think about it, you mention the whole 'Burying your face in a cat's belly' thing, right? That seemed to weird the guys out at first. But, now that you're so cute, they're talking 'bout how that is adorable too. Boys are simple creatures."

Of course, Nina had her thoughts about this sudden change in the boys' attitudes, but there was something else the waitress said that caught Nina's attention. "Is it…weird to bury your face in a cat's belly?"

"I'm not sure I'd call it weird, but…it's the sort of thing that only someone obsessed with cats would ever think of doing."

"I guess," muttered Nina in utter shock.

Nina was, obviously, a cat lover, and so was her mother, Aida. She'd taught Nina that doting on cats was a fundamental aspect of human life, and Nina never questioned that. It would explain why Ed was always so flustered and needed advance warning.

"I have to apologize to Ed," she stated.

"The cat? If a cat doesn't like something, won't they scratch you and run away? I think you're fine."

"Maybe…"

That was definitely true of regular cats, but Ed was sent by a god and had some odd human-like characteristics. There was a chance he was simply putting up with Nina's tyrannical behavior. Maybe it was only Nina who enjoyed it when she petted his fuzzy fur, while he found it torturous.

Nina couldn't help feeling sorry when she thought of it that way. She picked up her bag and stood. "I'm finished working today, so I'm gonna head home. See you!"

"Later! I cannot wait to see you again."

"Huh…?"

They were only saying bye, but the way the other girl said it seemed a bit weird. She didn't think much about it and left the break room with a confused look.

The heroine influence might be working on girls too. Its power level was much better than what was at work on the boys, but it still made her feel a bit awkward.

"I just wish it worked on cats…"

Nina sighed and hurried back home.



"GOOD evening."

"Hello, Ed."

She greeted the white cat like always when he came in the window, then sat perfectly still. She genuinely wanted to pick him up and cuddle, pet, and bury her face in his belly fur. However, after her conversation earlier at work, she was worried that she was causing Ed distress, so she decided to hold back.

Nina decided she needed to apologize for everything, but thinking about it pained her, and it was difficult to get the words out.

"Nina, is something wrong?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You don't seem very happy."

Yet again, the messenger from the gods was on point—he was sharp.

At any rate, she would start worrying him, and she didn't want to do that either. Nina needed to hurry up with this apology.

She steeled herself and gave a low bow. "I'm sorry for petting you however I wanted and for burying my face in your belly. I'll never… I'll try to never do it again."

It was a painful part of being a cat lover that kept her from being able to say with conviction that she would never do it again. She could see a faint glimmer of her desires, hoping that she might at least be allowed one stroke a day, and realized how pathetic she was.

Ed sat still, staring at her, then cocked his head to the side. "What's this about all of a sudden?"

"Someone told me at work it's weird to bury your face in cats' bellies. I feel terrible that I might've made you let me pet you even though you didn't like it, and you just couldn't tell me no."

"…Which is why you'll try not to anymore?" He cocked his head to the other side. That and his other movements were so cute that she wanted to pet him all over, but that was her secret.

But he didn't seem angry, so maybe she had a chance if she asked.

With that glimmer of hope in sight, Nina put her hands together as if in prayer and stared at Ed. "J-Just a little, please? I think I can get through this if I can pet you once a day. I'm so worn out with everyone trying to get involved with me because the buff's working outside the academy too. Just give me a little relaxation, please?"

Ed's ears perked up in response to Nina's begging. "People are trying to get involved with you?"

"Yeah, it's basically the same as what happens at the academy. They offer to help or say they wish they were the plate I was carrying. That sort of thing."

"They wish to be a plate?!"

"And then…I don't really mind if they only wave at me, but I seriously wish they'd stop putting their arms around my shoulder. I jump whenever someone comes at me suddenly, and I can't work if I can't move."

Ed's swaying tail stopped motionless.

"Is there any way you could make it so the effect only works in the academy?"

"I'll bring it up. I can at least ask that they are prevented from approaching you too much," answered Ed, his proactive response ending Nina's sighs.

"Really? Thank you, Ed!"

She nearly pulled him into a hug without thinking but stopped and pulled herself back. It was hard to change such an ingrained habit.

"…It's fine, honestly."

"What?" She looked at him, not truly understanding what he meant. He turned away and lashed his tail. "What's fine?"

"What I'm trying to say is I don't dislike it. It's fine."

"You mean…me cuddling you?" She gulped, feeling hopeful.

"Yes."

"A-And stroking you?"

"Go on."

"And my face in your belly…?"

Ed looked at Nina and sighed; she was doggedly asking because she couldn't let this one-in-a-million chance slip away. "Nina, if it's you, I don't mind anything. Do as you like," he admitted.

"Thank you!" she squealed with delight and immediately picked up the white cat. She nuzzled her cheek on the top of his head, sighing with joy as she enjoyed the heavenly feel of his coat. "The added perks to this job are incredible. Guess that's what I get for working with the messenger of a god."

She took advantage of his offer and rubbed her face a little on his belly, and he bent back a bit in response.

"…Do you feel better?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"Well, you said you were worn out from being approached so much."

Did that mean he agreed merely to help Nina feel better? She felt slightly disappointed in herself since she needed a cat to worry about her, but that feeling was weak compared to the warm, fluffy feeling of happiness growing in her heart.

"You're so nice, Ed," she told him. She booped his nose. It was nicely damp and cool. Every single part of a cat was adorable. She was so grateful they existed.

"Why did you touch my nose?" he questioned.

“That’s how cats greet each other, by touching noses. You didn’t know?”

If Nina stuck a finger out to the free-roaming cats she saw, they would bump their noses against it to investigate or as a greeting. Nina found the coldness of their noses and their curiosity about her so utterly adorable.

But, with what he said, maybe Ed didn’t greet people, or cats, by touching his nose to them? He could talk, after all. Maybe cats working for gods were significantly different from average cats in a bunch of different ways.

“Kinda like this…” she explained as she held his head and brought her own nose close to touch his.

He jerked the moment their noses brushed. “Aaaaack!” He yowled, and all his fur stood on end. He was usually fuzzy, but now he was so round and fluffy that his head was nearly at risk of disappearing into the fluff.



"Wh-What are you doing?!" he demanded.

"What do you mean? It's a greeting… Oh, right. Advance warning." She was so happy to be permitted to stroke him that she forgot about that part. It looked like she was still obligated to let him know first what she would do.

"That's not what I mean. I don't see why you had to use your own nose…"

"It's how cats show each other they're not enemies. It's a sign of affection, and I like you."

"Y-You like me?!" This time, he jumped and then slumped down. He looked like a big ball of fluff, so Nina wasn't entirely sure where his head was, but she imagined it was hanging low. "Nina…I think you're quite dangerous even without the heroine advantage."

"What do you mean?"

"A-Anyway. I'll request the adjustment to prevent others from approaching you too much. And, Nina, if you could…hold back a little."

"Hold back?" She could only assume he meant to hold back on petting him so much, but he also said not long ago that she could do what she wanted, so it shouldn't be a problem, should it?

"This form is incredibly frustrating…" muttered Ed, but Nina was so lost in thought that she didn't hear the voice coming from the fuzzy ball.



"WELL...at least now I know Lady Clarissa is hard-working," Nina sighed, polishing the banister like usual.

Clarissa would come over regularly to wherever Nina was, and Nina would plan her response appropriately as a heroine.

She was grateful that it was easy to tell what was landing well or not based on Clarissa's expressions, but she surely wished she'd do something since she was coming by quite often. Or, if she didn't need Nina for anything, just don't come.

Wasn't the villainess supposed to bully the heroine, and then people were supposed to find out about it? Lately, Clarissa had

started a one-woman performance of bullying, which Dino and Nina tried to match with, but was that good enough?

The ring's powers weren't stepping in; the raffle winner herself was doing it, so maybe it was okay.

Even so, try as Clarissa might, there was no way she could convince people it was Nina who made her fall randomly in front of a load of people when Nina was somewhere else weeding. Clarissa claimed Nina used some sort of telepathy to do it from a distance, but that was clearly impossible, leaving Dino looking on with confusion.

It was tiring for Nina to get dragged into this all the time, but also difficult on Dino since Clarissa asked his opinion every time something happened. Concerning the telepathy allegations, he gave the perfect response, "If she could do something like that, she'd use it to weed from far away." He wasn't buying it.

The incredible thing was that everyone around them seemed to realize something was going on and wouldn't step in with objections. The same students who buzzed around Nina in the classroom or the cafeteria would step to the sidelines and become observers when Clarissa walked in.

This let the three of them put on their comedic play.

It was probably the god's power at work again to allow events between the villainess and heroine to unfold without interruption. If that wasn't the case, then all the students liked watching the drama. That was a bit too painful of a possibility to accept.

Nina might have been worrying over whether she was fulfilling the contract or not, but she didn't stop polishing the banister in the process. Wiping away the grime helped brighten her spirits.

She was clearly worn out if she was looking for cleaning work to make her feel better.

"But Mom's doing good. It's thanks to this," she recited.

And Aida truly was doing well. Her illness still progressed, supposedly, but she was tending to the flower beds and housework with a smile. Seeing that made Nina smile too.

For Aida's sake, Nina wanted to play the perfect heroine for Clarissa to gloat over in the end. Her portrayal might be a bit

different from the image she had in her mind, but it was fine so long as she played the role that Clarissa wanted.

After getting herself pumped up again, she tackled the banister once more, and that's when she heard a familiar voice coming closer from behind.

It seemed Clarissa was coming by for another visit.

"Now that I think about it, the contract says the villainess ends up alone after people find out she was bullying the heroine. Which means *I* don't have to do any bullying. I would need to get everyone on my side after being bullied by her."

And if that were the case, she should do it sooner rather than later. Nina didn't know what Clarissa was going to do this time, but she hoped it was the sort of thing she could easily use to draw on others' sympathy.

"Oh, is that Nina, or whatever your name was?" taunted Clarissa. "You look like you belong there, crawling on the floor."

"Thank you, Lady Clarissa," replied Nina, first giving a basic response as she surveyed the area. A few students were nearby watching the two of them, but there was no sight of the main love interest.

That meant this wasn't Nina's moment for convincing them she was being bullied.

"Doesn't your uniform get dirty if you polish the stairs?" Clarissa continued.

"Not if you do it right. I could give you some tips, if you like."

"That's not knowledge I need. Who do you think I am, anyway?"

Who? Well, she was the winner of the Lucky Reincarnation Raffle, the bright and beautiful villainess that Nina had to bend over backward for.

"You're the Unrivaled Lady Clarissa Tessarini," Nina answered instead.

"Unrivaled…? Don't call me by such an odd name," demanded Clarissa, a shadow falling over her beautiful face.

Behind her, Nina could see Dino approaching. Finally, this was her chance to show she was being bullied.

"No, Lady Clarissa! That's not what I meant to do!" yelled Nina in an intentionally loud voice to draw the attention of both Dino and those around them.

Clarissa winced back briefly, but then a look of anticipation spread across her face as she watched Nina. "What do you mean? Would you say that one more time, Nina?" she egged.

Dino was right beside her when Clarissa started to happily snap back at Nina. He looked tired but was still exquisitely beautiful, which was a testament to how incredible a creature this main love interest was.

"You're the *Unequaled* Lady Clarissa, right? I'm sorry I misspoke and said unrivaled."

"What?" Clarissa exclaimed. Her and all the other students' eyes widened while Dino struggled to stifle a laugh.

"…Clarissa," he spoke gently. "Everyone knows no one can equal you. Do you think you could forgive Nina for a little mistake like that?"

"What? But, Prince Dino, that's not… I wasn't…?" It looked like Clarissa was trying to respond to her "bullying" being found out, but she was so flustered that she couldn't give a good response.

She had to help the adversary out here. If a valuable customer like Clarissa was unhappy, that could also affect Aida's health.

"It's okay, Prince Dino," Nina interjected. "I understand why she'd be angry. Lady Clarissa is so incredible that nothing in the world can equal her, so she *has* to be the Unequaled Lady Clarissa."

"Nina," came Dino, "you don't have to worry over it so much. Unrivaled, unequaled, they're basically the same thing anyway." Somehow managing to hold back his laughter, Dino matched pace with Nina when he realized what she was going for.

She had been feeling uncertain before, but now she needed to focus. "I'm sorry, Your Highness, that's not enough. I made a mistake. Lady Clarissa is unequaled."

"Are you sure? Well, I'll believe you then. From this day on, you'll be known as the Unequaled Lady Clarissa."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Nina intoned, not entirely sure at this point herself what she was going for, but she bowed to Dino.

"Now…Unequaled Lady Clarissa, do you think you could forgive Nina?" Dino turned expectantly to her.

"What? But, that wasn't what I…" Having lost the right response to this situation, Clarissa tried to fill in her words with gestures.

Nina wanted to tell her it was okay, that she too was lost and confused, but she couldn't step in because it was Clarissa's turn.

"Do you genuinely hate being called unrivaled that much? I think you need to be more understanding," stated Dino. And, with Nina's hand in one of his hands and the bucket in the other, he left.

With Clarissa's flustered state, it looked like he was protecting Nina from further harassment, but Nina knew that he only wanted to end this ridiculous exchange as soon as possible.

The two of them sighed, exhausted from the effects of their buffs and this baffling scene they just played through.

"What was that about… 'Unrivaled'?" he said with a chuckle once they'd moved away from the stairs, found an empty classroom, and shut the door.

"I was only thinking I needed her to bully me sooner rather than later so I could out her for it. She could've even thrown a bucket of water on me, but that would've been a bit too obvious."

"But why unequaled?"

"I just happened to call her the Unrivaled Lady Clarissa, and then I thought that was the only way to go with it. Do you…think it went well?" She was a little concerned because even she didn't really know what was happening at the end.

"Well, she ended up bickering with you over nothing and so kind of ended up isolating herself, right?"

"That's good then."

That meant they'd successfully accomplished the third condition of the contract: Both the villainess's fiancé and everyone around are captivated by the heroine's charms. People find out the villainess bullied the heroine, and everyone stops being friends with her.

Nina smiled with satisfaction that she'd made another step toward her own downfall.

Chapter 4: The Bucket of Water Thing Was Intentional

"I hear there's a cold going around."

Aida was waiting for Nina with a smile and dinner when she got home from work. It was incredible what this god could do. Aida couldn't stay out of bed for long before, but now she was cleaning, washing, and even cooking.

However, Nina was worried that the chores were putting strain on Aida since she was still ill and getting worse—she just wasn't feeling any pain. But not moving also meant you became less fit, which was also bad. In the end, Nina decided it was better to let Aida do what she wanted and not butt in too much.

"Seems like it, yeah," Nina replied. "A lot of girls have been taking days off work at the restaurant."

Obviously, a day off work meant a day's less pay. When she heard that her coworkers with colds were annoyed that they had to take time off, Nina sympathized from a financial standpoint, but her other coworkers alleged that wasn't the problem.

Apparently, the problem was that everyone was fighting over who got to work on Nina's days. She had been working less lately since she'd been going to the academy, but she still didn't understand why people would fight with each other to work with her. It wasn't like anything would happen if they did work with her.

Ed must have handled things well because people weren't trying to hold her hand like they used to. It was creepy to have them constantly staring at her from the shadows, but them doing no work on the sidelines was better than them doing no work and getting in her way.

“Are you feeling all right, Nina? You shouldn’t push yourself too hard,” Aida asked as she put a bowl before Nina. It was one of her favorites: soup loaded with carrots. She loved its cute orange color, which seemed all the more delicious because Aida made it for her.

She might be able to eat as much luxurious food as she wanted at the academy, but nothing beat her mother’s homecooked meals. They made idle chit-chat as they went to town on the warm food.

This sort of thing put Nina at risk of believing Aida’s illness had actually been cured. She knew this was only a brief moment of happiness, but she couldn’t help wishing this could go on forever.

“Mom, you should be careful, too,” Nina cautioned.

“I know, I know. You’re such a worrywart.” Aida stroked Nina’s hair and smiled. Nina quickly stuffed some bread in her mouth to hide the tears she felt welling in her eyes.

She would play whatever role Clarissa wanted her to if it meant getting just one more day like this with Aida. It didn’t matter what sort of downfall was waiting for her. If it were for Aida’s sake, Nina would become the best heroine ever.



“WHOOPS! My hand slipped,” Clarissa stated with glee as she dumped a bucket of water over Nina’s head.

Nina had a feeling that was where this would end the moment she saw Clarissa with a bucket, but she didn’t think she’d genuinely come right over and pour the water on her.

If Clarissa couldn’t make it look more like an accident, Nina just looked weird for letting someone dump water on her. She really wished Clarissa would make the best of it since everyone was watching and judging this comedy of three between Nina, Dino, and Clarissa.

The villainess accidentally dumped water on the heroine, and the main love interest is supposed to see it and mistakenly assume it was on purpose.

That was likely the idea Clarissa had in mind. She was pretty sure of it because Clarissa had been looking around for Dino a

moment earlier.

Nina understood what Clarissa wanted to do and was willing to cooperate. But could she please at least do it when Dino was actually nearby? It was uncomfortable waiting there, soaking wet. And she was a complete weirdo for standing there, not saying anything, dripping wet.

"Oh? Wait here for a moment," requested Clarissa, finally worried that the main love interest wasn't there. She set the bucket down and left.

Probably to go took for Dino.

"…Do I have to stand here waiting forever?"

The water wasn't that cold, and it wasn't like Clarissa had hit her with the bucket and injured her. However, she was soaked from head to toe since she didn't try to avoid the water—Nina had *actively aimed* to get the water Clarissa threw all over her.

As expected, she started to shiver after not moving for a while. Even so, she decided to wait it out, like a female protagonist, bucket in hand. No matter how long she waited, Clarissa didn't return.

From an outsider's perspective, it looked like Clarissa just doused Nina in water and ran away. She had actually become a true villainess. That wasn't good, for a variety of reasons.

With no idea what else to do, Nina tried asking the audience about this comedy, watching her from a short distance, which was when she finally learned that Dino hadn't come to class that day.

She wished Clarissa had at least checked first if the essential actors in the scene were actually at school that day. Now Nina was soaked for no reason.

Clarissa might try hard, but she was fundamentally bad at following through.

"I feel like…rather than a villainess, she'd be better at playing the sort of heroine that seems perfect but isn't…" Nina couldn't stop her muttered complaints, but they weren't going to help at this point.

She sighed, put away the bucket, and went home.



"URGH, I'm cold."

When Nina got home, she went straight to her room, her body shaking like a leaf.

She dried off and changed clothes, but it seemed she'd done it too late—she couldn't stop trembling. It wasn't surprising really, after walking all the way home from the academy while soaking wet.

If she had this super heroine buff, why didn't it give her a super hardy constitution to endure all this bullying?

She didn't care if she got a cold herself, but it was no joke if she passed it on to her mother. She wasn't cured; she was just made to feel less pain. If Nina put too much strain on Aida's body, things might take a turn for the worst, and there was no coming back from that.

Nina told Aida not to come into her room, leaving her with nothing to do but get some rest and try to recover quickly.

But, while she was tottering toward her bed, she heard a familiar voice from the window.

"Good evening." His fur was as sleek and beautiful as ever, his form backlit by the moonlight. Normally, she'd have the urge to cuddle him, but she didn't even have the energy to pet him right now.

"Hi, Ed. Why are you here?"

"I came for an update on your progress."

Now that he mentioned it, she realized she couldn't exactly refuse to interact with the messenger of a god, and she had to thank him anyway. She put down the blanket she was holding and sat on the edge of her bed.

Ed moved from the window to the desk to take his place on the cushion.

"Ed, did you get rid of the buff outside the academy for me?" she inquired.

"No, I wasn't able to completely eliminate it, but I did have the god prevent people from interacting with you even if it was working on them. How has it been since?"

"They don't keep pestering me and try to touch me anymore. Now, they look at me from the shadows."

They were interested in Nina since the enhancement was working on them, but the god's power kept them from approaching her. That must have been what led to the current situation. It was an improvement from the previous situation, at least.

"Well, that's good then," responded Ed. His white tail bounced happily back and forth. That was incredibly enchanting, but Nina decided not to bother with his tail because she only wanted to get her report over with and go to sleep.

"Lady Clarissa is as bad with execution as always, but I'm pretty sure I'm still acting like a heroine," Nina continued.

"Nina…wait a moment." Nina started rubbing her arms to try to hold back her shivering, which caused a wrinkle to appear on Ed's nose. "Are you feeling unwell? You're shivering."

"She dumped a bucket of water on my head, and then I waited for Prince Dino. I wish Lady Clarissa had checked if Prince Dino was there before throwing water on me."

She wasn't against the water idea at all since a flashy move like that would've been good for Nina to use as material for claiming Clarissa was harassing her. She was all for going along with it. But if Clarissa weren't even going to check if the bare minimum of cast members were there before doing it, Nina would just end up wet and sick for nothing.

The students who saw it would only think less of Clarissa, and Nina couldn't even step in like a heroine to defend the villainess, which positively made the whole thing worse.

"Don't push yourself if you're not feeling well. You should get in bed now," urged Ed, pointing to her bed with a charmingly fuzzy forepaw.

She honestly wanted to grab that paw, stroke it, feel the squishiness of his paw pads on her cheek. She even wanted a little kitty slap, the sort of joyous attack that didn't hurt at all.

She must really be feeling unwell if she didn't even have enough energy to do that.

"Is there anyone who can look after you while you're ill?" asked Ed, looking up at her from beside the bed as she spread out the

blanket with shaking hands. His gold and blue eyes were so beautiful that she felt like she would be swallowed up in them.

"I told Mom not to come in; I can't let her catch this. I'm pretty sturdy, so I should be good after a night's rest." She tried to smile, but she was shaking so much it turned into a strained grimace. Nina knew this was no good, so she slipped quickly into bed and pulled the blanket over her.

"…There's nothing I can do for you, is there?" uttered Ed, standing on her pillow, his head drooping sadly.

It wasn't like she planned on asking something of a cat serving a god anyway. He shouldn't feel the need to worry about her. That part of him seemed really human too—such a weird cat.

"You're so nice, Ed. Do you wanna warm me up, then?" she ventured.

"Huh?" He froze. Cat's eyes were already so big that when they were opened wide, they looked like they might roll right out.

"Please? I'm cold." She lifted the blanket.

He hesitated for a moment, then let out a heavy sigh. "Just… this once," he relented, slowly slipping beneath the blanket. His fur was soft, fuzzy, and, most importantly, warm.

Nina wrapped her arms around Ed and drew him to her chest like she was trying to steal his warmth, but then it hit her. "Wait, you might catch my cold like this. No, let's not do this then."

"It's okay. Don't worry. Could…you let me go?"

"Let go?" She loosened her grip as he requested, and he wriggled a little bit away from her. She peeked under the cover and saw a white fluffball plopped down there, which was a sight to heal the soul, too.

"Let me stay like this, please," he requested.

"Oh, right. If you're too close, I might roll over and squish you. Thank you, Ed. I'm warm enough now."

"That's not the reason. I just…have my limits."

"Limits?" He was already so fluffy and warm; maybe he'd get too hot under the blanket next to her.

"It's nothing. You should sleep, Nina."

She didn’t completely understand, but she was shivering a little less, thanks to Ed. Nina was also tired; she needed to rest up. There were still her duties the next day as well. “Okay, thanks. Good night, Ed.” She reached out and stroked him, then closed her eyes.

When she woke, it was light outside, and Ed was nowhere to be seen. She touched the sheets but didn’t feel any warmth. He must have left during the night.

She hoped the god would give him overtime for agreeing to her heating request.

“I’m not shivering anymore, but…I’ve got a pretty bad fever.” She touched a hand to her forehead. It was quite hot. It looked like she’d have to stay home from school today.

Going in was still an option, but she couldn’t spread this cold to Clarissa or Dino. A leading lady wasn’t going to cause trouble for the people around her.

There might be scenes like that in some otome games, but Nina’s role was to end up the fallen heroine. She didn’t need to play the sick girl, giving Dino and the other boys an opportunity to care for her and allow them to grow closer.

Anyway, she drank some water and sat up when she noticed something at the window. Moving closer, she saw it was a small bottle. It looked expensive, a vivid blue with gold lines containing pills. A slip of paper beside the bottle read, “Cold medicine.”

“From Ed? Probably.”

She didn’t know how a cat would write, but she definitely wanted to see a cat struggling to wield a pen. She smiled at the thought of the cute cat doing his best to keep the pen between his toebeans while she popped some pills in her mouth.

By night, she was feeling much better, likely due to a combination of rest and the medicine.

It’d been years since she’d spent a whole day at home on bed rest. Aida made the best honeyed milk on those days. Maybe it wasn’t so bad to have them every once in a while.

Nina wanted to thank Ed, but he didn’t appear that night. It wasn’t like he usually came every night anyway, so it wasn’t a

problem. She was only worried. What would she do if she accidentally gave him her cold? Was there someone who could look after him? Other cats, maybe.

She imagined a cat wringing a damp towel and placing it on another cat's forehead. The first one got his paws wet, so after that, he got absorbed in cleaning them off. And, maybe there wasn't any point in putting a damp towel on a cat's forehead since the fur would get in the way of it actually touching the skin.

It wasn't clear how effective the whole thing would be, but the setup was so cute that she absolutely wanted to see it.

Nina smiled, remembering the kind servant to a god with his humanlike qualities.



"NINA, are you okay? I heard you caught a cold."

The next day, students swarmed Nina when she arrived at the academy. The students were one thing, but there were teachers in the huddle too, which made her want to ask who was running all their classes.

No matter what she said, the buff would grow even more until there was nothing but perverts around her.

She didn't want to waste her energy on something like that since she was recovering from her cold. Instead, she managed to put a smile on her face. "I-I'm okay. Just a little tired." She tried to leave before things could get worse, but one of the students shook their head.

"Nina, you don't have to cover for her. You caught a cold because Lady Clarissa threw a bucket of water on you, right?"

Several other students then started saying they saw the event, too.

It looked like the bucket event had already turned into Clarissa's bullying. It was sloppy and confusing, but it couldn't be wrong if everyone accepted it as "the villainess bullying the heroine."

She was glad it seemed all right even if Dino hadn't been there; it had nearly been a wash.

But Nina's mission as the hired heroine was to set up a great failure for the villainess to gloat over. This wasn't enough yet. She needed to give it one more push.

"You misunderstood," began Nina. "Lady Clarissa's hand accidentally slipped. She didn't do anything wrong." She brought a hand to her mouth and looked down apologetically.

A true heroine never interpreted bullying as actual bullying. Even if someone were coming straight at her with a knife, she would take it as a coincidence, a mistake caused by misinterpretation.

"Nina, you are so kind-hearted!"

Seeing as the boys collapsed to the ground from the sheer emotional impact of her declaration, she decided it was the right move.

It was clear to everyone that Clarissa intentionally threw the water on Nina, which apparently led to Nina's cold. But heroines saw the world through rose-tinted glasses, or, even if they understood what was happening, they would always respond in a way others would like.

So, essentially, they were masochists.

Even though she questioned what a heroine was, Nina gave a heroine-like smile and left.

"Oof, I'm so tired…" It was incredibly draining to say things you didn't believe with a forced smile on your face.

She completely forgot that her effect turned all the students into perverts before she got sick. At this rate, all sorts of worked-up students would declare they wanted Nina to throw a bucket of water on them. The quickest way to calm things down was to remove the source: Nina.

For both her and the students' peace, she kept going toward where there were no people until she eventually found herself standing in front of the vegetable patch.

Without thinking much about it, she crouched down and started weeding, and her heart began to settle. Maybe that was why older adults got into gardening all the time. She was suddenly starting to worry about herself for finding weeding so calming.

"Oh, Nina. I heard you caught a cold. Are you feeling better?" came a voice. She didn't notice when the beautiful blue-haired boy came to stand next to her.

A pretty face was also very effective at soothing the soul. She gladly basked in his beauty.

"Hello, Your Highness. I got some really effective medicine, so I'm feeling much better now," she answered.

"Really effective medicine?"

"Yep. Ed, the cat working for the god, gave it to me."

Dino's eyes twinkled. "Ed? He's been visiting you, too?" He crouched beside Nina and joined her in weeding.

"The medicine came in this dark blue bottle with gold lines. I should've known a messenger of a god would use such a pretty bottle, and the medicine worked nicely."

"Dark blue with gold lines, huh?" Dino nodded, looking satisfied about something, smiling as he weeded.

He seemed in an oddly good mood. What was so amusing? "Did something happen, Your Highness?"

"Hm? Oh, I was only thinking that god's servant seems to treat you well."

"Well, Ed is a really kind cat, and he did have to work extremely hard to find someone to be the heroine. It makes sense he'd want to take care of me."

It was practically an emergency, after all, since they couldn't find anyone who wanted to enter the raffle to get chosen as the heroine, meaning they didn't have the heroine to start school at the same time as the villainess. Now that they had finally found someone, they'd be in quite a pickle if she ran off.

"Of course. Let's just assume that's what it is," Dino replied with a smile as he started to hum while he weeded.



"YOU'RE growing up so pretty, Nina," exclaimed Aida, shocking Nina into a frown.

There's no way the effect could even be working on her own mother, was there?

On one hand, the god's power was scary. On the other, Aida was probably an obsessed mother, so Nina couldn't be sure which it was for sure. Either way, it wasn't the sort of topic that encouraged discussion.

"Y-You think so…?" responded Nina. She hoped to get through this with that noncommittal response and expression, but her mother sighed.

"I do. You've always been cute, but lately…you look more like a young woman."

"Uh-huh…"

The "You've always been cute" part was probably the obsessed parent bit. Then maybe the heroine buff was bumping up her femininity. Maybe her cleaning at school wasn't seen as janitor's work, but the sort of thing a girl who likes things clean would do.

This divine filter was terrifying.

Nina felt like having everything she did interpreted positively was actually kind of like harassing her.

"So, I was wondering if there's anyone you like?" Aida posed playfully, but Nina froze, not understanding what she meant.

"Anyone…I like?" Her voice squeaked.

Aida sighed, looking troubled. "Don't look so disgusted. I'm just…looking forward to it."

"Looking forward to what?"

"It'd make me so happy if you brought home someone someday who wanted to be with you."

Nina couldn't look directly at Aida's smile; it was too blinding.

Mom, I'm sorry. You only think I'm prettier 'cause I'm the heroine.

And it caused all the students at the academy to love her in a perverted way—it was a false love.

Nina stood firm against the urge to apologize growing in her and somehow managed to put a smile on her face.

"It'd be nice if there were someone," she answered measuredly, "but I haven't met anyone like that."

Well, quite a number of people wanted to be with her, but none of them were the kind of normal, suitable suitors she wanted to be involved with.

"That's too bad. I'd feel so much better if there was someone like that," sighed Aida in an offhand way.

Nina stiffened. This was the sort of conversation mothers and daughters likely had all the time. But to Nina, this sounded like more than just romance talk.

Aida said she would feel better if there was someone other than her who would be with Nina—it would ease her concerns knowing before she died. That's what it sounded like to Nina.

Tears welled in her eyes. She knew she couldn't cry in front of her mother because of this, but she didn't think she could stop them.

"I'm beat. I'm gonna head to bed. Night, Mom," Nina jumped up from her seat and rushed to her room, closing the door behind her.

"I'm glad Ed didn't come tonight…" she mumbled as she wiped away her tears and crawled into bed, trying to escape everything.



"GOOD evening."

When the white cat with his beautiful fur appeared in her window, Nina ran over with a smile. "Long time no see, Ed. Are you okay? You didn't catch that cold or anything, did you?"

He hadn't visited her for a while, not since that day she had a cold. At first, she decided it was because he had no reason to drop by, but then she worried something might have happened.

She couldn't bear it if this ultimate fluff suffered because of her.

"I'm fine. I came today with your dress for the soirée," he replied.

"Soirée?" Nina looked back, and a dress, shoes, and accessories had appeared in a row on her bed. As always, the items from this god were beyond comprehension. "This soirée is that party thing we

talked about before, right? I really do have to go, don't I? I'm a bit nervous, to be honest. I have no idea what to do there."

She couldn't picture this event beyond imagining it would be quite opulent, but that was enough to make her anxious about it.

"You started attending the academy partway through the year, so this will be the only soirée you can attend. The only other event will be the graduation celebration," informed Ed.

"Which is where my downfall happens. Right… There's not much time left, is there?" She believed she'd done everything she could so far, but was that enough to fulfill the heroine's role properly? She was worried whether or not she'd lived up to Clarissa's expectations so that she could have fun gloating…but Nina didn't even know what would happen after all that.

It didn't matter in the end because she would still play the heroine for Aida's sake, but she'd be lying if she said she wasn't uneasy about it.

"The soirée involves, in short, light refreshments and dancing," explained Ed. "There is no requirement that you dance, but you are the heroine, so I imagine you won't be short on potential dance partners."

"Can't really do anything about that, not with the heroine boost in effect. But…you mean it when you say I don't necessarily have to dance?"

"Essentially. I'm certain you'll be asked to dance, so it will depend on how skillfully you can turn down those requests."

To skillfully turn down an invitation to dance, you, of course, needed a reason. There was a limit to how far she could use "I can't dance" as an excuse. She would be dealing with the people who had become captivated by her enhancement, their perverted affection bringing them all the way to wanting to steal away the dishes she finished eating from.

She had a feeling it would be fatal to dive in without a plan.

"Hm… Maybe I'll ask Prince Dino," she pondered.

"Ask Dino…to go with you?" Ed questioned, tilting his head to the side. It was so cute that it seemed to lift a burden from Nina's soul.

If she could, she'd bring this little white cat as her date, but a cat wasn't going to intimidate the boys away from approaching her. And besides, considering how beautiful he was, even the nobles would end up charmed by him. They'd swarm him, too, and put a strain on him, which she didn't want.

Even though she didn't want to go to this event, it was part of her heroine duties.

"He's attractive and has higher social standing than the others, so nobody will try to start something if he's there, right?" Nina reasoned. "Oh, but he's engaged to Clarissa. He's gonna go with her, isn't he?"

As the heroine, Nina was supposed to be getting between them. She couldn't start the party by going with him. Try as she might, there was no one else she could think of.

Well…it didn't actually matter who she went with, did it? She could invite anyone. But she might end up stirring up unnecessary trouble if she chose a person from out of all those perverts.

"Guess I don't have a choice. I have to go alone. It'd be so much easier to say no to people if I went with someone though," she admitted dejectedly.

"You can't think of…anyone else?"

"Nope."

Dino far surpassed anyone else in both looks and social status. She couldn't think of anyone that could come even close. She needed someone who didn't look at her like those perverts did, who was forgiving enough not to care as she cozied up to Dino, and had the ability to keep all the other students at bay. She couldn't think of anyone perfect enough to fit all those requirements.

Ed sighed for some reason, then waved his tail back and forth in thought. "I…do have an idea," he expressed haltingly.

"What?"

"I can't say for sure yet, but I think I may be able to help you."

"Really? I'm not sure what you have in mind, but thank you!"

If Ed said so, he would surely be able to help somehow.

The easiest way would be to use the god's power to get rid of this whole soirée thing in the first place, but that wasn't possible,

was it? Regardless, Nina felt reassured knowing that at least one person—uh, one cat—was working to help her.

The rest was up to Nina and her hard work.

She balled her hands, pumped herself up, and stared at the white cat's swishing tail.



ON the day of the soirée, Nina was in her room preparing for her departure.

The dress Ed delivered was the sort of beautiful gown perfect for a heroine. It was gorgeous and classy, made with fabric in the same pale coral color as Nina's eyes. The abundant white lace gave it a flowery yet elegant impression.

Even Nina, who didn't know much about this sort of thing, could tell how incredible this dress was—and the accessories were both dazzling and cute.

She stood in front of the mirror admiring herself, thinking this was a good example of the phrase, "You can put a pig in a dress, but it's still a pig."

"I am grateful, but everyone's gonna know there's no way I could get a dress like this on my own," she noted.

She was a commoner who entered the academy partway through the year and ended up weeding and cleaning. Some students thought she was just a cleaner or a servant, which didn't bother her—it was basically the truth.

The problem was: How did a non-noble cleaner get her hands on such a high-quality dress?

"I have no idea how much this'd cost, but I know I'd never be able to afford it, that's for sure."

So, the new question was: Who got it for her?

The answer to that, in truth, was a god, but she couldn't tell people that—and no one would imagine that either.

"So…that means someone with a lot of money had it made for me…"

And what would people think about a heroine who had someone like that? Should she pretend it was Dino who did it? On the contrary, it would be incredibly sketchy for him to be giving other girls dresses when he had a fiancée.

Usually, saying something like that would damage Dino's reputation, but the main love interest boost would probably make people interpret that in a convenient way.

And then, once Nina had her downfall, she should be the only one whose reputation was damaged.

Nina wasn't entirely satisfied with that, but it was all for Aida.

She sighed and looked at herself in the mirror again. "Anyway, it truly is annoying. I can't put this thing on without help."

She had a go at it herself because she didn't want to bother Aida, but there was no way. With any standard dress, she only had to pull over her head and button it up. This gown was splendid; there was no way she could dedicate that much time every day to put clothes on.

That aspect was probably because she was nothing but a commoner and not a chosen heroine.

"All right, into battle!" she proclaimed, getting herself pumped before heading off to her battleground at the academy.

And when she got there, she found her energy quickly whittled down.

"This power-up is too strong…" muttered Nina, unable to stop herself.

The dance was held in a building that seemed to exist only for soirées and the graduation party. Nina was shocked at how extravagant that was—and even more shocked when she went inside. Finely detailed decorations covered the walls, and chandeliers hung glittering from the ceiling. It was like being in a dream.

Silky tablecloths covered the decorated tables with sumptuous dishes packed close together. Even the glitter of the silverware sent her heart fluttering.

Everything was so new and exciting that Nina felt like she was walking through a dream the moment she entered the hall, but then

the boys surrounded her. They started to talk to her and ask her to dance.

Each time someone else approached her, she somehow managed to parry their request and run away, but it was tiring work. She hid behind a pillar in a corner, but honestly, she just wanted to go home.

"I can't go home until I've had a tiff with Lady Clarissa," she reasoned. She wasn't here to have fun. Assuming her real goal was to carry out her duties as the protagonist, it would all be for nothing if she left before running into Clarissa.

Even if that was the goal, she wished she could at least find time to eat. However, she couldn't get herself to move. She was convinced it would be the end of her if she stepped out.

For now, she decided to stay hidden until Clarissa arrived. Then, they could have their little drama, Nina could snatch some food and shove it in her mouth, and then she could run home…

That plan wasn't really befitting the beloved heroine, but sacrifices had to be made.

"Oh, Miss Nina?" came a voice from behind as Nina was sighing in the shadows of the pillar.

She turned timidly back and saw a smiling boy she didn't recognize coming her way.

Oh no, I've been found.

She resisted the urge to let out another heavy sigh and somehow managed to put a smile on. A heroine wasn't ever in a bad mood in front of people.

"Is something wrong? Why are you back here?" inquired the boy.

"Oh, I'm simply taking a little rest," she replied and tried to make a natural-seeming getaway by backing up, but the student took a step forward for every step she took back.

After taking a few steps, her back bumped against the pillar, and the boy grinned. They were hidden. The other students out dancing couldn't see the two of them.

Nina had a bad feeling about this.

She opened her mouth to say something, anything to get herself out of this, but then a cool voice came from behind the boy. "I apologize for keeping you waiting, Nina."

The newly appeared boy was gorgeous. He had white hair with no hint of discoloration, sparkling in the rainbow light from the chandeliers. His bangs were a little on the long side, a blue eye as clear as the summer sky peeked out, and graceful features that in no way detracted from the beauty of those colors but instead enhanced them.

That, in combination with his fine clothing, made him look like a prince who had just jumped out of a fairytale picture book. Both Nina and the other boy were struck speechless.

He had apologized to Nina for keeping her waiting, but…who in the world was he?

There was a chance he knew this other boy who had been talking to Nina, but if that was the case, wasn't it weird that he mentioned Nina's name rather than the boy's?

Nina stood there, unable to process what was happening, and the white-haired boy smiled kindly at her. "I had a hard time finding you, with you hiding somewhere like this."

"O-Oh…" She didn't remember anyone looking for her, so she didn't know what to say back. All she could think of was how beautiful his swaying white hair was.

"What do you think you're doing?" demanded the other boy. "*I'm* talking to Nina."

"Perhaps, but I can't say I'm impressed by someone who traps a girl in a hidden corner," remarked the white-haired boy.

The other boy spluttered while the beautiful boy took Nina's hand and pulled her behind him.

She looked at his back, filling her vision, her mind racing.

He wasn't an acquaintance of hers; she'd never met an attractive boy like this. She also got the impression he was trying to save her, but she couldn't think of any reason for all this, which meant the only explanation was that this was also some sort of scene to bring her closer to her heroine's downfall and he was an actor in that.

That would explain why someone so extraordinarily beautiful would ever talk to her.

And if that were the case, then it would be a good idea to match his story, assuming he was going to fall for Clarissa later or something and cast Nina aside.

"Y-You're late. I nearly got tired of waiting," she stammered. She went for something one might say to someone they were close to if they'd agreed on a time in advance. The other boy glowered.

"Less savory individuals have a habit of coming out when you put yourself where others can't see you," replied the white-haired boy, and the other boy huffed in frustration before he backed away and left.

Nina sighed, having escaped the immediate threat. "Um, thank you," she said as she bowed. The gorgeous boy smiled and nodded.

His looks were on par with Dino's, which meant he was likely an important character.

"You're welcome. But as I pointed out, you really shouldn't be somewhere like this where no one can see. Especially as you are now," he noted.

"I'll be more careful. Now, if you'll excuse me…" She was grateful for his help, but she didn't want to get close to anyone involved with her future downfall. She'd have to if the contract said something like, "The heroine grows close with an attractive white-haired boy who then throws her away," but it didn't. The best thing was not to get involved if she didn't have to.

Considering she was hired for her role, she had no obligation to go above and beyond whatever was written in the contract.

Besides, she was hungry; she seriously wanted to eat.

Having bid her thanks, she attempted to leave, but that seemed to fluster the white-haired boy for some reason.

"Wait, I want to talk to you," he interjected.

That nearly made Nina roll her eyes. In the end, he was just another victim of her effect. "I don't think there's anything in particular we have to talk about." She tried to walk away, but he moved in front of her.

"Please, look in my eyes," he asked.

Of course, an attractive guy like him's going to be confident, she thought, a little impressed. She looked at his eyes and realized they were mismatched, one blue and one gold. They were beautiful, like two shining gems, but…so what?

"…You have gorgeous eyes," she noted, trying to give a compliment to be polite, and tried to leave again, but he jumped to stop her.

"W-Wait! Don't you…recognize them?" he nearly pleaded.

Nina searched her memories, but she didn't know anyone with eyes as unique as his. White hair and mismatched eyes were pretty memorable. And with how pretty he was…there was no way she'd forget someone like him. She cocked her head to the side.

White. Blue. Gold.

That color combination made a certain white cat messenger of a god pop into her head. Now that she peered closely, the colors perfectly matched Ed's. But he was a cat working for a god, and this was a handsome boy in an academy—they were totally different creatures.

He watched Nina grumble as she thought and let out a gentle, frustrated sigh. "I did say I would help you, didn't I?"

"Huh?"

She did remember something like that: "*I can't say for sure yet, but I think I may be able to help you*," he'd promised, his tail swishing back and forth.

"…Ed?" she said timidly, and a smile spread across the boy's face. It was as beautiful as all the buds in a flower bed bursting into bloom at once. She couldn't help letting out a gasp of admiration.



"Good, you've finally realized," he breathed in relief, taking her hand and leading her to sit on a sofa near the wall.

Glossy white hair, blue and gold eyes, beautiful features. That in itself was something Ed and this boy had in common, but she still couldn't fully believe it.

"You're…really Ed?"

"I am."

Looking only at his eyes and speaking with him, it did seem true; it was exactly the same as talking with Ed. Regardless, that didn't get rid of her confusion. "But why do you look like that? You're a cat. You can turn into a human?"

Maybe he could turn into all sorts of things since he was a servant of a god. If that were true, she wanted to request the fluffy cat back.

"No, I'm actually human. This is what I genuinely look like."

"Oh…" That sound betrayed her true emotions, a low groan of disappointment. That pearly, fuzzy animal…was fake? How could there ever be something this disappointing?

Seeing Nina looking so clearly disappointed destroyed Ed's composure. "Uh, is that…bad?"

"Well…no. Boys are fine too. It's just…I want to play with your divine fur and squishy toe beans." She'd lost her ever-so-important eye candy for soothing her soul. Her shoulders slumped as that pain hit her.

"Well, I will still be a cat when I visit you."

"Really?!" She leaned forward in joy, and Ed nodded with mixed emotions across his face. "Good! But…why are you working for the god if you're a human?"

"Before I tell you that, have this." He drew a cute package from the inside pocket of his jacket.

Nina opened it to find mini cookies. Each was a different shape and color, and they looked delicious, but she wondered why he'd brought something like that.

"I suspected you might not be able to do what you wanted because of the heroine buff and might not even get a chance to have some food."

He was right; she was starving. It was worse than your regular empty stomach because she was forced to look at and smell all the delicious food in the venue and unable to eat any of it. She wanted to eat so much that she'd already planned to shove food in her face as she ran away from this place.

"Thank you. Can I eat them now?"

"Of course."

She picked up a cookie and popped it in her mouth, and the cookie's perfect level of sweetness spread through her body. It's known that hunger was the best spice, but these cookies were already great.

Her expression softened now that both her heart and stomach had been nourished.

"They're good. Do you want some?" she offered.

"No, thank you. I brought them for you. You have them all."

She was a bit embarrassed, wondering how much of a black hole he thought her stomach was, but she was honestly starving. Before she knew it, she'd scarfed down all of Ed's cookies.

"Here," he offered, holding a glass out to her when she finished.

Now thirsty, she thanked him and sipped the drink, the flavor of fresh fruit juice washing through her mouth. She wasn't sure what kind of fruit juice it was, but she was grateful to have it.

"Okay, so. Ed, what *are* you?" she asked.

He looked at her with a gentle smile. It was a beautiful smile, suited to someone working for a god.

"I was reincarnated, like you."

"What?!" she shrieked before she could stop herself, clamping her hands over her mouth. If she drew attention, people would flock to her.

"Don't worry. We're at the edge of the venue; there aren't many people here," reassured Ed, seeming to guess what her concern was and letting her know he was keeping an eye out for what was around them. "I was born with a weak constitution. I'm not ill, but my body gives out at the slightest difficulty. I always caused concern for those around me, putting a burden on them."

"You don't seem weak to me," she observed. His beautiful features and pale coloring seemed to give him a sort of ephemeral quality, but he looked healthy.

"Thanks to you."

"Me?" She didn't remember doing anything like that.

"As I explained earlier, finding someone to play the heroine for this Lucky Reincarnation Raffle winner's request was hard. The god approached me to ask me to scout someone to play the role."

Oh. Well, an attractive boy would be much better at interacting with a girl of this age than some crusty old man. If that were the case, Nina didn't quite understand why he would do it while hiding the best weapon he had at his disposal: his face. At the same time, she was happier to have a beautiful cat than a beautiful boy, and she could let her guard down more around a cat.

Considering that, it did seem like the appropriate decision.

"That's why you came to me in cat form."

"Actually, we didn't choose a cat specifically for you, Nina. I went to see Clarissa at the beginning of the contract to explain things looking as I normally do, and…things got quite complicated."

True. Any girl visited out of the blue by a boy as attractive as him would get quite worked up—if she didn't go off on how suspicious he was.

Nina would've been that second type. She was glad he was a cat when he visited.

"I only visited the villainess once, but I was going to have to meet several times with the heroine," he elaborated. "It would have been tiresome if she came after me every time I did, which is why I asked the god to change my form."

"I'm glad you went with a cat. It means I can get my fill of the most beautiful cat in all history!"

Cats were cute just by being cats, but Ed in cat form was truly wonderful. She wasn't even exaggerating when she said he was the best cat she'd ever seen in her life, both in terms of looks and cuddling satisfaction.

"My contract is that if I find someone to play the heroine as the villainess wants, I will receive an improved constitution after the

heroine has her downfall," he continued.

"By constitution, you mean…" Nina prodded. Ed had told her when they were making her contract that they couldn't heal Aida's illness, so she assumed that sort of thing was impossible.

Ed seemed to guess what she wanted to say from her look. He shook his head apologetically. "I mentioned it before, but illness can't be cured other than an illness of the contractee themselves. However, it does work on someone in an actual contract."

"Oh…right…" Nina couldn't help being a little jealous and feeling it was unfair. She was ashamed of herself for that.

As Aida couldn't attend the academy with Clarissa, she would never be able to make a contract and play the heroine. Nina had to convince herself that soothing Aida's pain was enough.

"The more you act as the heroine, the more my constitution improves. Which is why I'm doing as well as I am now."

"That's good. I guess we're both helping each other out." If she fulfilled her heroine role, it wouldn't be just Aida who would benefit, but Ed would too. That gave her good reason to work hard. "But why are you here as a human?" asked Nina. "The contract isn't making you show yourself. Did you really come to help me?"

"I knew you would end up like this."

He anticipated the boost would prevent her from doing what she wanted, and she'd end up hungry? And then he came all the way here as a human just to help her? He certainly was kind. "Thank you, Ed."

"Part of it was definitely because I wanted to help you, but there's more. I wanted to see what it's like talking with you."

"But we talk all the time." Ed regularly visited her house so she could give her reports on her progress.

"That is me, but it's also not me. That's Ed, servant to a god. But…my real name is Edmund Zelati. I'm the second son of Duke Zelati."

Nina's mouth dropped open. She admitted his good looks oozed with class, but she didn't actually think he was noble-born.

"Son of a duke… All right, so, I really shouldn't be talking so casually with you, uh, my lord."

A duke was the highest ranking of nobles. Nina wasn't; she normally would never have an opportunity to meet someone this high-ranking. She felt like Ed had grown a little further from her. That was probably caused by her ingrained commoner sensibilities.

"No, it's fine," reassured Ed.

"But—"

"Nina, you're fine the way you are."

But even if he said that, there was no way a commoner like her could speak to the son of a duke like that. Even if he claimed it was fine, the rest of the world wouldn't agree. There had to be a very good reason for him to say it was okay.

"Oh, I get it. It's because of the heroine buff. Generally, people wouldn't approve of me talking like that to you, but the effect'll make it so no one thinks it's a problem. So, you're saying to keep doing that so the villainess can focus on it, and then I can tell everyone she bullied me once she does."

It was a tedious strategy, but surefire in its own way. He wasn't the kind of person a commoner like her should be talking with so casually.

"That's not what I mean, Nina. I just wanted to talk with you. Not as Ed the cat, but as Edmund the human."

She felt nearly blinded by his beauty as he looked at her, never taking his eyes off. What the heck was with this boy, servant of a god, prettier than both the heroine and the villainess? Nina knew she wasn't exactly ugly, but he was in a totally different league.

Nina might not be the girliest of girls, but losing like that still hurt a little.

"All right. So, what did you wanna talk about?"

As she spoke, she heard Clarissa's voice from the center of the venue. She stood to see what was going on. It looked like she was having some sort of argument with Dino.

If the main love interest and the villainess were raising their voices, then this was a scene: a scene the heroine should probably be part of.

"Oh no, I'm late getting in there. Lady Clarissa's trying to start a scene without all the actors. I have to go."

“Good luck, Nina.”

Edmund watched with a sad smile as Nina rushed away in a flurry.

Chapter 5: The Cat-Boy and the Impending Change

"IT'S a misunderstanding. And there's not even anyone here!"

"You're not fooling me, Prince Dino. How dare you leave me, your fiancée, to dance with this…this… Oh, there she is. Yes! This *commoner*!"

Clarissa smiled with relief when she saw Nina running up. Nina, on the other hand, was gasping for breath. Running in a gown and high-heeled shoes she wasn't used to wasn't easy.

It looked like the gist of this scene was, "The prince is planning to cast aside his fiancée to go dance with another girl." Nina just wished Clarissa would wait until the players were there to start.

She was seriously impatient and terrible with follow-through. Nina strongly believed she was better suited as a seemingly-perfect-but-flawed heroine rather than a villainess.

"I, huff, I…am not…" panted Nina, her line coming out in small chunks thanks to her jog.

Clarissa was so obviously engaged with her performance as the evil foe that she didn't even appear to notice Nina's lack of breath.

Based on the conversation so far, Nina guessed that she was supposed to push Clarissa aside to dance with Dino.

But now that she actually thought about it, she remembered she couldn't dance.

They could go for a scene where Dino is kind to Nina even though she's a bad dancer while Clarissa looks on in jealousy. However, dancing with Dino was like putting his feet on death row.

Nina decided to try to throw a curveball instead. "Lady Clarissa, please dance with Dino," she offered.

"What? But…why?" She looked openly disappointed, likely because this was different from the plans she had in mind.

There shouldn't be anything wrong with her dancing with Dino, but Clarissa was looking for a fight.

Nina let out an exaggerated sigh for Clarissa's sake since she wouldn't normally accept Nina's suggestion to dance with Dino. "You're so elegant and graceful, Lady Clarissa. I wish I danced so well everyone admired me, but I…can't…"

She tried to exude sadness, casting her eyes downward. Nina once heard someone say that a girl's weapon was her smile, but a heroine's weapon was downcast eyes. She could bluff through pretty much anything if she looked down a little sorrowfully. At least…she hoped.

"I just feel more and more embarrassed when I see you and Prince Dino dancing so beautifully and delicately. It…hurts to watch…"

It would have been perfect if she could've shed a single tear there, but that was asking too much of herself.

She glanced up at Clarissa. For a moment, she was utterly dumbstruck; then, her expression transformed into sheer joy. "Th-That's right! A commoner like you is suited for nothing more than observing!"

While Clarissa looked like she was having fun, Dino was behind her, sighing. "Clarissa, would you…dance with me? Over there?" he requested.

"I would be delighted, Your Highness!"

They joined hands and walked away, and Nina slumped with fatigue as she watched them go. Any regular person would just dance with their partner without all this fuss. Actually, they should marry and get it over with.

Then again…that would mean losing her opportunity to relieve Aida's pain. Maybe she should be grateful for Clarissa's tiresome taste.

"Right, that's one job done," muttered Nina. She was reluctant to say farewell to the food, but she didn't need to stay any longer. However, her plans were about to be ruined.

“Nina, would you dance with me?” asked a boy, holding his hand out to her, even though she thought of nothing but going home—and he was only the first. There were several more students behind him swarming to ask her to dance.

Even the girls were looking at her with passionate gazes.

This was bad.

She thought about trying to convince them she hurt her foot, but it would probably be hard to pull that lie off, considering she’d literally run up to Clarissa. It was going to be impossible to dodge every single one of these dance requests, and she was never going to be able to escape if she danced with even one of them.

This was it. It was all over.

“Nina, may I have this dance?” someone with a beautiful voice cut through the clamor, holding a hand toward her.

Everyone exploded in whispers when they saw the smiling white-haired boy. As the son of a duke, all the other students would know who Edmund was, being nobles themselves. No one could stand in his way, not with his status and those good looks.

He must be trying to save her. She didn’t even have to debate whether she should take his hand or not. “You saved me, Ed. I had no idea what I’d do, surrounded like that.”

They moved toward the edge of the hall, and Nina let out a massive sigh. The pair successfully escaped without issue thanks to his good looks, which silenced all the other boys. She couldn’t be more thankful for his overwhelming beauty.

“Okey-dokey. Job’s done here. I should be able to go home now,” Nina breathed in relief. “Thank you for everything, Ed.” She waved goodbye and went to leave, but he grabbed her hand.

“Wait, please. I don’t get an opportunity like this very often. Would you dance with me?”

“Huh? But I told you, I can’t dance.”

“I’ll match you. We don’t stand out much here, and Prince Dino can’t see either.”

He was right about that; they were at the edge of the venue in the shadow of a pillar. It was good that Clarissa wouldn’t catch sight of the two, but that didn’t give them a reason to dance.

"I don't mind, but I'm being serious; I honestly can't dance. I'll only end up hurting your feet," protested Nina.

"That's fine. I'm not asking you to dance with me *well*."

"Uh, okay?"

He pulled her hand while she was trying to figure out what that meant, and, before she noticed it, they'd started dancing.

She was a little shocked when he slipped his arm around her waist, but it wasn't unpleasant like when her coworkers at the restaurant put their arm around her shoulder. It was a bit odd, but maybe this physical contact was different since it was all about purely wanting to dance, while the coworkers had an ulterior motive.

Nina tried hard to match Edmund as he led, but she stepped on his feet at regular intervals. It was almost like his feet were always right where she was about to put her foot down. She felt so bad that she started to change her mind about agreeing to dance.

"I'm sorry, Ed, let's stop. I'm gonna hurt you."

"It's okay." He still smiled with enjoyment despite being trampled on constantly.

There was a limit to how kind someone could be, which almost made Nina wonder if he was into being hurt.

"I haven't danced in such a long time…" he murmured, and that's when Nina finally figured out what was happening.

If he hadn't danced in a while, he must be uneasy about dancing with the noble girls, who would be good at it. Nina was so bad that you'd never be able to tell if he made some little mistakes. He was practically a victim of her dancing. So, even if his feet hurt, he at least felt at ease with her.

That must be what he meant when he said he wasn't asking her to dance well.

If that was the case, then she should join Edmund for this, as a thank you for everything he'd done for her lately. Knowing he actually wanted her to dance poorly made her feel more at ease too.

After dancing for a little while, she started to feel able to look up and around them rather than down at her feet.

"You've gotten better, Nina," he complimented.

"You think?" That made her happy for some reason. She looked up, her eyes meeting his beautiful blue and gold eyes. They glittered like gems, looking at nothing but her.

"Yes, you've gotten very good."

She took him in from up close, smiling gently, then jerked her eyes away. It was a terrifying thing, the smile of a handsome boy. Her heart was threatening to go off racing.

"Thank you," she replied. "I should really be getting back."

She bade him goodbye and slipped quickly out of the hall so no one would notice.

Her heart was pounding faster than usual, but she was sure that was because she'd been running.



"I'M home."

"Welcome back, Nina."

When she got back, Nina slowly opened the door and found Aida in a chair waiting for her. She'd told her she could go to sleep before she got home, but Aida had apparently decided to stay up.

However, her complexion wasn't looking good at all.

"Mom, are you feeling bad again?! You shouldn't push yourself so hard; you need to go lie down."

Nina rushed over and touched Aida's cheek. It wasn't hot but instead freezing cold.

Nina felt the blood drain from her face, but Aida's expression was relaxed. "Did you have fun, Nina?"

"Oh, none of that matters. Wait a sec, I'm gonna get your bed together."

"It'll be hard in that outfit. Come here."

Aida was right; there was no way Nina could make a bed in this gown. Frustratedly, she moved over as Aida beckoned her, who then started slowly unlacing the gown. Every single lace of the corset annoyed her right now.

"It's a good thing you were able to borrow such a lovely dress," noted Aida. "It makes me happy to see you all dressed up and cute."

Her voice was nothing but tenderness despite how ill she looked, which nearly brought Nina to tears.

She tossed aside the dress and shoes and rushed into Aida's room in nothing but her undergarments, where she made the bed and put out a glass of water.

After helping Aida into bed and closing the door behind her as she left, Nina was hit with embarrassment for how swept away she got during tonight's event. It was no party for her; it was work. She shouldn't have bothered with dancing and have come home right away.

She picked up the dress, wiping away tears as she did, and took a deep breath.

The doctor had told them how long they expected Aida to live, and that point had already passed. Nina knew all this, but it still didn't feel real because the contract was relieving her pain. Aida was definitely not cured, and even if Nina fulfilled the contract, she likely couldn't extend this extra time with Aida much more.

And yet, it was the only thing she could do. She couldn't let herself get her priorities mixed up. Aida was priority number one. And for that, Nina had to go through with the downfall.

She'd been told that the god's power didn't cure Aida; it only relieved pain. Even with that, it was evident that Aida's condition had deteriorated in the past few days. It was possible her illness had advanced so far that not even the god could do anything.



AFTER getting some rest the day after Nina's party, Aida seemed to regain some strength back, but her limit was likely very close. Nina thought she'd already come to grips with that, but it was still a shock to have reality shoved in her face.

"Nina… Those aren't weeds."

Dino's voice brought her out of her reverie and made her realize she'd pulled the seedlings straight out of the soil. "I-I'm so sorry. I'll fix it."

"It's not a big deal. I only recently planted them. They should be fine if we put them back," he placated as he reached toward the mound of seedlings Nina had accumulated and swiftly began replanting.

He was such a good farmer; it was hard to believe he was a prince.

Nina had been trying to give her all to her heroine work, cleaning and helping with the vegetable patch, but honestly…she didn't remember any of it. She'd been like that ever since Aida became bedbound.

"You don't seem as lively as usual," Dino observed.

"Really?"

"I mentioned it to Ed. He's worried about you."

It had been a few days since the party, but she hadn't seen Ed. Her head was filled entirely with Aida, but the mention of Ed reminded her that the feline servant of the god wasn't a feline after all. "Ed isn't actually a cat," she muttered.

"Yeah, I know."

"And he's the son of a duke."

"Yeah. We've been good friends for a long time. And he's in the same class. He doesn't come to the academy that often, so I don't think many people know him."

"Oh." She was so fatigued that that was the strongest reaction she could muster in response to Dino's explosive news.

It truthfully made sense that the prince would at least know the duke's son. In any case, Nina couldn't imagine what it was like; their social standings were so high above hers. He must also be the same age if they were in the same class. She thought it was incredibly unfair that he got his good looks and she hadn't—they'd been developing and maturing for the same number of years.

"Is that…why you seem down?" asked Dino.

"Well, it was pretty shocking to learn that ultimate fluff ball wasn't actually a real cat."

"Uh, that's the problem?"

"What do you mean?" What could possibly be the problem besides the sheer shock of learning that beautiful cat wasn't a cat?

"Well, I thought maybe you'd drawn a line in the sand because he's the son of a duke."

"Drawn a line?" she repeated, bewildered at his accusation.

He scratched his head. "Uh-huh, okay… I see why Ed's having trouble too."

"He's having trouble as the son of a duke? Well, I guess having a high status comes with its own problems."

Edmund may be blessed with both status and looks, but he also had a weak body that didn't seem good for much.

Maybe, in the end, everyone was struggling just because they were alive.

Nina sighed, and Dino sighed along with her.

"By the way, you mentioned Ed was a cat earlier when he visited you. Did he tell you he was human?" asked Nina.

"No. Before, he had threatened to make me king. You also mentioned that most people would think that'd be good. But then I literally looked at him and recognized his colors."

"That's when you figured it out."

It was a very distinct color combination. A close friend could very well discern who it was based on that.

Nina wondered if Ed was genuinely trying to hide his identity. If he was, he should've done something about his colors.

"Ed, well, Edmund, I guess, isn't sick, but his body is weak," continued Dino. "He only learned he was also reincarnated because of this contract scenario with Clarissa, and he decided to go with it because he always worried that his poor constitution burdened the people around him."

"Yeah…"

Which meant that Ed also desperately wanted Nina to play a wonderful heroine and meet her downfall. She had to work hard—for Aida, Edmund, Dino, and even Clarissa.

"Your Highness," she started. "I'm gonna work hard. Please help me by acting like we're close until the day of my downfall."

And, as she declared, Nina acted like she and Dino were close from that day on. Obviously, she also didn't forget to get into tiffs

with Clarissa. She put her all into cleaning, turning the already tidy academy into a sparkling gem.

Aida's condition remained poor, but Nina did everything she could to make sure she was at least comfortable.



"LATELY...you seem to be with Dino at all times," noted the white cat when he appeared in her window, his tail twitching.

His white fur was as beautiful as a dream, like always.

"Yeah," she said. "The heroine's got to grow close to the prince, right? I should act like one as much as I can."

"Yes, I suppose that is true." While he did agree with her, he still seemed a little unhappy. Even when he sat on the cushion on the table, his tail drooped listlessly. "You…haven't pet me much lately."

"Pet you?"

"Before, you would pet me any moment you got."

"That's because I believed you were a cat. But it's rude…isn't it?"

Whether you called it "petting" or "squeezing with all her might," she couldn't very well do it now that she knew Ed was a human—the son of a duke, no less. She was definitely hesitant to treat someone that high-ranking like a stuffed animal.

She didn't think Ed would get angry and punish her or anything, but she did feel a big mental resistance to the idea.

"I am a cat at the moment, and it isn't rude," he asserted. He definitely seemed disappointed about something.

"Ed… Do you *want* me to pet you?" she asked, the question popping into her head suddenly, and Ed's tail stiffened. "Oh, sorry, of course you don't! It was all one-sided from me anyway."

Dino had informed Ed about Nina's well-being, so maybe he brought it up because he thought she was feeling down at not having pet him in a while.

"At any rate," he continued, "you have already completed condition two of the contract: 'The heroine comes to school and gets

friendly with the prince.' You have almost completed number three as well: 'Both the villainess's fiancé and everyone around are captivated by the heroine's charms. People find out the villainess bullied the heroine, and everyone stops being friends with her.' This phase we're entering will be for number four, which means there's no need for you to strengthen your relationship with Dino."

"But that phase is 'The villainess protects the prince. True love blossoms.' There's nothing for me to do there. I might as well keep racking up as many points as possible, which means growing closer to Dino."

There were five items in the contract in total. Her role as the hired heroine was also entering its final stages, meaning she only needed to act like the protagonist for a little longer. She couldn't let up knowing how hard she tried now might change the outcome.

"May I ask what specifically are you doing for that?" Ed inquired.

"We weed together, I help him with the vegetable patch, we drink tea together… It's nothing big, truly. I mainly try to spend as much time with him as I can."

"Which means there is no need for you to strengthen your relationship with him further. It accomplishes nothing." Ed's voice rarely sounded that rough.

Having him say that so bluntly to her made her sad; it was like he was saying all her hard work was for nothing. "What's this about?" she countered. "You want to be healthy, don't you? And I want my mom to live as long as she can. I thought you understood. Why would you say something like that?"

With Aida's health worsening the past few days, Nina felt like she was on an emotional rollercoaster. Her eyes didn't even know when she should cry or not; she was especially sad and incredibly angry.

Before she knew it, tears welled in her eyes and threatened to spill over.

There were only so many things she could do. It didn't matter how well she played her role—it wasn't going to cure Aida. She knew that, but there was nothing else she could do to help her. And if

there was nothing else, she wanted to do absolutely everything she could to limit Aida's suffering as much as she could.

Why would he suddenly act like all her effort was meaningless?

"Nina," he voiced, standing from the cushion when he saw her tears and looking shaken up.

She noticed she was just taking out her frustration on him. Her jealousy sprung because Ed could become healthy thanks to his contract.

Knowing she would say something insensitive if they continued talking, Nina bit her lip hard in an effort to restrain herself. "Ed…I'm done with my report for today. I'm going to sleep. Please go." She turned away to keep the tears from running down her cheeks and sighed.

"Nina…I'm sorry," he offered quietly before disappearing out the window.



"ARE you sure you're okay? You're not looking great."

Nina was at the vegetable patch like always with Dino, who looked at her with a crease between his brows.

She didn't need him to tell her. She looked terrible, worn down, and sleep-deprived.

Boys still kept trying to chat her up though, which made her nearly believe the heroine power-up could eliminate any age or sex restrictions. They'd probably whisper sweet nothings into the ear of a stuffed animal if it had the same effect.

Actually, if Ed in cat form had the hero buff, everyone in the world would turn into a cat lover, and there'd be world peace.

"Nina?" Dino inquired.

"Oh, sorry. I was merely thinking about world peace."

"…Does the buff mess with your cognition?"

Nina felt Dino misunderstood something, so she returned to her work.

She felt the patch looked healthier after pulling the weeds and laying down fertilizer. Her work there was precious to her now. It

calmed her—the one thing she could work on and immediately see results.

"By the way, you were engaged to Lady Clarissa before this, right?" Nina recalled. "Does that mean if she hadn't won the raffle, you two would've just gotten married?"

"Hm, probably. It works family-wise and age-wise, after all."

Hearing him talk about it like it wasn't his own life made Nina realize she had no idea how Dino truly felt about Clarissa. However, she definitely didn't feel comfortable coming straight out and asking.

And what about Clarissa? Maybe she didn't actually like him, considering she was trying to cause trouble with the person she would've married if she'd done nothing. Nevertheless, Clarissa was going to gloat and be with Dino while Nina got nothing. That must mean Clarissa didn't hate him either, did she? The fact that she considered him the main love interest meant she was fine with him as her romantic partner.

"Maybe…she wants to experience overcoming an obstacle…" Nina reasoned out. Maybe she was the kind of person who thought a pleasant, peaceful romance was boring. Nina didn't understand that in the least, but different strokes for different folks…

After finishing her work, Nina looked around with satisfaction and noticed Clarissa was busy with something beneath a tree nearby. Looking closer, she noticed Clarissa fiddling with a cord tied to a bucket in the tree.

"Oh, I get it. This time, she's gonna dump water on me from the tree," Nina conveyed.

At least Dino was there this time, meaning she wasn't going to be left soaking wet forever.

She was at a good stopping point with her cleaning and gardening work, so it made sense to get drenched now and head on home.

She put her shovel in her empty bucket and walked toward the tree, her next work site.

"Hello, Lady Clarissa," she greeted.

"Huh? You're early! I mean, nothing."

It seemed Clarissa hadn't finished preparations yet, leaving her blatantly holding the cord leading to the bucket.

From what Nina could tell, the cord was tangled. There was a massive knot in Clarissa's hands, and it coiled around on the ground too.

Nina's first thought was that the cord was way too long. Secondly, it was also way too tangled, even considering how long it was.

There were admittedly several other criticisms that went through her head, but maybe a sheltered noble-born girl never got a chance to work through these situations. Clarissa might have been reincarnated, but it wasn't like many people had experience setting up a bucket to dump water on someone.

Nina decided it would've been best to redo the whole thing if Clarissa wasn't ready yet. She turned on her heel to go back, but then saw Dino heading their way.

"Nina, you forgot something," he called out. "This shovel needs to go back too. Oh, Clarissa? What are you doing here?"

Clarissa panicked when Dino showed up and jerked the cord behind her to try and hide it. Such an obvious move was basically like shouting, "Look at me!"

"What's that cord?" He moved closer, and Clarissa pulled back.

Then something moved above them.

"Your Highness!" both Nina and Clarissa exclaimed.

Dino looked up. Clarissa pushed him out of the way, and the water poured down her head.

She stood there soaked and frozen in place for a moment. Then, she seemed to come up with an idea as she glared at Nina. "How horrible of you! You put that bucket in the tree to spill water on His Highness. Admit it!"

Clarissa pointed the blame at Nina, while very kindly explaining the nature of this particular torment. It was, of course, ridiculous, considering the cord tied to the bucket was in Clarissa's hand.

Even so, anticipation gleamed in Clarissa's eyes. She probably wanted a heroine who denied it.

…Clarissa's still bad at carrying plans out. Nina was utterly worn out, but she was under contract—she couldn't run away.

With a deep breath, Nina yelled, "I haven't done anything! It's all a misunderstanding!"

With that cry of the heroine, Clarissa's face lit up with joy. The soaking-wet villainess turned and exited stage left. Nina could practically see the word "Satisfied" written on her back. It was probably matched by one on Nina's that said: "Fatigued."

"Good work, Nina," Dino offered as Nina picked up the bucket.

Clarissa was so bad at seeing a plan through that she left before even cleaning up the scene of the crime, putting even more on Nina. If this were a real case of bullying, Nina would want Clarissa to destroy the evidence, at least.

Nina asked Dino to get rid of the cord while she took the buckets back to the shed. She'd checked around the tree to ensure nothing was left and found three more buckets, which she assumed were extras just in case—meaning she was stuck dealing with four buckets.

They were surprisingly heavy for metal buckets, causing Nina to start panting from the moderate exertion of carrying them.

"You know, before worrying about extra buckets, she should've worried about getting the length of the cord right," she muttered.

It was very like Clarissa: hard-working but bad at execution. Nina truly wished she would consider what it was like for the person cleaning up her mess.

Finally reaching the shed, she opened the door and stacked the four buckets behind some wooden crates. With that weight off her, she sank to the ground in exhaustion, leaning against one of the boxes.

She let out a long sigh, and her eyelids slowly closed.

Sometimes, she had no clue what she was doing, but it was all for Aida. It didn't matter how ridiculous or meaningless it was; she was happy as long as it meant easing Aida's pain.

"Hm…?"

Before she knew it, darkness had fallen around her. She blinked over and over, her eyes slowly adjusting to the gloom. It wasn't only until she took in her surroundings that she understood her own mistake.

"No way, I fell asleep?!"

She was still inside the academy's shed. Nina remembered returning the buckets and must've fallen asleep after sitting down.

"Oh no, I have to get home right away."

Through a small window near the roof of the shed, she could only see the night sky. She had no idea how long she'd been there.

Nina stood and pushed the door. It didn't move. She tugged and hit it repeatedly, but it wouldn't budge.

"Did someone lock it?"

The shed stored academy equipment, and the person patrolling the grounds would lock it up. Boxes and objects were stacked high enough to hide Nina as she dozed off. They must not have seen her in there.

If that was the case, it meant no one was going to come unlock the shed until morning at the earliest.

Aida might assume Nina stayed a bit longer at work if she was only a little late, but there was obviously something wrong if she didn't come home at all during the night.

Her mom had only recently gotten back her strength to get out of bed, and Nina didn't want to put any stress on her if she didn't have to. There was a chance she could collapse in the street if she went out looking for Nina.

"I have to get out of here."

It would be easiest if she could break down the door, but she didn't think she was strong enough to do that because of how sturdy it felt when she was tugging at it.

That left her only one option.

She looked at the window above her.

"I should be able to get high enough to reach it if I stack some boxes up…but I think it'll be a tight squeeze."

She might be able to break the glass, but she couldn't exactly break herself into bits to go through the window. It was hard to tell

if she'd be able to get through or not.

"Welp, let's try first and think about it more later if we have to."

Nina got to work stacking the crates in the gloom. She didn't know what was in them, but they were ridiculously heavy. They felt more stable when piled up, but sweat was pouring down her temples by the time she got them three high.

"Next, just gotta break the glass…"

She climbed up on the crates and smashed the glass with the haft of a spade. There was something satisfying about the sound as the glass fell both inside and out of the shed.

If she tried to get out as it was, she'd end up covered in her own blood. She had to make sure she got every shard of glass out of the frame before trying, but she was having a hard time aiming the end of her spade and couldn't knock the last bits out.

She was still too far down to do it, so she considered stacking another crate up before finishing cleaning the window frame out.

"Nina?! Are you in there?!" came a shout.

"…Ed?"

It was definitely Ed's voice coming through the window. She had no clue why he was at the academy at night, but it was dangerous to come any closer.

"Ed, there's glass everywhere, don't come any closer!"

Even a single shard of glass piercing his soft toe beans would be a tragedy. She'd rather end up covered in blood herself if it meant saving a cat from harm.

"Nina, stand back from the door!" she heard him shout. Before she could reply, the shed's door shuddered.

She didn't even have time to register shock at what was happening before the door burst down with a loud, splintering crack. It thumped down, sending dust into the air and letting moonlight stream into the shed.

"Nina!" A figure rushed in, searched the area, and quickly found Nina atop the crates. His eyes caught the moonlight and glittered blue and gold like gemstones, leaving Nina frozen with a spade in hand. "Nina, are you all right?!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm fine." She was tempted to say that the shed door wasn't all right, but she didn't have much right to, seeing as she was the one who broke the window. "Ed… Is that really you? Why are you here? And why are you human?"

He was both in human form and wearing the academy's uniform. Considering he was in the same year as her, it made sense that he would own the uniform.

No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't think of an explanation for why he was there.

"You were late returning home," he answered. "I asked Dino, and he said you had gone to put away the buckets. I came to see if you were here… What in the world happened?"

Despite his explanation, Nina was still left with nothing but questions, but she decided she should answer his question before asking hers. "I must've fallen asleep after putting the buckets away. The door wouldn't open, so I was gonna try going out the window."

"Which is why you broke the glass? You're not injured, are you?" He sounded half exasperated and half concerned, but his voice was slowly going back to normal.

"I'm fine," she answered. "So…why are you here?"

"I told you. You were late returning home."

"Well, yeah, but how'd you know I was late going home?"

He probably could have used some divine power to go to Dino and then come to the academy, but the only person who had any way of knowing when Nina was supposed to get home was Aida, who knew her work schedule. Even if Ed had simply been waiting for a long time at her window, he wouldn't have any way of knowing if she had to stay late at work or was still at the academy.

"Well… Come down from those crates first. Are you sure you're not injured?" he asked concerned.

"I'm fine."

She'd stacked the crates vertically. While she had been able to climb up, climbing down was another matter. She wanted to ask Ed to either move away or turn around because there was a chance he'd get a complete look up her skirt since she would crawl back

downward from the crates, but he stepped forward and opened his arms before she could say anything.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Come on, I'll catch you."

Despite how calmly he said it, she had no idea what he was saying. She froze, blinking, then her cheeks started burning. "D-Don't be stupid! I don't want to knock you over!"

To Nina, it was the obvious thing to say, but a wrinkle of disappointment appeared on his brow. "I know my body tends to give out, but I train it plenty to compensate. I will have no problem catching a person your size, Nina."

"And I'm saying it's a huge problem!"

"Nina," he repeated quietly, making Nina jolt. He sighed with the sort of smile you'd have when looking at your dearest love. "Come here, Nina."

"Urk!"

What the heck? What was that? That smile? The face of a boy chosen as a god's servant was such an unfair trap that it bewildered her.

"I-I just don't know! I might knee you in the face and make your nose bleed and knock you over!" she shouted frantically, but he only smiled back.

Argh, I have no clue anymore!

She steeled herself, closed her eyes, and jumped from the crate. There was a moment where she felt like she was floating in air, then a pair of strong arms wrapped around her.

She opened her eyes to see his face so near hers, his blue and gold eyes crinkled happily. "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"



Hearing his sweet voice so close sent a shiver down her spine.

It was because he was working for a god. The fact that her face was burning and her heart was pounding was all because of the god, for sure.

"O-Okay, just let me down now," she pleaded, squirming and flailing her arms.

He put her down, but then immediately grabbed her wrist. "What's this?" he noticed, looking at several tiny scratches leaving little lines of blood streaking down her arm.

She didn't remember getting scratched like that, but it looked like a scrape from when she was moving the crates.

Edmund pulled out a handkerchief and wrapped it around her arm. She stood still, watching in surprise at how well the son of a duke could care for wounds, but then quickly stopped his hand. "It's nothing but a scrape. It barely even hurts. You don't have to make such a big deal out of it," she protested.

"I asked if you were injured, didn't I?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't even notice this. It doesn't even count as an injury."

"Are you saying it doesn't matter because you didn't notice?" He looked blatantly upset when Nina nodded, but then sighed and smiled for some reason. "I see. Well, I suppose we'll have to be extra careful since I can't see your pain."

"Huh? What do you— Ack!" Before she could ask him what he meant, he'd swept her into his arms.

"I can't transport using divine powers if it's not for the contract, so I'll have to send you by carriage. And I'll carry you that far," he explained.

"Why?! I can walk! And we're going to leave the window and door broken like that?! I can walk!"

She tried to get down, but his arms showed no signs of loosening despite his slim build. With no other options, she went to work peeling his fingers open one by one, but he simply put one back down when she started on the next one, getting her nowhere.

"Why are you— Oh! This is the heroine buff, isn't it?!" she demanded. That mysterious power that turned everyone into

perverts could explain Edmund's strange behavior.

"I'm a contractee," he rebuffed. "You confirmed with Dino that it does not affect other promisees."

"Okay, so you're protecting your precious heroine actor?"

"There may be some of that, but I wouldn't have to carry you if I was simply protecting you."

"If you don't have to do it, put me down!" Everything he was doing, saying, and being was plain crazy right now.

"I might not have to, but I do want to," he insisted.

"What…?" What the heck did he mean by that, not needing to hold her but wanting to? *Overtaken by confusion and still in his arms.* "Advantages to carrying me… Preventing my escape? Leaving only one set of footprints?"

Edmund burst into laughter like he couldn't hold it in. "What are you on about? I'm not trying to commit the perfect crime. There's a much simpler explanation."

"Simpler… You walk faster than me?" To be honest, she was pretty sure she walked faster than he would when he was carrying a person, but he seemed to think she was injured, so maybe he was considering that.

"No. I simply want to be close to you. I can look into your face from up close when I'm holding you like this," he replied, looking into her eyes, his face still close to hers. One gold eye that seemed to hold the shining sun, one blue as clear as the sky on a cloudless day, the silvery hair that framed skin so smooth the world's women would cry with jealousy, and features so perfect there couldn't possibly be any more beautiful.

The light of the moon caught on his softly swaying hair, and Nina's heart leaped in her chest.

"Nope! Can't do it! Don't look at me!" she proclaimed. She squirmed to push Edmund's face away because she couldn't bear how embarrassed she felt, but she worried she'd push his neck in some odd direction if she kept at it.

With no other option, she decided all she could do was look away herself, but his chuckle in her ear made her heart pound. "I want to see cat Ed…" she muttered.

"Please bear with me as I am, for now. Until now…I've been the one enduring it."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

She didn't understand what he meant, but it was dangerous to look at him or talk more. He said he'd put her in a carriage; she just had to hold out until then.

But Nina was far too naïve. She had no way of knowing that the far more difficult battle awaited her in the carriage, where he sat beside her, looking at her, leaving her with even fewer routes of escape than when he held her.

Chapter 6: A Parting, an End, and a New Sign

"NINA, come look at the flowers with me, would you?"

One day, Aida was out of bed for the first time in a long while and looking at the flowers in the garden. She didn't look very well at all, but Nina hadn't seen her sitting up in a chair like that in what seemed like days.

Honestly, she would have been just as happy if she stayed in bed, conserving her strength.

Nina moved another chair over beside Aida's and sat down.

It was a small garden. There was a time when they'd grow vegetables there, but they had a little extra money now that Nina was working, letting them grow flowers again instead.

Her father had loved flowers, and because of him, Aida began gardening.

Most of the flowers were transplanted wildflowers, nothing extravagant, but Nina still loved them all the same.

"They're all blooming beautifully since you've been watering them so carefully," said Aida with a happy smile.

Nina glanced over at her face. Her cheeks were hollowed, telling Nina that the moment she feared this whole time was looming closer. So many times she'd wished she could heal Aida in the same way she cared for these flowers, by working the earth, watering, pulling weeds.

But reality never changed; it was always there. She needed to face it without running from it.

"Mom, are you in pain? Is it bad?" asked Nina.

"No, it doesn't hurt. I haven't felt any pain ever since I started taking those pills you got. I really appreciate that."

"I'm glad…"

Even if she couldn't keep Aida alive, if she could just relieve her pain… So long as she could do that, she would have no regrets no matter what sort of downfall she had to endure.

"Nina, do you know what those purple flowers are called?" Aida pointed to a plant with round clusters of tiny purple flowers.

Nina picked one bunch and gave it to Aida. They smelled faintly sweet, like vanilla.

"It's called heliotrope," she explained.

"They smell beautiful." Nina had been tending the garden in Aida's place, but this was her first time hearing the name of that particular flower.

"Your dad planted these flowers before he passed away. In the language of flowers, they mean 'eternal love'… He knew he wouldn't be with us much longer."

Nina was at a loss for words as she watched Aida smell the flowers, a peaceful look on her face.

"Nina, your mother has a prediction for you," she continued. "You're going to meet an absolutely wonderful young man who will treasure you."

"Come on, Mom." That wasn't a prediction; it was the sort of wish every mother in the world had for their daughter.

Nina tried to laugh it off but couldn't. Aida's smile was too gentle. "Nina, you're such a good girl. You have a great head on your shoulders, and you can do anything. But it's about time you start thinking about your own happiness. It's okay to rely on someone else, to ask to have things your way sometimes." She softly reached out and placed the heliotrope in Nina's hair. "And remember, your mom will always be with you. I love you; I'll love you for all eternity."

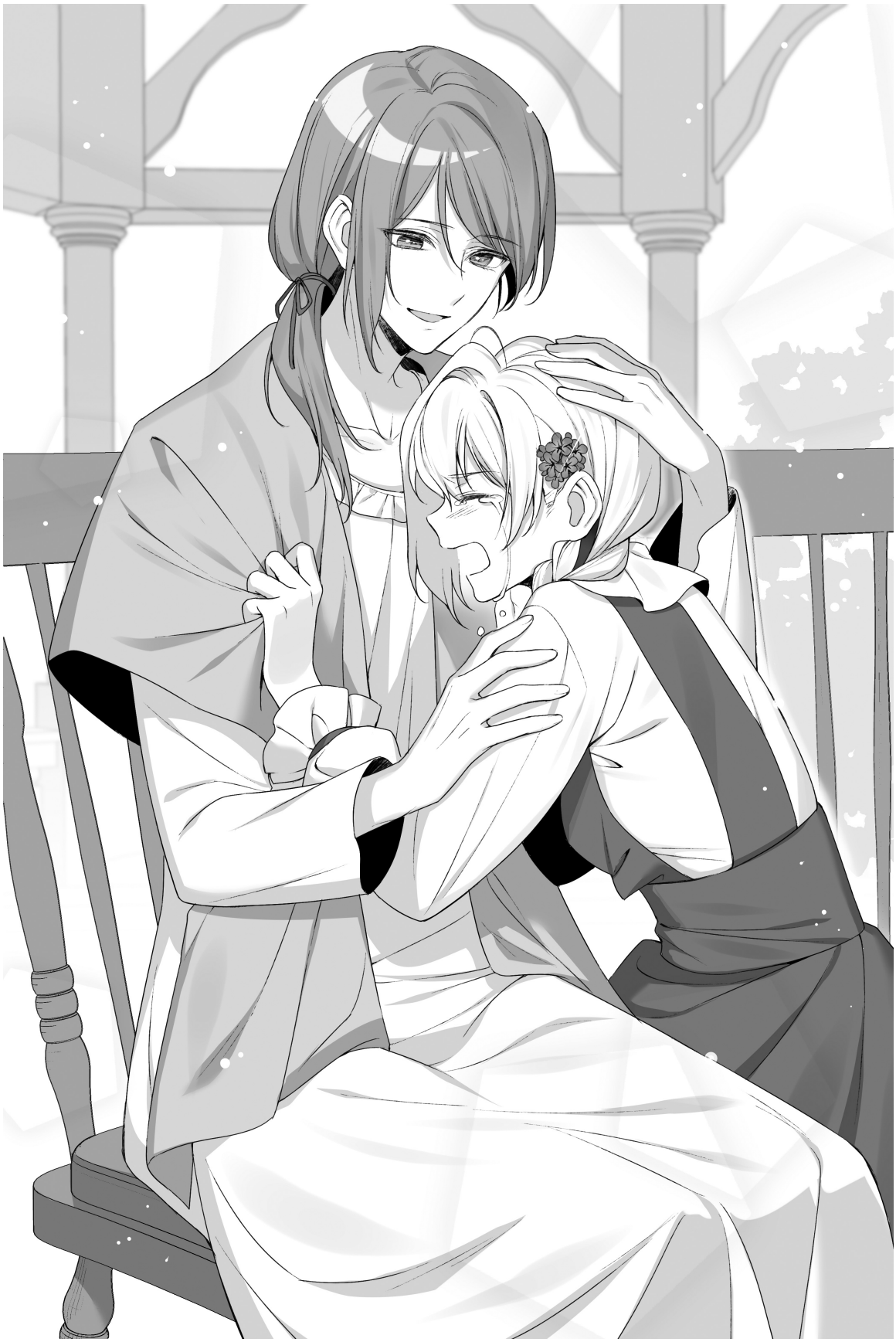
What she said carried both eternal love…and an eternal farewell. When Nina realized that, she put her arms around Aida. "No!" She'd hid her feelings for so long because she didn't want to worry Aida, but she couldn't hold them back any longer. "I don't

need eternity. Just be here with me, now! Don’t go! Don’t leave me alone!”

Her cries were quickly taken over by sobs. All she could do was cling to Aida. She was usually so warm, soft, and graceful, but Nina felt like she could snap her in two if she held her too strongly—she was so fragile.

That made her even sadder because she was forced to look directly at reality, even if she hated it, to acknowledge that Aida had very little time left.

Aida gently stroked Nina’s hair as she cried. “I’m sorry, Nina. I love you. I’ll always watch over you, forever and ever…” Her voice trembled as she put her arms around Nina.



That night, with her hand held tight in Nina's, surrounded by the sweet scent of heliotropes on her pillow, Aida slipped into sleep and began her journey to the heavens.



THE next day was busy.

While this world had a Medieval Europe flavor to it—meaning Nina expected a burial—Aida was instead cremated.

If you weren't a member of a family with a magnificent crypt, you were generally entombed in a communal graveyard. These were limited due to health and space-saving restrictions, making cremation commonplace.

Laying Aida to rest passed quickly; it was like Nina was watching someone else do everything.

After that was done, she cleaned the house. She weeded. She polished the floor. She dusted.

Nina couldn't relax if she wasn't doing something; she couldn't focus if she were—she just kept moving.

There was nothing else she could do to distract herself.

"Maybe…I should have a cup of tea." Night had fallen while she'd been mindlessly cleaning. Nina hadn't eaten since the night before, having not felt any hunger.

Thirst still came, so she boiled the kettle and poured herself a cup of tea. Drinking the warm tea made it feel like the past few days had all been a dream.

Her eyes turned toward Aida's room. She felt like Aida would come through the doorway at any moment, even though she knew that was impossible.

"I should sleep. I have to go to school tomorrow," she murmured, the words echoing through the empty house before fading.

No one responded. There was no one there to wish her sweet dreams.

It felt like there was a hole in her heart, and all her emotions had spilled out of it.



"GOOD evening…"

When she opened the door to her room, she found the white cat waiting in the window. His beautiful fur glimmered in the moonlight. Nina couldn't help but think how lovely he was today, as always.

"I'm sorry for not going to school today. Don't worry, I'll go tomorrow," Nina told him. The contract didn't say anything about attending school every day, but she couldn't very well carry out her duties if she didn't go.

"That's okay," replied Ed. "I…heard about your mother."

"Oh." She wasn't surprised he knew. Dino probably told him she wasn't at school, or maybe the god told him everything.

"Are you okay…?" he asked.

"I knew this was coming; the doctor told us before she only had a month to live. Thanks to the contract, she got a lot longer than that and wasn't suffering. Thank you." Even with the god's help, she was so weak in the end. Nina shuddered to think what it would have been like for her if she'd been in pain that whole time. Even if it only eliminated her pain, Nina could never be grateful enough.

"It wasn't my power that did it," he responded.

"I know. But still, thank you." Even if the contract couldn't cure Aida, it was still plenty worth it.

"…Are you sure you're all right?" asked Ed timidly.

Nina nodded. "I'm fine. I'll keep being the heroine. It doesn't even matter what kind of downfall's gonna get me—I'm not worried anymore. I have to do something, or my brain won't shut up."

"That's not what I mean. Are *you* all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Nina… Your mother…she died…" he said painfully, his tail drooping.

"I'm okay. I knew all along this was gonna happen. I'm not a kid anymore. I can work and take care of myself," she answered, trying to smile, but tears started falling from her eyes.

She looked down and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. The cloth got darker and darker. No matter how many times she wiped her eyes, the tears simply wouldn't stop. Something about that was so funny that she laughed.

"Nina." Ed's voice came from higher than before.

The moment that registered in her mind, she felt someone's arms wrap around her. She looked up to see the beautiful white-haired boy with blue and gold eyes. "Ed…?"

His eyes looked steadily back at her, incredibly tender and filled with sorrow. "Today is an exception. Today, I'm not the messenger of a god; I'm merely Edmund. Go on—complain, cry, do whatever you need to."

"What's going on? You've been turning human a lot lately," she teased as she tried to smile, but the tears kept coming, bringing with them an overflowing sorrow from out of nowhere. "My mom… She's gone. I'm all alone…"

And with those words spoken out loud, the dam inside her burst, and tears poured from her eyes. She couldn't do anything to stop them; she only bit her lip and tried to endure the flood.

Edmund held her tight in his arms, gently stroking her hair the entire time.

How long were they even like that?

She felt a little calmer after crying for a while. And, once she was, she finally realized how odd this situation was.

Why was Edmund holding her, stroking her hair? She knew he was being kind by trying to comfort her, but she just felt on edge in the arms of such an attractive boy. She'd felt like that the night he carried her after rescuing her from the shed, but he seemed even closer tonight.

"O-Okay, that's enough. You can let go now."

"I'd like to stay like this for a little longer. I don't often get the opportunity to do this."

"What opportunity…?" What was he on about? She was done crying, so he didn't have to volunteer to help her anymore.

"I think…I like it when you stroke me," he answered.

"What? Oh, when you're a cat, you mean." He seemed disappointed lately. Apparently, that really was because he wanted to be petted. Even if he was a human originally, maybe he leaned toward cat feelings when he was in cat form.

"But I think I like it more when I can stroke your hair," he continued.

"What?" He didn't stop despite her cry. "Your fur is definitely nicer than my hair, though. Must be torture not being able to pet your own fur." It was an absolute shame that he couldn't enjoy such ultimate floof. Her hair paled in comparison, but maybe it was some consolation.

"That's not really why. It's… Oh, never mind," he relented, loosening his arms, finally releasing her.

Now free, she moved away from him and sat on the edge of her bed. Having such a handsome boy in her room was incredibly weird, but she wasn't nervous when she thought of him as Ed the cat.

"I know I don't have as many reasons to keep going, but I'm still going to make sure I'm a good heroine," she voiced. "You don't need to worry about that. And I feel a lot better about the whole downfall thing, since now it won't cause Mom any trouble. If I get out of it okay and free, I think I'll take the reward money and leave town."

There was a chance she'd face harsh punishment, but it didn't matter anymore. Besides, living alone in this town, in this house, would be too painful.

"You… You can't do that," said Ed falteringly.

Nina looked at him with confusion. "Why not? You're the one who told me to be the heroine. Don't you want to be healthy? I don't care what happens to me."

"I do want to be healthy. I put too much burden on those around me."

Nina heard that, while Edmund didn't have a chronic illness, his body did fail him at the slightest provocation. It would be difficult for both him and those around him if he couldn't engage with society in a way expected of him as the son of a duke. That's why he made the contract and why he should be happy, right?

"Then it's all fine, right?" asked Nina.

"If it means you are suffering, then I don't need health."

Nina frowned, not understanding what he meant. "What's this about? Are you…pitying me?"

"No."

"Are you planning on stopping the downfall?"

"No, I'm not. Rather, I can't. Nothing I do can change anything if it falls within the scope of the god's power."

If that was the case, there was no point in being against it. "Well, then, just leave it alone."

"I don't want to."

"Why?" She was starting to get frustrated. He almost sounded like a stubborn child.

He moved over to where she was sitting on the bed and knelt before her on the ground. Her eyes widened in surprise. She wasn't expecting that. Now, at the same height, his blue and gold eyes looked into her coral ones.

"I can't change the contract," he began, "But I may be able to do something if I can find a loophole. It's a gamble, of course."

"A loophole?"

"I know I'm the one who brought you this contract, but I don't want to see you suffer. Please…trust me."

She didn't entirely understand what he was talking about, but she was overwhelmed by the sincerity in his eyes.

He'd never once done anything to hurt her. In fact, he'd helped her several times. Maybe he deserved her trust.

"…Okay. I'll trust you."

"I will keep my promise," he assured her.

She nodded, and he gave her a dazzling smile.

Nina's daily life didn't change much after that night. She went to school, spent time with Dino, had altercations with Clarissa, cleaned, and went to work.

The world went on like it always had, even without Aida. It was an odd sensation, but even Nina slowly started to get used to that world as she kept herself busy each day.



"GOOD evening."

The white cat appeared in her window like always. She'd given so many progress reports, but this was the last time.

"Tomorrow is the graduation party," explained Ed, his eyes turning toward the bed.

She followed his gaze and saw a dazzling gown laid out. This wasn't the first time he'd done that, but she still hadn't figured out how, even after seeing it so many times.

"But, Ed, I can't put it on by myself. There's no way I can wear a gown," she protested.

She couldn't even get the corset on by herself. Aida helped her with the last dress, but it still took quite a long time. Wearing such annoying, constricting clothing every day was practically self-torture. It made her respect all those young noble ladies smiling gracefully.

"It's all right, take a look."

She picked it up. It was glorious and voluminous, yet with a simple construction, essentially a one-piece. The simplified corset-like part was already laced up. All she had to do was pull it on and tie up the ribbons. She should have no trouble doing it on her own.

"Ed, you always think of even the tiny details," she praised. He'd given her the cold medicine and saved her from the other boys at the party. It was incredible that he was so attentive despite being so handsome; he didn't need to fall back on his looks.

Once he was healthy and out in the social world, the noble ladies weren't going to leave him alone. Maybe he'd struggle when surrounded by them. Or, perhaps he'd actually enjoy it, handling them with ease.

Nina didn’t know anything about that world, but it was fun trying to imagine it.

The white cat’s expression softened when he saw Nina smiling, his tail swaying back and forth.

“All right, let’s take another look at the contract.”

1. The villainess is the daughter of a marquess and is both smart and beautiful. She’s engaged to a prince. The heroine is a commoner.
2. The heroine comes to school and gets friendly with the prince.
3. Both the villainess’s fiancé and everyone around are captivated by the heroine’s charms. People find out the villainess bullied the heroine, and everyone stops being friends with her.
4. The villainess protects the prince. True love blossoms.
5. The heroine goes to the graduation party with the prince. Everyone learns of the heroine’s deeds, and then there’s the love confession scene.

“This last item is where your downfall is meant to take place. It’s the last target in the contract—and the end,” summarized Ed, having spread out the rainbow-colored contract he had shown her before and tracing the words with a beautifully fuzzy paw as he spoke. “What’s written here cannot be changed, and the contractee is obligated to fulfill each of these. However, anything not specified in the contract can be left to your personal discretion. That is what we’ll aim for.”

“I still don’t know what you mean,” she admitted. The usual interpretation would be that the heroine ends up charged with some crime, and the villainess gets a happy ending. What could they go for other than that? And how?

The best Nina could come up with was swapping the places of “heroine” and “villainess” in the contract, but the god would probably prevent them from doing that.

“Item number five,” he pointed out. “Try breaking it down and thinking it through that way.”

“Break it down?”

"First, 'The heroine goes to the graduation party with the prince.' Then, 'Everyone learns of the heroine's deeds,' and finally, 'then there's the love confession scene.' We can think of these three as separate items."

She still didn't get it.

"I want you to continue as you have been, as I have no guarantee this will work well," he stated. "You are the heroine. No matter what you do, the ring's power will keep you from violating the contract."

"By that logic, you also can't do anything 'cause you're under the effects of your ring, aren't you?"

While he might be working for the god, he was still reincarnated and under a contract, just like Nina. He said the god's power would go into effect even if they tried to deviate from the contract.

"The contract will be fulfilled. That is our only option," he continued. "But I will prevent your downfall, I promise. I've spoken to Dino too about this, and he's on board. Don't worry. Everything will be all right."

He told her that, but fulfilling the contract was the same as causing her downfall. They both meant the same thing, they couldn't be separated, and the god's power kept them from resisting at all.

Ultimately, Ed simply smiled, not telling her the most important details about what he would do.



THEN, finally, it was the day of the graduation party.

Nina sighed for the umpteenth time, now in her dress and already at the venue with Dino. That should satisfy the part in the contract about her going to the graduation party with him.

Unlike the evening soirée before, the hall was filled with celebratory joy at graduating and a sense of release.

The tablecloths were all replaced as they were a different color from the party. It seemed a bit wasteful to a commoner like Nina,

but this entire building was only used for the soirées and celebration parties anyway.

Maybe to any regular noble, the idea of using the same tablecloths was quite unthinkable.

The chandeliers glittered overhead, the aroma of the food wafted around her, and the floral decorations were beautifully arranged. There were more seemingly closer couples mingling about. Spending a year together in the academy must have sparked some flames of romance.

Nina looked around at all the partygoers having fun and let out yet another sigh. "…Will everything be okay?" she asked.

There was, as expected, quite the uproar that the engaged prince had brought another girl—a commoner, at that—to the party. The emotions flooding the room seemed utterly normal: disgust at Dino, sympathy for Clarrisa, and revulsion toward Nina.

But no one actually said anything; they all just greeted them. It was like the calm before the gloat storm, the main event. Once the relish started, Nina's fall from grace was inevitable.

She didn't have any problem with the fact that she'd worked so hard to make this exact thing happen, but there were several parts about this situation she was objectively unhappy with.

"Nina, are you okay?" asked Dino. "Clarissa should be showing up any minute now."

That was when she realized she'd been standing there in a daze. The contract was coming to its end—and to her planned downfall. It was the most crucial scene. She couldn't lose focus now.

Aida may not be there anymore, but Nina got enough blessings from this job to feel grateful. She had to work hard for Ed's and Dino's sake too.

"I'm okay," she replied. "Thank you for everything you've done, Your Highness."

"It was nothing. And it's not over yet. By the way…that dress looks really nice on you."

Nina's mouth dropped open, even that was the sort of thing boys always said in this kind of situation. "I'm not surprised a prince would be good at flattery too," she noted.

"It's not flattery. Did Ed give you that dress?"

"Hm? No. Well…I actually don't know. It was sent by the god, so I assumed they picked whatever they thought would work," she answered as she now took in her attire.

It was made from a pale aqua fabric and had a cute, delicate silhouette. Pink beads were scattered across the dress while flowers of the same aqua fabric with yellow-and blue-beaded centers decorated her waistline.

"The god picked it out? But the beads— Oh, looks like Clarissa just arrived," announced Dino, looking toward the imposingly beautiful girl in her flaming red gown.

The red of her dress against the plum color of her hair was a rather clashing color combination. It made Nina's eyes hurt a little.

More than that, she couldn't help but notice how happy Clarissa looked, as if she'd turned into the embodiment of excitement and couldn't fully hide her emotions. It was obvious she'd been looking forward to this day for a long time.

"Your Highness," she greeted. "What is the meaning of this? You are my betrothed; why are you here with this commoner?" Her eyes gleamed as she jabbed her finger toward Nina.

Maybe it was only natural that she was like this since today was the day of the long-awaited gloat. She'd played the villainess role with everything she had all for this moment.

She might be impatient, bad at following through with her plans, and more suited to a flawed heroine role, but, in her heart, she was the perfect villainess.

With the three contracted actors there for the usual comedic play, the rest of the students around stopped and watched, surrounding them from afar.

They might not want to get involved, but maybe it was at least fun to watch. Either that or they did want to get involved, but the god wouldn't let them get any closer.

If it were up to Nina, she would rather be a laid-back observer.

Once the other students took their places, Dino stepped forward, his face grim. "This might not be an appropriate place to say this, but there's something I want you to hear." His voice carried

well. All the students and Clarissa were glued to him. It couldn't be only Nina's imagination that made it look like Clarissa's expression practically screamed, "This is it!"

Dino took a deep breath, looked deep into Clarissa's jade eyes, and declared, "Nina is always weeding the flower beds and vegetable patch. She's also very passionate about watering."

"Uh… What?"

A long time passed before Clarissa even managed to get that single word out. Apparently, this was the part corresponding to the line in the contract that said, "Everyone learns of the heroine's deeds." Probably?

Ed must have decided that the heroine's "deeds" could be anything, but Clarissa's expression was terrifying. Unsurprisingly, she'd glower like that; she surely was going for her "bullying" of the heroine as a misunderstanding, where she would expose the heroine's terrible personality once the heroine blamed her for that.

But, if the god's power wasn't interfering, it meant that whatever was happening was okay with the god. Maybe everything outside the scope of the contract was far more open to interpretation than Nina expected.

"What is this about?" demanded Clarissa.

"It is number five of the contract," came the voice of a white-haired boy, who appeared behind Clarissa in her confusion. Those beautiful blue and gold eyes, the far too handsome features that threatened to send Nina's heart fluttering. There was no doubt it was Edmund.

He was as beautiful as ever, and the formal clothing suited him well.

Nina was just as taken aback as Clarissa was since she never imagined he'd come. Actually, all the students around them were surprised too, but why?

"Ed barely goes out to social events, let alone to the academy, and you know what he looks like. He was basically raised in a tower, but the people who know about him definitely know about him," Dino quietly explained for Nina's sake.

Typically, princesses were the ones being locked away in towers, so this was her first time hearing anyone use that trope as a metaphor for anyone but a lady. It was kind of scary how plausible that would be with Edmund in a tower, considering how pretty he was.

It also explained why the god chose him to be the person negotiating with potential heroines.

"You! You're the one working for the god in charge of the raffle!" cried Clarissa, her eyes sparkling.

He told Nina they had met only once, but it seemed Clarissa still remembered him. Actually, he stated that things got complicated when he met her. Assuming they weren't suspicious of him randomly showing up, most people would be delighted by a visit from such an attractive boy.

"I heard rumors there was a beautiful boy with silver hair at the soirée," exclaimed Clarissa. "You really do exist!"

"My name is Edmund Zelati. It is a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance, Lady Clarissa."

Clarissa was spellbound, her eyes locked on him as he gave her a graceful bow. Nina wanted to ask her what happened with Dino, but she wouldn't have needed this villainess play if she genuinely had feelings for Dino. Maybe she simply wanted some excitement or to overcome an obstacle in the path of her love.

Based on how she acted, even if she did love Dino, she definitely had room in her heart for another attractive boy.

Nina wished Clarissa would simply make it clear whether she liked Dino or not, but Dino was sort of the same in terms of his affection for her. Maybe that was how engagements between nobles and royals were.

She did not understand that world at all.

"Zelati… Are you the son of Duke Zelati?" asked Clarissa.

"The unfit second son, yes."

Clarissa's mood improved even more when she learned this beautiful boy with the graceful motions was the son of a duke.

"Lady Clarissa Tessarini, winner of the raffle. There is only one remaining condition of your contract, a section of clause five. Do you

remember it?" asked Edmund.

"Of course I do. It's the love confession scene." Clarissa nodded vigorously, answering without hesitation.

She wrote the contract within only three minutes, so the fact that she remembered what was left was a sign that she was quite picky about these clauses. And yet she was so bad at carrying things to the end. It must be a character trait of hers that couldn't be helped.

"Considering how Prince Dino is, are you…Lord Edmund, going to take on that role instead?" she asked.

"I am. Is that acceptable?"

"Hm… It wouldn't be bad to be stolen back from a tryst with a duke's son. Let's just start by hearing how you feel."

What she muttered was not exactly moral, but the problem was that this was the end of the contract. There was no guarantee Dino would actually bother to steal her back. Did that mean she was confident enough in herself to believe Dino wouldn't give up chasing after her?

Nina couldn't help feeling this whole play was completely unnecessary if what Clarissa wanted was to end up with Dino.

Clarissa glanced sideways at Nina, who was filled with conflicting emotions. The raffle winner herself was bewitching and beautiful, her smile oozing with confidence.

Edmund looked at Clarissa's expression and nodded with satisfaction.

Oh, so that's what he's doing.

Even if the bullying issue never came out, and Dino confessed his love to Clarissa and they got married, Nina would only be an obstacle to their love. That could have been the cause that led to her downfall.

But if Edmund, a different contractee, took on the role in Dino's place, then it might work out. They already knew that everything was very loosely interpreted as long as the promisees carried out what was specifically written in the contract. This shouldn't cause a problem.

If Edmund confessed his love and married Clarissa, then Nina was safe because she wasn't involved at all. That must be what he was going for.

Clarissa was the most important factor, and she seemed to react favorably to Edmund. Plus, he can't find it too bad as a duke's son to marry a bright and beautiful daughter of a marquess.

Nina was worried about him choosing his life partner just to save her, but she learned from seeing Dino and Clarissa that not all high-ranking pairings were made between two people who loved each other. This was actually normal.

Thinking of it that way, it was actually good for Edmund to have a smart and gorgeous lady like Clarissa, who was also into him.

Nonetheless, Nina was also worried Clarissa would suffer a little from ending her engagement with Prince Dino, depending on how she carried it out. Edmund said he'd talked to Dino about this beforehand. It should be fine, right?

It seemed Clarissa wanted Dino to win back her love, so maybe she would make it look like she was pairing off with Edmund here, then dump him after the contract ended.

Whatever way it went, it wasn't every day Nina got to see a fairytale-like love confession happen right in front of her. She was overwhelmed with emotion as she thought of everything she'd experienced since meeting the white cat sent by a god.

"Nina, would you come here, please," asked Edmund.

"Huh? Uh, okay." She nodded. Nina didn't know why he was bothering to call her over, but he had to have something in mind.

She made her way over to stand beside him. Nina understood she was meant to be a witness for this love confession, but this was way too close for that. Or maybe, since she was the heroine who enchanted everyone, he would use her to describe how Clarissa was even better.

Whatever direction he was going, she knew she should go along with his lead.

"Miss Nina Scaglione," began Edmund, Nina suddenly finding herself tense as he did.

"Y-Yes?"

"I love you."

"Oka— What?!" In her confusion, her voice jumped an octave in the end. She couldn't help staring at him with a million questions, but he merely looked back at her with such a gentle smile that she was thrown even more off balance.

"What…is this…about?" uttered Clarissa. Her words were quiet, but it was obvious from her expression that she was furious.



This was the glorious scene where the villainess received a confession of love. It was certainly unpleasant to have someone stand in the way of that.

Nina only wished Clarissa wouldn't look at *her* like that. It wasn't like she had any clue what was going on.

Edmund, on the other hand, the cause of all this confusion, was composed as he continued, "The final clause of the fifth item in the contract stated, 'then there's the love confession scene.' And here it is."

"Huh…?" The sound from Clarissa could only be described as daft.

"With that, all items of the contract have been fulfilled. The contract is complete. Thank you, everyone, for your hard work," he announced flatly as Clarissa teetered over to him.

"You have got to be kidding me! It's not supposed to end like this! I mean, no one's confessed their love to *me*!"

"There's nothing about that written in the contract."

It was true; the contract didn't specify who was confessing their love to whom. The clause didn't even say it had to be a good love confession or romantic in any way.

All it stated was that there had to be a scene where someone told someone else they loved them.

Clarissa seemed to realize that too. She shook her head, clinging to Edmund. "That's just arguing semantics! This ring will not accept that!"

She thrust her right hand up in his face, but the moment she did, the red gem shattered, and the band crumbled away to sand.

Nina was shocked by the sudden event, then felt something strange on her own finger. The blue stone on her ring shattered like the stone on Clarissa's, the ring crumbling to dust that swept away.

Edmund and Dino looked at their hands too, and Nina guessed their contract rings had also disappeared.

"It appears…the contract's completion has been officially acknowledged," concluded Edmund while the rest stood dumbfounded.

That was why he said that to me.

That's why he'd told her to trust him. He wanted to keep her from being concerned because he was saying such weird things to her—it was just for his plan.

While Nina was impressed that he'd thought through everything so carefully, Clarissa was bewildered, her cheeks pale. "But, that can't be, it's all wrong. I'm supposed to gloat, and be loved, and marry someone rich and powerful, and live as a princess. Why…why doesn't anyone love me?"

"Because you don't love anyone else, Clarissa," Dino stated without hesitation as Clarissa grappled with her shock.

"You love this setting, the titles, yourself. You ask us to want to be with someone like that?" countered Edmund, then Clarissa snapped out of her daze to glare at the former servant of a god.

"I, I don't accept this! What sort of Lucky Reincarnation Raffle is this?! You liar!"

"Everything you asked for has come true. From here on out, perhaps try using your own hard work to get somewhere," he reported without an unchanging expression. He placed a hand on Nina's back and drew her with him as he walked away from Clarissa.

"Wait! What am I supposed to do now?!" Clarissa collapsed to her knees, on the verge of tears.

Nina did understand to an extent what she meant, but the contract was properly carried out. The first item stated that the villainess was smart, beautiful, and engaged to a prince, meaning she got all that because of the contract. From Nina's perspective, Clarissa had already received plenty.

It didn't look like she really loved Dino, and her goal probably was what she planned: to gloat, to be loved, to marry into wealth and status, and to live like a princess.

But when Clarissa asked what she should do now, Nina couldn't help feeling there was some similarity with how she felt now that Aida was gone. Before she could stop herself, she'd brushed Edmund's hand aside and moved back beside Clarissa.

She knelt down and looked into her eyes, and the beautiful girl looked back with tear-filled eyes. "What? I have no business with you," said Clarissa.

"Lady Clarissa. You are beautiful."

"What?"

"You come from a noble family and have money."

"Wh-What is this about?"

"Most importantly, you're alive."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's going to be all right. You can do anything. You can be anything. Not like me. And, honestly…I think you're a shoo-in for a flawed heroine role." She took Clarissa's hand and squeezed it tight. "Lady Clarissa, you're going to be all right."

"Heroine? Wait, are you also…?" Clarissa asked. That term had no reason to exist in this world. The self-proclaimed villainess looked with confusion at Nina as she smiled.

Then, the former main love interest stepped forward. "Clarissa, what will we do about our engagement?" asked Dino gently.

Clarissa wiped her tears, turning her face away. "Why bother asking? You hate me, don't you? You do the bare minimum attending events with me, you're in that field every day, and you leave me alone while you have fun with Nina."

Dino smiled like he was looking at a child having a tantrum. "I don't necessarily like you, Clarissa, but I don't hate you either."

Nina couldn't help but frown at his words, which were far too direct and cruel. Even if it was true, he could have tried to soften the blow a bit more. He was always so kind, but he seemed harsher when it came to Clarissa.

"That means you couldn't care less about me?"

"If you want to see it that way, that's fine," he said with a smile.

Clarissa stared at him. "…Is that not what it means?"

"I'm not sure. I can't wrap my head around you wanting to complicate things even though we would've been married if you had done nothing. And it didn't feel nice to be forced to play out your little game. How about…from now on, you try to do things on your own, without the help of the contract?"

"Y-Your Highness… You knew about it as well?"

"I did. You wanted to be the villainess, so I was forced to enter a contract as the main love interest prince."

Even Clarissa lost some of her bluster after hearing Dino voice his complaints about the contract.

Nina was actually surprised by his admission. She'd got the impression he and Clarissa were only engaged and there was nothing more to it than that, but it actually sounded like he might be willing to give it another try.

Maybe when he said he didn't like her but didn't hate her, that was actually him being too shy to be more direct with his feelings. Perhaps he felt they were bound together by fate. Either way, there was almost a glimmer of hope there for them.

People talked about couples where the two were exactly like each other. In this case, they were both exactly the same in the way they weren't open with their feelings.

Nina gave Clarissa's hand another squeeze and looked into her jade-green eyes. "Lady Clarissa, you're going to be all right."

Clarissa still looked beautiful when confused and crying. She honestly was much better suited as a heroine.

Nina wanted her to simply love and be loved without bringing up petty things about how she once hated her during this.

Clarissa snapped out of her stupor, staring at Nina, and shook Nina's hand off hers. Then, she stood and announced, "A c-commoner like you has no right to address me!"

Here she was with the classic lines again.

Nina smiled and stood, then bowed. "You're right. You are the Unequaled Lady Clarissa, after all."

"Wait."

Nina went to leave, but Clarissa jumped and called for her to stop. Which was fine, but Nina turned back to see her mouth working furiously, trying to get something out.

"You too," she finally uttered.

"…What?"

"For the love of! I *mean*…you're also going to be all right. You are the heroine who stood toe to toe with me, the unequaled villainess, right?" she muttered.

Nina grinned as she watched Clarissa's face turn bright red.

She was terrible at following through, impatient, flawed despite seeming perfect, and apparently also a bit of a tsundere.

Nina believed this whole setting was far too complicated, but it seemed to fit Clarissa, so maybe that was only to be expected.

"Thank you, Lady Clarissa," Nina replied.

Dino smiled and sighed as Clarissa looked away with a huff. He might not like or hate her right now, but there definitely seemed to be some feelings there.

Seeing that made Nina happy for some reason.

Epilogue

NINA left the party venue and went to look out over the academy's vegetable patch. Edmund accompanied her, but a boy that beautiful seemed out of place there.

Even so, Dino was as attractive as him and seemed surprisingly at home here, probably a result of his love for *japonica* rice.

Once she graduated, she would never see this field again. She'd grown attached to it, considering all the effort put in to maintain it. She found saying goodbye difficult.

"I definitely can't weed in this outfit. I'm only borrowing the dress, and my heels will only sink into the dirt," she commented.

She was sad she couldn't do one last bout of weeding, but nothing could be done about that. Instead, she sat on a nearby bench with Edmund.

She looked up. White clouds dotted the sky, swimming elegantly across the blue expanse. Days like this, with their pleasant weather, nearly made Nina forget Aida was no longer with her.

She filled her lungs with air and slowly let it back out. "It's over…" she whispered.

"You did well."

A white cat appeared in the night, and she became a heroine… Even thinking back now, it all seemed so unreal.

Today, everything was finished. Conflicted emotions filled her, satisfaction at a job done against a sense of loss.

"But, Ed, going for the contract's loophole like that…" she began. "It was a really forced logic there, don't you think? I know it was accepted in the end, but it was a huge risk."

"I realized at the fourth item in the contract that the god looks only at what is literally written, with no emotional interpretation. I

had a feeling it would be all right."

"The fourth item?"

The villainess protects the prince. True love blossoms. What did he learn there?

"I first assumed that section indicated the main love interest, but I asked Dino about his feelings, and he said nothing had changed about them: he still didn't like but didn't hate Clarissa. That was when I knew the exact implementation didn't matter so long as a contractee with a contract ring fulfilled an item in the contract."

Despite his explanation, Nina still had no idea what was going on. "If true love didn't blossom for Prince Dino, then the contract wasn't fulfilled, was it?" she asked.

"What I mean is that any promisee can have feelings of true love, and it fulfills the contract. It doesn't have to be Dino who develops those feelings, and it doesn't have to be for Clarissa."

Nina slowly turned over what he said in her mind, her head cocked to the side. "So, the contract doesn't necessarily have to refer to the villainess Clarissa, and it doesn't have to end up with her happy?"

"That's right. It's fine so long as any contractee fulfills the conditions of the contract."

"Which is how you were able to complete the contract by giving that fake love confession to me. …It still seems like forced logic though, but I guess it means you still end up healthy, and Prince Dino doesn't become king. It's good that everyone ended up happy."

It didn't feel kind toward the winner of the Lucky Reincarnation Raffle, but she did write that contract herself. It seemed the god decided it wasn't a problem because everything in it had come true. Apparently, the gods didn't bother adjusting to suit the situation or grant happiness to the raffle winner.

"Oh, by the way, this dress," Nina recalled. "I borrowed it from the god, but how do I return it? And what about my reward?"

"Without the ring, I can no longer turn into a cat. I also can't contact the god. They didn't prepare that gown, however, I did. You can keep it."

"What?" Did he mean the god left procuring the dress to Edmund? If so, they really put a lot on him.

"Your reward payment is coming from the god directly. I imagine it's already in your room at home."

"What? That's not safe. I have to get home!" There was no guarantee she wouldn't be struck by bad luck, and some thieves broke into her house. If it was just sitting on her bed like things always were when delivered by the god, she had to put it somewhere safe soon.

But as she tried to stand, Edmund grabbed her hand. Nina thought he might still have something he wanted to talk to her about, so she sat back down. "Ed, what is it?"

"Even if the love confession could be fake, no one could fake 'true love blossoming,'" he explained.

It seemed he was still explaining the contract. "I guess," she agreed. "If it has to be *true* love, then fake love won't work. But wait. You said Prince Dino's feelings didn't change…?"

"That's right. The person who developed feelings of true love… is me."

"Huh…? Really?" Here was another shocking revelation.

Edmund smiled for some reason when Nina's eyes grew wide. "Yes," he answered.

"Oh. I had no idea."

"So, you understand now?"

"I don't know who it is you've fallen in love with, but that's really nice, Ed. I'm happy for you," congratulated Nina as she clapped her hands together.

Edmund visibly grimaced. "Nina, you're not hearing what I'm saying."

"Hm? You said there's someone you like. Congrats!"

"The contract has to be carried out by a contractee. It can't be just anyone."

That was true. Even if he fell for some random beauty passing by, the god wouldn't consider that within the scope of the contract. "Okay… So, you love Lady Clarissa. But you're hiding your feelings for Prince Dino's sake?"

“No, not at all. Hopelessly incorrect.”

“O-Oh.” He seemed to be getting upset, but Nina didn’t know why, so she couldn’t figure out what she should do.

“I told you earlier. The person I love is you, Nina.”

“Yeah. And saying that is how you fulfilled the contract.”

He let out a heavy sigh, scooped up Nina’s hand, and touched his lips to her fingers.



“Wh-What are you…?” She was so shocked and shaken that she couldn’t get the words out. The only thing filling her mind was the ridiculous thought that he was so beautiful that everything he did looked like it could be a painting.

“I love you, Nina. I worked so hard to save you from a downfall because I love you. I had that dress made. I had them use beads that matched both our eye colors. On purpose. Even Dino seemed to notice.”

Having this all come rushing at her made her head spin, but even so, what he said was strange. “W-Wait, Ed. You’re a duke’s son. You’re healthy now. You shouldn’t be joking about this sort of thing…”

“I’m not joking. I love how hard you work. I love how much effort you put into caring for your mother. I love how strong you are, even if you’re hurting inside. I even love how oddly you express your love for cats.”

They were already within close proximity since they were sitting next to each other on the bench, but as he leaned in, she almost felt like he was whispering in her ear.

She clamped her hands over her ears. “J-Just wait a second.”

“I’m going to say it as many times as I need to for you to believe me.”

“O-Okay, okay, I get it.” It was impossible to keep her composure with someone that gorgeous staring right at her, saying those sorts of things. But that was a separate issue from everything he was saying.

“So, you understand now?”

“Ed, isn’t this just the heroine buff? You don’t love me; you love the status effect.” She’d got a good look at the enhancement, which was quite powerful. There was no proof that it had absolutely no effect on Edmund, even though he was a contractee serving the god. In fact, there was no way he would be saying these things if it weren’t for that.

“The contract is over, and the god’s power is no longer in effect,” he explained calmly.

"Well, yeah, but…" She wouldn't be surprised if there were a little lingering, like the faint traces of perfume in a room. That thought must have shown on her face because Edmund frowned.

"I see… I'm really not getting through to you, am I? I'll simply have to keep saying it," he continued.

"I-I said I get it." She didn't know if this was the heroine buff or a joke, but either way, this onslaught was far too painful. She just wanted it to stop; it was making her heart ache.

"So, you finally understand now?"

"I understand, but I was planning on leaving town…"

"Why?"

She wanted to shoot back with the fact that she already explained why to him, but she had a hard time getting anything harsh out with those blue and gold eyes looking at her. Seriously, that face made everything more difficult. "Well, like I said, my mom's gone. I'm alone."

"I'll be with you. You won't be alone."

Her mouth dropped open at the ridiculous suggestion. "No, that's not the problem."

"Then what is?"

"You're the son of a duke. You shouldn't be teasing commoners." Saying something like "I'll be with you" could be interpreted as a promise for the future. It was dangerous for someone as attractive as him to say those words lightly.

"I see…" murmured Edmund.

"You understand?" Nina let out a sigh of relief, while Edmund let out a plain old sigh.

"Yes," he replied. "I understand now that you don't understand." He smiled, his blue and gold eyes sparkling. "I love you, Nina. If my status is in the way of us being together, then I will renounce it."

"Uh…what?"

"Thankfully, I have an older brother who will inherit my father's title. It won't be a problem."

"N-No, you can't…" No problem? All she could see were problems.

"Why not?"

"Your family'll be surprised, and it's not what's best for you. Also, I don't think a noble boy from a tower like you can survive out in the city."

"That stings a little."

"But it's true. I'm sure noble society has its difficulties, but it's hard living as a commoner."

Edmund nodded as if he had finally accepted what she was saying. Before she could feel relief that she got through to him, he continued, "In that case, you can come be with me."

"What?"

"If I can't go to you, then that's our only option." He told her like it was the most obvious answer, but it was based on a flawed premise.

"But why me?" asked Nina.

"I've already told you why. Shall I repeat it?"

"Huh? Uh, no, no, it's fine!" The reason was that whole "I love you, Nina" or whatever thing from before, probably. Her heart might give out if he told her again.

"We're not making any progress…" he sighed, took Nina's hand, and went down on one knee.

She had a bad feeling about that. She jumped off the bench and crouched down beside him. "N-No, what are you doing?!"

"What does it look like? I'm going to ask you to m—"

"Aaah!" Nina shrieked and clamped her hand over his mouth.

He looked up at her with injured eyes. "Nina… Do you not like me? Am I just troubling you?"

The eyes of a beautiful boy looking up in sadness could destroy anything. She couldn't look at them up close; she was afraid she would drink them in, making her head spin. "I-It's not that I don't like you…"

"Then, this is good, isn't it? What's wrong with it?"

She couldn't think of what was okay about it. She felt she was starting to get a peek at the kind of assertive behavior nobles were known for. "I'm a commoner who loves wandering around looking

for cats. I don't have the space in my life to go along with the whims of a noble boy from a duke's family."

"Yes, and I love that about you, Nina."

"P-Please, stop!"

Even if what he said was true, a commoner and a duke's son were as far in status as the ground was from the sky. She trusted Edmund and had feelings for him, but that wasn't the problem. This wasn't something she could say yes to with a light heart.

Edmund sighed, took Nina's hands, and pulled her back on the bench, where he sat beside her. "I…made a promise," he began.

"A promise?"

"To your mother."

Nina bolted to her feet in shock. "Why, why were you talking to my mom?!"

Even when he'd saved her from the shed when he was in human form and taken her back home in a carriage, he had only just set her down outside her house. Aida didn't even know he existed. The only other times he came around the house, he was in cat form and definitely only in Nina's room. They had no reason to ever meet, let alone talk.

"She caught me once when I was there as a cat, but she seemed to realize I was a human for some reason. She also knew when her end was coming. It seemed she could see things that others normally can't."

That was how Aida seemed to know when she would die. Nina had been there when the doctor talked about how much time she had left, but there must have been some signs that only Aida herself noticed.

That day they looked at the flowers together… Aida knew she had very little time left, so she told Nina about the heliotrope.

"But, you'd just come to my room and then leave," Nina described. "How'd you run into my mom?"

"I was waiting in your room like usual, but you never showed. I had a bad feeling. I opened the door to your room and looked out, which is when she saw me."

All right. So that was when Aida found him and knew he wasn't a typical cat.

"Your mother was worried about you. She asked me to tell you it was okay not to work so hard all the time," he relayed.

Aida was so concerned about Nina that she would say something like that to a cat that wasn't a cat that came out of Nina's room. She felt happy at that. And embarrassed. And like there was a warmth deep in her heart.

"Then I promised your mother that I wouldn't let you be alone, that I would treasure you."

"Why?!" The story had been heartwarming until it took a far too sudden turn. "What would my mom even say to that?! Hearing something like that from a cat-human she only met for the first time!"

"She asked me to."

"But *why*?!" Nina was terrified by Aida's flexibility in adapting to the situation and quick decision-making to the point where she asked a person who looked like a cat to watch over her daughter.

"Your mother told me you hadn't returned home yet even though you didn't have work that evening. I checked with Dino, then went to the academy," explained Edmund.

So that was how it happened. She felt like she should have put two and two together sooner, considering she'd already thought about how Aida was the only person who knew when she was supposed to be home or at work.

"I am grateful to you for saving me from the shed," Nina slowly began, "but that has nothing to do with this. My mom must have been thrown for a loop; she can't seriously have believed a cat was…"

Her voice trailed off as something Aida said flitted through the back of her mind: "*Nina, your mother has a prediction for you. You're going to meet an absolutely wonderful young man who will treasure you.*"

Maybe…just maybe, she was talking about Edmund then?

Considering Aida was no less a cat lover than Nina was, she definitely would have had a positive first impression of someone who

could take the form of such a beautiful cat.

"B-But you can't turn into a cat anymore!" argued Nina.

"Would you let me be with you if I could?" asked Edmund.

"Uh…" Ed in white-cat form was far too fluffy and tempting to give an outright no to.

Edmund smiled weakly, seeing Nina falter. "Unfortunately, I can't turn into a cat anymore. Please accept this as a substitute." He took her hand and placed it on his head.

"It's impossible to describe what cat-Ed's fur felt…" Nina faltered. Her hand touched Edmund's silver hair, sparkling in the sunlight. It wasn't quite the same as a cat's floof, but its firm feel was silky to the touch, which…

"You don't seem to dislike that," Edmund lightly joked, snapping Nina back as she started obsessively stroking his hair. She jerked her hand away, and he continued, "I'm going to keep my promise to your mother. I won't let you be alone."

"And that's why you want to ask me to ma…marry… Ugh, you don't have to go that far, do you? We could just be regular friends. But it'd be kinda weird for people from such different social classes to be friends." There was usually no way a commoner and the son of a duke would even meet.

"If we were only friends," argued Edmund, "then someone else might steal you away."

"No one's gonna steal me away; no one's ever stolen me!" she protested, quickly regretting saying something so embarrassing.

"Does that mean I'd be your first?"

"Don't say it that way! It just sounds wrong when you say it that way! And everything's out of order!" It was true that Nina had never had a boyfriend before, but she was pretty sure that wasn't the right way to say that.

Edmund didn't seem to think he needed to change that, however. He actually looked like he had an idea. "I see… You would prefer if we follow the standard order for these things?"

"No, that's not, it's not really what I mean…" She felt like they'd been talking past each other for a while now. What could she say to make him understand?

"I suppose first is this then: Nina, will you be my girlfriend?" he asked.

"Aren't you supposed to start with being friends?"

"We have essentially been friends this whole time. I think it's okay to skip that step."

He held out his hand, a serious look on his face, causing Nina's mind to whirl. Why was she so uncertain? It wasn't like she didn't like him. "Uh, how about we put the brakes on things a little and just be *really* good friends…?" She placed her hand on his, then he placed his other hand on top of those and gently squeezed. His cool hands felt nice against hers, which were burning hot.

"…It seems I have no choice but to compromise," he exhaled. "All right, so the proposal is we be more than just friends, but not quite boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"That's not quite what…" she started, but Edmund grabbed her left hand and pressed his lips against the back of it. "Too fast! Everything's moving too fast! We're friends!"

She jerked her hand back, and Edmund shrugged in exasperation. "What is the issue after all this time? You have taken a good look between my legs, after all," he reminded.

"Huh?" Now that he said it, she remembered she did look down there when he was a cat to confirm his sex. But that was a cat. That cat was Edmund…meaning what she looked at was Edmund's… "No, b-but, that was a cat! A cat!" she shrieked.

"That was my first time experiencing such a forceful attempt to examine me. You are bold, Nina. And you've kissed my ear, and we have already slept together."

"Don't say it like that! You keep saying things, and they sound wrong the way you say them!"

He made it sound like Nina looked between Edmund's legs even though he didn't want it, kissed his ear, and shared a bed with him.

Which was all true. But it wasn't the truth. They were all horrible accusations.

Edmund watched Nina turn bright red with annoyance and sighed. "Please accept the fact that I have no intention of giving up on you."

Having that beautiful, seductive smile turned her way left her stumbling to get any words out. "…Is this…some sort of raffle, too?" If not, there was no way a duke's son should be saying these things to a commoner.

"It is," he responded.

A feeling of relief washed over her, but at the same time, her heart ached.

Why? Why did it hurt like that? Maybe she was tired from Edmund saying all these weird things to her.

"The heroine is you, Nina," he continued, Nina nodding along. "The employer is me. The contract length is the rest of our lives. The contract conditions are to live happily ever after… Do you have any objections to these terms?"

Nina froze, no longer nodding. "That's basically…"

"Nina, will you marry me?" he proposed with a huge grin, and Nina sighed.

"If there's a provisional contract, and I can check the details of the contract and employee benefits, then…I'll consider it."

Edmund laughed. She'd said something similar to him once before. That laugh made her smile too.

"Very well," he complied. "We've established a provisional contract. I look forward to working with you more, Nina, a heroine for no one but me."

Side Story: The Hired Servant of the Gods Seeks a Heroine for Him to be Healed

"CUT it out! What the heck is with this cat?! It keeps talking and is so creepy!" screamed the beautiful girl with blindingly shiny gold hair as she grabbed the white cat by the scruff of the neck and threw him out the window.

He twirled in midair, righting himself and landing without a sound on the roof. It was shocking how athletic cats were and how much their paw pads eliminated sound. If only his real body could be this full of energy.

The white cat with shining fur let out a little sigh. "Another failure… When will I find a heroine?" he murmured, lifting a fuzzy forepaw to touch the ring hanging from his neck.

The ring glowed, and he disappeared from the rooftop.



EDMUND Zelati was born with a weak body. He wasn't ill, but his health failed him at the slightest provocation. Seasons changing, weather changing obviously, and, when he was at his worst, even eating chilled food was enough to render him bedridden.

His body was well-developed, and it wasn't as if he lacked physical strength. He wasn't even that bad an athlete. It was just that no matter what he did, his body would give out on him.

If it were an illness, he might have been able to take some medicine or receive medical treatment for it, but since his body was

just weak, his only option was to make sure he ate nutritious food and kept slowly training his body up to health.

Edmund was Duke Zelati's second son. His older brother doted on him to the point that you could even say he spoiled him. The moment Edmund showed the slightest fever, his brother would push him into bed. He would regularly visit and watch over Edmund as he rested.

Edmund wished he would stop—he wasn't a child anymore—but his brother seemed to see him as a little brother forever needing protection.

Even Edmund's coloration was terrible. White hair, blue and gold eyes. A single look at that color combination would tell anyone how weak his body was. He'd even once tried to dye his hair black, but he reacted badly to the dye. He gave up that idea, considering how traumatized he was by the event.

He couldn't do anything about his eyes, but he grew his bangs long in a sad attempt to fight back by hiding the mismatched colors.

And, when he was starting to get fed up with the vicious cycle of trying to train his body to better health only to destroy his constitution, it came.

He immediately knew he was dreaming.

In front of him was a stuffed animal of a well-known character from a long-running television program that a child couldn't escape from even if they tried.

The moment Edmund saw this hero with his sweet-bean-jelly motifs, he knew he was one of those reincarnated from another world.

"…If I were reincarnated, I would at least want a healthy body," he muttered. "Health is usually the bare minimum for those sorts of things with some other blessing on top of that."

It's not like he wasn't blessed with looks and status, but he couldn't very well do anything with a body as weak as his, could he?

"Well then, want me to restore your constitution?" asked the stuffed animal.

Edmund looked at him. Bean Jelly Man looked back.

They stared at each other in silence for a while.

Edmund sighed. “How absurd, hearing fanciful wishes in a dream. I’m going to sleep. Deep, deep sleep.”

“Wait, listen to me! It’s not a bad deal. A bargain, in fact. I’m begging you, just listen to what I have to say.” Bean Jelly Man came over to Edmund, groveling so much it was hard to imagine him a hero despite striking a winning pose with one fist raised.

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t like sweat bean jelly in my previous life,” commented Edmund. “I can’t trust someone who would terrorize passersby by forcing them to eat that jelly.”

“What? You prefer soft sweat bean jelly? Oh well, guess I have no choice. Hang on a sec.” Bean Jelly Man’s dark, reddish face jiggled and turned a bit more transparent. He planted his fists on his hips as if to say, “How ’bout that?”

Edmund closed his eyes and decided to go to sleep.

“Wait, wait, wait,” exclaimed Bean Jelly Man. “You might be so stupid you don’t understand the incredibleness of sweet bean jelly, but I can’t be getting my priorities mixed up. I’ll fix your constitution if you agree to a contract with me.”

“I have no idea what you’re on about, and I don’t trust you,” Edmund replied sharply, and the stuffed toy’s shoulders slumped.

“Is that where we need to start? All right. Tomorrow it’s going to rain. Go out in the rain and get wet. I’ll make it so your body doesn’t give out even if you do. Call it a trial run. A special offer, just for you,” beseeched the toy, his juicy jelly head jiggling around as he did.

The next thing Edmund knew, it was morning. He felt like he hadn’t slept much, most likely due to his strange dream. He looked out the window to a clear blue sky, not a cloud in sight. It definitely didn’t look like it was going to rain.

“…What an odd dream.”

His poor constitution must be such a big problem in his subconscious that he dreamed up something as ridiculous as a Bean Jelly Man who would heal it.

The commotion did make him remember he had once lived a past life, but the memories were so hazy that he didn’t think they’d be good for any specific use.

His shoulders slumped, knowing the whole thing only resulted in him losing a night's sleep.

Sometime after that, rain fell. He happened to get soaked and, surprisingly, did not develop a fever from it.

For any normal person, that could all be chalked up to coincidence, but Edmund knew his body.

There was absolutely no way he could get soaked like that and not develop something, not even a fever.



"LOOKS like you believe me now."

That night, the Bean Jelly Man toy appeared in his dreams again. There was actually something annoying about his wildly flapping cape despite the utter lack of wind.

"Are you a god or something?" asked Edmund. There were a few things that made him wonder. This "god" looked like a jelly character that didn't exist in this world, for one, and then Edmund's stubborn constitutional imperfections were kept at bay out of what seemed like an impossible coincidence.

This was all rather sudden and hard to believe, but he suspected that might be the explanation.

"If you're up to speed, let's dive into the important stuff," answered Bean Jelly Man. "I need you to find a heroine."

"Right… It really is a dream. Good night." Edmund went to close his eyes, but Bean Jelly Man flapped his arms to stop him.

"Wait! I'm running out of time! You're my last resort!"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Even if this was a dream, it made little sense. Edmund couldn't think of any time limit red bean jelly would have to be wary of—other than its best-by date—but that wasn't a problem Edmund could help with. He did consider suggesting he store himself in a fridge if he was so worried about going off while stored at room temperature, but he wasn't even sure if Bean Jelly Man would be considered a food item.

"I host this Lucky Reincarnation Raffle, right?" Bean Jelly Man explained. "The winner of this round wants to gloat over the

heroine's downfall in a European-inspired-otome-game setting, where she plays the beautiful and intelligent villainess."

"…That was too much information. I didn't catch most of it."

"You don't have to understand it, just accept it."

A rather slipshod explanation. If Bean Jelly Man really wanted his help, he should explain it in a more easily understood way.

Regardless, it didn't seem like Edmund could escape this dream. He decided to shut off his brain and listen.

"There are these restrictions in place in this world," continued Bean Jelly Man. "They make it so the actors have to be someone who was reincarnated. So, I went around sounding out reincarnated girls the same age as the raffle winner, but they all refused."

"I'm not surprised. It seems pretty pointless. What is this downfall supposed to be, anyway?"

"The details aren't spelled out. But…based on past examples, it could be losing fame and fortune in the best-case scenario. Average is probably getting sent to some nunnery or exiled from the country. Worst case is a death sentence."

"Obviously, they would all refuse to throw their life away like that."

It was one thing to end up facing the death penalty after committing crimes you chose to do. It was absolutely absurd to ask someone to die just because someone else wanted to gloat.

"It seems the villainess role has grown in popularity lately," said Bean Jelly Man. "Heroines aren't popular at all. Then, there's the whole downfall thing. No one's accepting the job." He wobbled his head about as if at a loss for what to do. However, it seemed there was an obvious outcome for Edmund.

This wasn't about what was popular and hip. It was about the fact that no one would actually wish such an illogical misfortune on themselves.

"What about canceling this Lucky Whatever Raffle and issuing an apology to the winner? That would solve everything," Edmund suggested.

But Bean Jelly Man shook his…blob…of jelly…corresponding to a head. "You don't understand the allure of a reincarnation story. And

the fate of the company rests… Um. I mean. There's just a lot of background issues. The important thing is, I need a heroine."

Edmund thought he heard Bean Jelly Man say something odd, but he didn't think too deeply about it since he'd shut off his brain earlier. "But why do *I* have to look for a heroine?" he asked. The actors had to be reincarnated people, but he didn't exactly have the ability to judge this sort of thing.

Were there really a whole lot of reincarnated people, anyway?

"To be blunt, you're bait," remarked Bean Jelly Man. "You're a good-looking guy. You'll seduce the girls with that ridiculously pretty face of yours and draw in a heroine for me."

"That doesn't sound ethical. I'm not interested in being a part of your criminal activities." Getting compliments on his looks from Bean Jelly Man didn't exactly make him happy, and he was even less happy when he heard why he was chosen.

"But in return for doing that, I'll fix your constitution. Every time the heroine acts like a good heroine, you'll get a bit healthier. How's that sound?!"

"How's that sound…?" Edmund felt nothing but distrust for this toy, like he was a mark for a used car salesman.

"Normally, I can't grant any wishes that go against the order of things—like curing disease, increasing lifespan, bringing someone back from the dead—but there's a little leeway regarding contractees. Besides, you're not sick. I just need to bump up your constitution a bit."

Nothing about what Bean Jelly Man said sounded honest and good, but Edmund had already seen his ability to improve his constitution at work. Maybe this was an opportunity to make his body normal, something he hadn't been able to do with healthy food, exercise, or medicine.

"No, I don't know if I can be involved with leading some girl who's done nothing wrong to the death penalty," Edmund declared.

"I don't think it'll get that far. The winner of this raffle is a little, how should I put it…bad at thinking things through?"

"What?"

"She didn't even write anything about a downfall in the contract."

That did sound like someone terrible at following through with things. If she wanted to become a villainess who gloats over the heroine's downfall, then the details would be important conditions for the main event.

"The contract is considered fulfilled as long as contractees carry out what's written in the contract," added Bean Jelly Man. "There aren't any restrictions outside of that. You just have to finagle things so the downfall doesn't end up with the girl dead."

Edmund thought this whole thing was haphazard and selfish, but he did feel a little less opposed to the idea when he learned the girl wouldn't necessarily have to die. He couldn't stop his interest growing at the prospect of eliminating a problem he'd had for so long.

Additionally, he felt more reassured after reading the actual contract and learned the raffle winner wasn't after some sort of horribly dark revenge story.

In the end, he agreed to a contract with Bean Jelly Man, received a ring symbolizing that contract, and went to meet the raffle winner.



"YOU met the raffle winner? How'd it go?" asked Bean Jelly Man.

"It was…rough."

The stuffed toy appeared in his dreams again that day.

Edmund wondered why he always looked like that, but upon closer inspection, he realized his cape had turned from brown to yellow. He couldn't remember which color the real character had had, but apparently, this god just liked to look like Bean Jelly Man.

The raffle winner was named Clarissa Tessarini, the daughter of a marquess. She was engaged to Edmund's friend, Prince Dino Mento.

Edmund did know of her by name, but this was his first time meeting her in person. She was far more…intense…than he'd

imagined. Clarissa apparently took a liking to Edmund's looks and kept staring at him, complimenting him, and inching closer to him.

He wanted to ask her what about her fiancé, but an engagement between royals and nobility likely had nothing to do with love.

"I know you told me to use my looks to my advantage, but I'm going to run out of energy if it keeps up like this," complained Edmund. "Could I have some sort of disguise?"

"Makes no difference to me so long as you find me a heroine. How about we make you a cat? The people demand floof in this era of suffering. And I've always been a cat person, anyway."

Just as Edmund learned of Bean Jelly Man's preferences—which wasn't something he cared about—he turned into a cat with shiny white fur.

Then, in cat form, he visited Prince Dino Mento, Clarissa's fiancé. Apparently, he had also been reincarnated.

Edmund needed to get him to agree to a contract where he carried out the role of the main love interest. He felt bad about deceiving his close friend, but at least the prince wouldn't be in danger since either way, he would end up marrying Clarissa.

They were already engaged, after all. There was nothing wrong with them getting married…right?

The problem was that Edmund was trying to negotiate with a farming prince who dreamed of growing rice. Dino was so uninterested in the proposals that Ed eventually caved and threatened to make him king, which was when Dino realized who he was.

There was no fooling your best friend.

Edmund got him to agree to the contract, but he was already feeling weary from his efforts. Next was the hardest part: finding the heroine.

Bean Jelly Man did tell him who was reincarnated, so it was less about finding a heroine and more about negotiating with a heroine. That, though, was far more difficult than Edmund had been led to believe.

First of all, the girls all seemed uncomfortable the moment there was a white cat in their room. He couldn't blame them for being surprised when a cat talked to them, but he couldn't get them to agree to a contract if he didn't explain it, so he had no other choice.

He didn't mind much when they chased him out the window or door, but the worst was when one chased him around with a broom. He had Bean Jelly Man find him some more demure ladies since this was putting him in danger.

That resulted in girls that were too demure. One passed out the moment the white cat started talking to her. Others just groaned in fear, utterly unable to have a conversation.

So, he asked for courageous girls and ended up nearly being sold to a circus as an animal of curiosity. Then he asked for innocent girls and got ones that only pretended to be innocent in front of boys.

Prince Dino was his best friend; he couldn't bring in a weird girl to hang around with him, even if it were only temporary. After all his encounters with these girls, he was starting to lose faith in the female race.

"Perhaps I should observe the heroine candidates for a short time before trying to engage in negotiations," he decided.

Clarissa and Dino had already entered the academy. There was essentially no time left to find a heroine, but he didn't expect things to go well even after feeling out the candidates a bit.

Exhausted, Edmund told Bean Jelly Man his proposal. Bean Jelly Man jiggled his head and said, "Whatever works for me. What kind of girl do you think?"

"She can't be too demure. But she can't be too aggressive or scheming, either. That would cause trouble. And she definitely can't be the kind of person to torment a cat."

First and foremost, Edmund just wanted to have a safe conversation with the girl. He felt faint when he realized he'd never even made it to the negotiation table with any of these girls and imagined the difficulties of what lay after that step…

"'Kay, how about this girl?" suggested Bean Jelly Man. A paper appeared in his hand out of thin air, and he handed it to Edmund. On the paper was a name and a simple background. "I avoided her cause I figured she'd ask me to cure her mom, which sounded like a pain to deal with," Bean Jelly Man explained. "But we're out of options. She seems adaptable, works hard, and loves cats."

"Hm," pondered Edmund.

Based on that, he didn't have to worry about her tormenting him, a cat. He decided to start by observing this "Nina" girl.



NINA Scaglione had ivory hair and pale coral eyes. She wasn't the sort of bam-in-your-face beauty that Clarissa was, but she was the sort of cute that made her feel approachable and friendly. Edmund found that was much more his type compared to Clarissa, who'd left him traumatized after their encounter.

She was a commoner living with just her mother, busy with her part-time jobs from morning until night, but had no problems regarding work attitude or relationships with her coworkers.

Edmund also spotted her petting the roaming cats on her way home from work, which told him he didn't need to worry about being in danger when interacting with her.

"This is looking promising," he murmured.

He had a good feeling when he finally met her. She didn't pass out, wasn't far too suspicious of him, and didn't chase him around. Just that alone was enough to be grateful for.

He actually realized as he thought about it that he hadn't ever had a chance to discuss the contract in detail. Nina was also kind to him in cat form. Or rather, she would furiously pet him all over. That was a little odd, but it was far better than being tormented.

His gratitude also knew no bounds when Nina said she'd consider the contract once they'd proved the god's powers to her. He was so grateful, in fact, that she nearly seemed like some goddess of mercy to him.

“I hope Nina gets the part…” he muttered to himself. That was to help him with his own contract. He wanted to hurry up and fulfill it so he could be healthy. But he also thought that if he had to work on fulfilling this contract anyway, it would be nice if he could work with that coral-eyed girl.

He didn’t understand the emotions he was feeling. It must be that his mental state was just unstable due to the difficulties he faced searching for a heroine. He told himself that as he turned into a white cat to visit Nina’s room.

Were the butterflies in his stomach just from impatience, him being unable to wait for his body to be healed? Or was there another reason?

He honestly didn’t think too deeply into it then.



“I heard you caught a cold,” Dino spoke as he entered Edmund’s room for a visit and set a small, vivid blue bottle with gold lines across it on Edmund’s bedside table.

“I’m sorry for always causing you trouble like this,” Edmund replied meekly. He tried to sit up, but the room spun around him when he did. He gave up and slumped back into bed.

It was rude to remain in bed with a prince visiting him, but Dino was his friend and used to this sort of thing.

The small blue bottle glittering in the sun was a unique item Dino commissioned specially for Edmund. It contained medicine sourced from far-off lands packed with useful nutrients for Edmund, whose body decided to give out whenever it had a spare moment. The colors of the bottle were chosen to match Edmund’s eyes.

Edmund found that whole thing quite embarrassing, but he was grateful for his friend’s kindness, and the medicine inside was valuable since it was made to last for a long time without losing potency.

He felt nothing but gratitude to Dino for going out of his way to prepare something like this for him.

“And you were doing so well for a while there,” voiced Dino.

He was right. Edmund was very aware that his body was becoming sturdier with each passing day since Nina had become the heroine, but this time, it obviously couldn't take anymore. Even if his body was stronger than before, he had spent time next to someone with a fever who clearly had a cold—there was no reason to think he wouldn't catch it too.

"My fever isn't as high as it used to get with these sorts of things, though," protested Edmund weakly. "I believe it will settle down with some rest."

Dino made a noncommittal "humph" sound and sat in the chair beside the bed. "I met Nina, the heroine," he relayed. The name sent a jolt through Edmund's body. "She was off with a cold, but she seems much better today."

"Really?" That meant the medicine he gave her worked. He'd worried when he'd seen her shivering and face pale. He was glad she recovered.

"You met Nina, right?" asked Dino. "In your cat form?"

Edmund nodded. Dino put a hand to his chin in thought. He had beautiful ultramarine blue hair, yellow ochre eyes, and handsome features. Even Edmund, who wasn't attracted to boys, could tell he was undoubtedly good-looking.

"You're putting me in a spot, staring at me like that," said Dino. "Is there something you want to say?"

"No, it's nothing. I was only thinking…you really are like a prince incarnate," answered Edmund, thinking back to something Nina had told him: "*He has a pretty face and is generally a good guy. He's exactly like a prince who stepped out of a picture book*."

That basically meant she considered Dino attractive. She said they were essentially partners working together, but her feelings might change as they continued collaborating.

But Nina was the to-be-fallen heroine, and Dino was the main love interest who would end up with the villainess. Any feelings she had could never be allowed to blossom, and Edmund didn't want to see her get hurt.

"Well, yes, I am literally a prince if we're talking status," quipped Dino. "And if you mean appearance-wise, sure, I know I'm

not exactly an eyesore, but it's really something to be hearing that from you."

"How so?"

Dino sighed, then pointed at Edmund's face. "Just having mismatched blue and gold eyes is enough to draw everyone's attention. Then you have that glittering white hair and features perfect enough to match… You really need to come to grips with the fact that no one in the world comes close to being as attractive as you."

Edmund wasn't getting it, even with an inarguably attractive person like Dino telling him. Maybe he was trying to flatter him? "I suppose the god did tell me to use my ridiculously good-looking face as bait to draw in a heroine," admitted Edmund.

"Are you certain that thing is a god? He seems sketchy."

Edmund had assumed Clarissa's absurd reaction to him was partly due to the god's power, but if he accepted what Dino said, maybe he really was not that hard on the eyes.

"Hm, you're not going to get anywhere as a cat, though," Dino pondered.

"Where would I be trying to get?"

Dino lifted a cup of tea from the bedside table, took a sip, and then let out a small sigh. "You're in cat form when you see Nina, right?"

"Yes. That form is well received. She's obsessed with cats."

"Well received" was an understatement. She stroked, cuddled, and even picked him up to look between his legs; she even invited him to share her bed. Obviously, she thought she was just interacting with a cat, but there were many moments that made Edmund's heart race.

It was odd, how not unpleasant that was.

"That said, you don't have any future with her as a cat," Dino continued.

"Future with her?" Edmund looked at him in confusion.

Dino gently set the teacup back on the table. "Edmund. You like Nina, don't you?" he pronounced with a grin that matched his teasing tone perfectly.

Edmund froze for a moment, blinking. "…Uh, what? Nina's the heroine; it's a vital role."

"Would you give this bottle to someone you saw as only a coworker?" Dino pointed at the small bottle on the table. "This is an item of utmost value, made on personal order from me, a prince. And it's in your colors, Edmund. Things could go bad if the wrong person got their hands on something like this."

He was right. Someone could get quite the sum for selling it, but they could also use it to try and falsely claim some connection to the royal family. And considering its colors, it wouldn't be hard to convince people Edmund gave it to them, allowing it to act as proof of a close relationship with the son of Duke Zelati.

"But Nina is a commoner, and she would never use it with ill intent," Edmund declared.

"I don't doubt that," agreed Dino.

Edmund didn't need to hear what Dino said to know he trusted Nina. He also felt confident in assuming Dino saw Nina positively, especially considering Dino brought her up as a topic of conversation when he rarely showed interest in anything but farming.

"The problem is," expressed Dino, "that Nina might mention this to someone. She might have mentioned that she received a valuable bottle, blue with gold lines in it. Many nobles will immediately make the connection to you with just that description. You're fairly famous after all, the duke's son secluded in a tower."

"I see you can put more than just ladies in a tower," joked Edmund, feeling a little frustrated, but it was true that he rarely made appearances at social events or even at the academy. You could argue that the metaphor suited him more than it did most real princesses, actually.

"Anyway," continued Dino, "my point is, you know what this bottle means. And even though you know that, you still gave it to Nina. If that's not a sign of your feelings for her, then what is it?"

"I was just giving her medicine because she caught a cold."

"If that were the case, you didn't have to put it in this bottle."

That might be true, but the bottle was ideal for storing medicine, so it didn't degrade. It didn't seem all that odd to Edmund

that he would give Nina the bottle.

"I'm guessing it was Nina that called me a prince, like you said earlier?" asked Dino.

"Good guess," Edmund admitted surprisedly, and Dino grinned.

"When you said that, you looked very obviously jealous."

"J-Jealous?!" Edmund jerked to a sitting-up position before he could stop himself, then sank back into bed as the vertigo hit him.

As he got his ragged breathing back under control, Dino looked at him with wide eyes. "You really have no idea how you feel, do you?"

"I'm telling you, I don't…" he stammered. Nina was important to him as the heroine, which he needed to improve his constitution. She was nothing more or less to him than that.

He did admit that she was cute, and she sometimes did wild things that sent his heart racing, but that was because she was dealing with a cat. Nina wasn't even aware of Edmund the human; he couldn't possibly have strong feelings for her either way.

Dino narrowed his ochre eyes and declared, "If you insist you don't have feelings for her, then you won't mind if I court her, yeah?"

Edmund's eyes snapped open wide, and he dragged himself upright when he saw Dino's flirtatious smile. "You can't!" he shouted.

With this contract with the god, Dino was going to end up with Clarissa—end of story. Edmund wasn't sure how Nina felt about Dino, but he couldn't stand by and watch her start a relationship he knew was doomed to fail.

He fought against his whirling head to glare at Dino, only to finally see Dino's lips curled up in an amused smile, which then escalated into a burst of laughter.

"…Dino?"

While he couldn't figure out what was happening, Dino was literally clutching at his sides, convulsing with laughter. Edmund waited, not knowing what to do. Eventually, Dino's fit passed, and he looked at Edmund with tears in his eyes.

"Sorry, sorry. That was just the best reaction ever. Couldn't hold it in," he admitted between gasps, making a motion with his hand

that Edmund interpreted as him trying to get Edmund to lie back down.

He rested his head on the pillow, still feeling light-headed because he'd pushed himself a little too hard, but that wasn't important right now.

"You didn't like the idea of me going after Nina, did you?" Dino inquired.

"What I meant by you can't is that, considering the contract, that relationship would only end unhappily, and I wanted to stop that."

"Meaning, it's fine if it's after the contract is over?"

The god's contract was absolute. But it might not influence anything once the contract was finished.

"Dino… Are you saying you like Nina?" asked Edmund, his voice quivering.

"If I had to pick between like and not like, yeah, I'd say I like her." Dino's response was so immediate that it made Edmund's heart ache.

The restraints were off once the contract was over—Edmund had no right to stop him then. He told himself that, but his heart felt heavy, like it was sinking into the depths of a murky bog.

"When I say I like her, I don't mean romantically, as someone of the opposite sex," Dino clarified. "She's kind of like my comrade. My comrade in rice."

"O-Oh."

Dino had no romantic feelings for her? It was incredible how much lighter Edmund's heart and body felt when he heard that. He was a little curious about Dino's choice of vocabulary at the end, but he was going to pretend he didn't hear that for the moment.

He let out a long sigh, and Dino gave a little troubled smile.

"It's as clear as day… Well, you just come to terms with it on your own." The prince stood up and waved goodbye.

Edmund let out another long sigh as he watched Dino leave. "I…like Nina?"

She was cute. He would admit he had positive feelings when he saw how hard she worked for her mother and how seriously she

devoted herself to the heroine role.

He wasn't Dino, but if he had to choose whether he liked Nina or not, he would absolutely say he liked her.

"But I'm a cat, and she's a heroine," he articulated.

From her perspective, Edmund was Ed, the white cat working for a god. They'd have no reason to interact once the contract was over, and she would go the rest of her life, never even knowing the human named Edmund Zelati existed. Even if she did learn about him, a commoner and the son of a duke couldn't very well interact as friends. There was something sad, even frustrating, about that truth.

It did feel nice to be loved on like a stuffed animal—it had its perks—but he also felt like it wasn't quite enough, which made things difficult for him.

He still wasn't entirely sure what it was he felt, but his highest priority at the moment was fulfilling his duty as the god's messenger. Then, if he got the opportunity, he might try appearing before her as a human.

Would she be surprised when she saw his true form? Angry? Or maybe…would she find it to her liking?

Edmund's eyes slowly closed as he thought about a future yet to come.



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