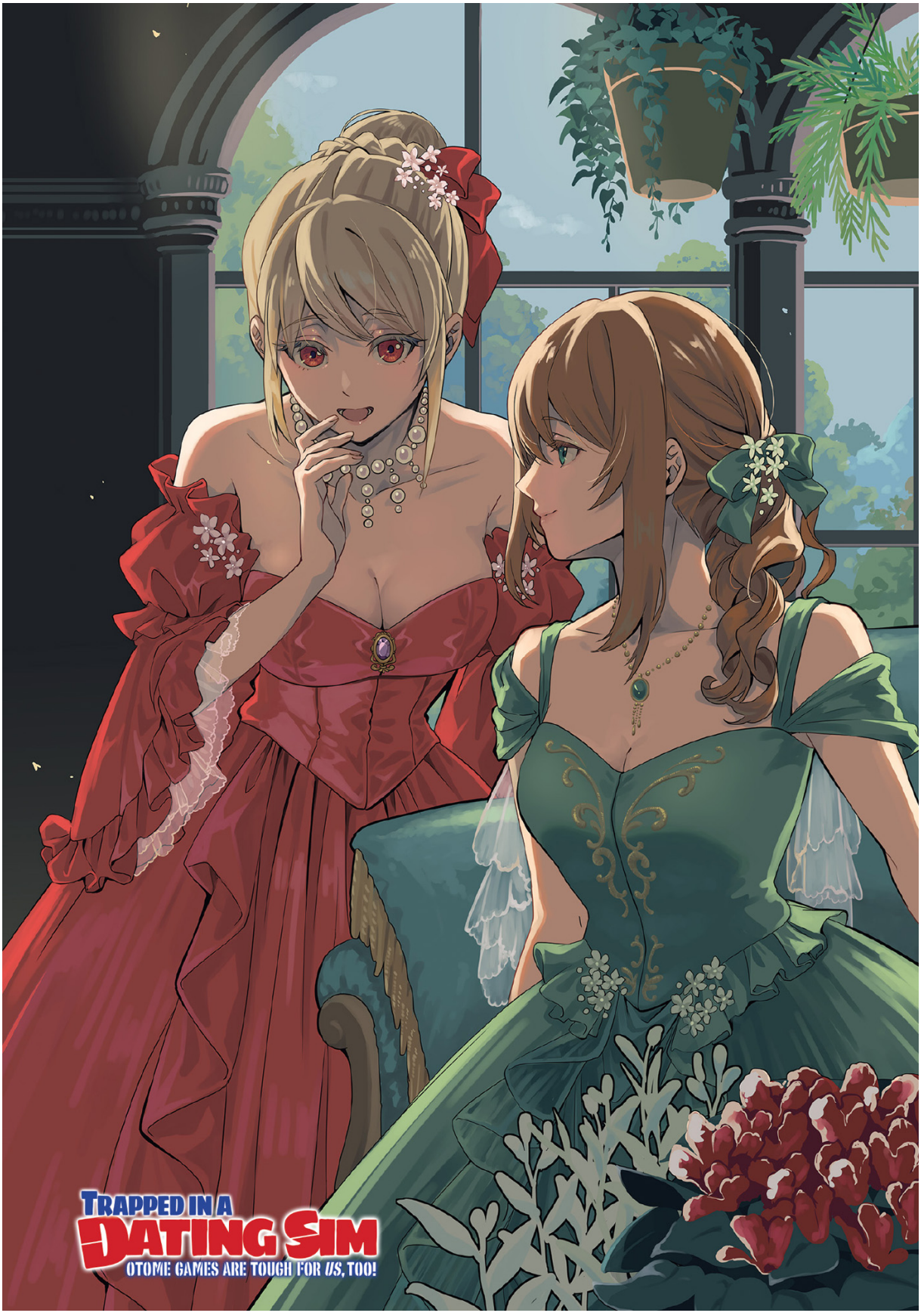

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NOVEL
04
TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM
OTOME GAMES ARE TOUGH FOR US, TOO!

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TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM
OTOME GAMES ARE TOUGH FOR US, TOO!


"I suppose we'll have to buy time until the royal guard arrives. If you have some kind of plan, you reckless rapscallion, I'll permit you to share it now."
"I'll wipe that smarmy grin off your face, you dirty perv."


DEIRDRE FOU ROSEBLADE
Before I realized it, my eyes were transfixed on Deirdre as I tried to burn the image of her body into my mind. Unfortunately, my preoccupation meant that I was late to realize when Marie raised her fist. However, I could already see where she was aiming—my stomach.

Trapped in a Dating Sim

Otome Games Are Tough for *Us*, Too!

NOVEL

04

WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

WITHIN FANOSS'S ROYAL CASTLE, the two princesses found themselves alone together. They had already finished their early-morning breakfast and had a packed schedule of official duties and lessons with their tutor. This small interval was one of the precious few breaks they would have during the day.

Thick gray clouds hung outside their window, blotting out the sky. The fireplace crackled nearby, providing warmth. The contrast in temperature between the warm room and the chilly air outside fogged the windowpanes with thick condensation.

Hertrauda Sera Fanoss, the younger of the two sisters, shooed their maids from the room. Her elder sister, Hertrude Sera Fanoss, was startled by Hertrauda's sudden and unusual orders to the servants.

"What's the matter, Rauda?" she asked. "You don't normally need to speak of anything so private that you usher out the help like that."

Rauda inspected the door to ensure that no one would eavesdrop, nor step in and interrupt them, then turned back to her sister with a relieved breath. "Elder Sister, I wish to speak to you about something. Namely, our country's history, which I fear we've been far too ignorant of."

"History? What nonsense are you talking about?" Truda demanded with knitted brows.

Summoning her courage, Rauda went on. "We have been deceived about it. No—perhaps it'd be more accurate to say that we weren't taught the whole truth of it. There is history between our nation and Holfort Kingdom which was kept from us."

Fanoss and Holfort had a bloody, inimical past. Tracing their lineage back far enough, Fanoss's royal family had actually descended from the royal family of Holfort. However, their closeness in blood had done nothing to prevent the growing tensions between them that eventually led to Fanoss's independence. As far as Rauda and Truda knew, it was Holfort's fault that Fanoss had decided to split from the kingdom.

Ever since the two girls had lost their parents—the archduke and archduchess—to an accident, all the people around them had filled their heads with talk of how Holfort was a merciless, unfeeling enemy. Rauda and Truda had quickly developed a hatred for Holfort as well, partly over the evils they'd been told the country perpetrated when invading Fanoss twenty years earlier. Holfort had rampaged, leaving a trail of destruction behind them within Fanoss's borders. That was a fact.

At least, that was what Rauda had believed until she learned otherwise. That day, when two intruders dressed entirely in black breached the palace and made off with their Magic Flutes, one of them had given Rauda a hint: If she wished to know the true history between their nations, she should seek the old archivist. She'd been skeptical, but she did as he bade and visited the archives, whereupon she learned the truth. Everything she and Truda had previously believed was complete propaganda. They'd never been told of their own nation's misdoings.

Rauda slid the book she had borrowed from the archivist toward her sister, urging her to read it. "The truth is written within," she explained. "This is what actually transpired. I inquired with people alive at the time, and they corroborated this volume's contents. Some, of course, refused to answer my questions, but enough of them confirmed the truth. No one could honestly insist that all the blame lay on Holfort."

What Rauda learned had shaken her to her core. The things she'd always believed to be true about their history had, for the

most part, been propaganda rewritten to serve their own narrative. It was hard to think that so many had lied to her.

I didn't want to believe that was true, she reflected. *But we* are *royalty. It's our duty to face the truth, however ugly it may be. Besides, people here at the royal castle have been pulling our strings as if we were their puppets. I can't continue to sit idly by.*

Though Rauda was still young, she felt the heavy weight of responsibility that came with her station. She wanted her sister, who shared that burden, to know the truth, too. She desired them to share it so that they could team up and rail against those who'd deceived them.

Truda kept a blank face as she thumbed through the book's pages. At last, she heaved a small sigh. "How foolish," she said coldly.

Rauda assumed that Truda meant the people who'd hidden the truth from them—that she resented their deception. So surely Truda would agree to work with her to rectify the situation.

"Yes," the younger princess agreed. "It was foolish indeed. We must stop them from—"

Truda shot a glare at her. "I was talking about you, Hertrauda."

"What?" Rauda choked out, her throat strangely dry. Truda rarely addressed her by her full name.

"We are done speaking," Truda said loudly, calling out to the servants outside the door. "You may reenter."

"B-but, Elder Sister!" Rauda tried to protest. She had driven the servants out specifically so that they could have this private conversation. Truda denying her further discussion insinuated that the elder princess had no interest in the subject whatsoever.

"Absolutely ridiculous," said Truda. "I can't believe you were so childish as to believe all this nonsense."

Before the servants could spill back in through the door, Truda snatched up the book and tossed it into the fireplace. Panicked,

Rauda lurched toward it, arms outstretched, but Truda seized her arms.

Rauda struggled. “You can’t do this!” she howled at her sister. “That book is important! It’s our real history!” She tried to shake her sister off, to launch herself into the flames to save the tome, but she couldn’t break free.

Truda regarded her coolly. “Enough of this,” she snapped.



When the servants finally entered, they stared at the two with shocked expressions.

"Y-Your Highnesses?" blurted out the head maid worriedly.

Truda shoved Rauda aside, letting her younger sister land hard on her bottom.

The maids gathered around Rauda, trying to help her to her feet.

"The history we were taught *is* our real history," Truda insisted. "If you intend to continue this farce and insist otherwise, I will no longer consider you part of my family." She turned suddenly; her long, silken black hair swayed like a curtain behind her as she stomped out of the room. She never once paused to look back at Rauda.

Rauda's heart was heavy after her sister's physical repudiation. Although the maids tried to lift her, she stayed seated on the ground. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Why?" she rasped. "Why won't you believe me?"

***

In Fanoss's royal castle, Earl Gelatt had his own private quarters separate from his office. The chambers were more lavish and opulent than those of the royal family. The furnishings were of the highest quality, and the space was decorated with the hides of animals Gelatt had hunted himself.

At the moment, Earl Gelatt sat in front of a vanity, staring into the mirror as he carefully trimmed his mustache. This was a daily routine for him, one he never deviated from. Even when running a high fever that prevented him from attending to his duties, he still at least groomed his facial hair—or so he boasted to anyone who would listen.

"Meh heh heh!" he snickered gleefully. "My mustache looks as perfect as ever today."

Gelatt had purchased a number of tools for the upkeep of his facial hair, each one carefully tucked into a small box which was in turn stowed safely inside the vanity drawer. The man spurned his duties as it suited him, but he never failed to attend to his beloved mustache.

Satisfied, Gelatt rose abruptly from his chair. "There," he said. "I suppose I should attend to today's work." Atop the vanity was a report sent to him from spies he'd dispatched abroad. He pulled thoughtfully at the ends of his mustache as he held the report with his free hand, eyes scanning the text. "It's really quite the blow to be divested of our strongest weapon. I had planned for us to sacrifice one of the princesses as necessary to achieve victory in war, should the need arise."

He knew how the Magic Flutes worked. Before the thieves stole them, the heirlooms had been passed down through many generations. They were rather simple instruments capable of manipulating monsters. Their true power lay in the number of creatures they could control. A single flute could command thousands or even tens of thousands of monsters. At the cost of their life, the player could summon an enormous beast.

When Fanoss had first gained independence from Holfort, a foreign nation attempted to invade them. Fanoss had employed one of the flutes, and the summoned beast had attacked the enemy relentlessly until it destroyed their entire fleet. Said fleet had tried to concentrate fire on it to vanquish it. For a moment, it seemed that they'd succeeded, but the beast rejuvenated instantly and continued its rampage, according to records from the time. It only disappeared once it had fulfilled the command it was given. The royal who'd summoned it then passed away.

The materials documenting these events included a decree from the reigning archduke: "I hereby condemn the usage of this flute and prohibit its employment in battle unless our nation's very survival hangs in the balance."

Gelatt found that restriction ridiculous and didn't apply it to himself. He had not even a trace of loyalty in him toward the royal family.

"One person's life? It's a small price to pay when we stand to gain so much," he reasoned. "The flutes were invaluable weapons. Shame we lost them."

What did he care if a flute's use sacrificed a royal? In exchange, they would gain an unbeatable beast that would stop at nothing to fulfill the orders it was given. As far as Gelatt was concerned, the two princesses were expendable ammunition for that weapon. And since there were two of them, there was no harm in sacrificing one if it came down to it.

When the flutes were first stolen, Gelatt had been a nervous wreck.

"There's no point in longing for what's already been lost," he said to himself. "Right now, I must face the facts." His voice betrayed no emotion, but that was all bravado. The man had been a bundle of nerves, taking out his anger on those around him. He couldn't hide how narrow-minded and petty he really was at his core.

Setting the report aside, Gelatt reached for the letter left on his vanity. This letter, which had come from Holfort Kingdom, was the reason he'd finally regained his composure. "Things seem to be getting interesting over there. Conflict is barely smoldering now, but it may eventually become a roaring flame. I can't wait to see how the situation develops." He pinched his beloved mustache between his fingers and pressed a kiss to the letter.

Chapter 1:
The Dinner Party

WINTER BREAK WAS NEARLY OVER, and the new school term would soon be upon us.

I—Leon Fou Bartfort—had unfortunately been reincarnated into this absurd otome game. At present, I found myself spending time in the region formerly governed by Earl Offrey. My older brother, Viscount Bartfort, had recently been installed here, and he was now busy with all the preparations that inevitably faced a new lord taking over administrative duties.

The Holfortian aristocrats who presided over territory could generally be divided into two categories: lords who possessed their own mainland domains, and lords whose domains were located on independent floating islands. My father, Baron Bartfort, fell into the latter category. However, there were many benefits to the former category, though it often entailed frequent skirmishes with neighbors. I supposed that it made sense that those with independent territories were less susceptible to such petty squabbles.

In any case, Viscount Bartfort's territory also placed him into the latter category. They had a new station among the nobility, but that didn't entail all the usual downsides one might expect, thanks in part to their connections.

My brother, Nicks Fou Bartfort, came from an arguably minor, largely unheard-of barony. However, his betrothed was Dorothea Fou Roseblade of the esteemed House Roseblade. Therefore, although this viscounty was newly established, the couple possessed a long noble lineage. Some nobles would still scorn them as upstarts, but they had the full support of the Roseblades, who had history,

tradition, and power on their side. No one in high society could disparage the viscount and viscountess openly, at least.

That's what I was told, anyhow. I didn't know squat about high society or its conventions myself. Deirdre Fou Roseblade, Dorothea's younger sister and my new relation through the marriage, had filled me in during the break. When we spoke, I found myself exasperated, thinking, *Only nobles would care about this crap.*

Well, whatever.

The point was that Viscount Bartfort and his wife were now in charge of the former Offrey territory. As I said, they should've been busy with preparations. However, Nicks was raised by parents of simpler means, and he was loyal to his family. Thus, he asked me and my fiancée, Marie Fou Lafan, for dinner.

Nicks had always been a stand-up guy, but I couldn't help worrying about him.

"Are you sure you should be inviting us to dine with you when you have so much else to focus on?" I asked. "You've got powerful officials living here who you should be wining and dining to make your future rule easier."

Inviting those officials and listening to what they said would've been a much better use of his time. Although he and Dorothea were now in charge, the rest of the local administration hadn't changed at all. The general populace probably felt anxious about their new lord. Winning over the old administration would go a long way toward improving relations with everyone.

That, by the way, was all knowledge I'd gained at the academy. I never figured it'd be useful to me. I only memorized it because I thought it might appear on a test. Who knew I'd ever land myself in a position to convey that information to my older brother?

Nicks's smile vanished. "Unlike the upper classes, we in the general class don't learn those sorts of things. I guess I should be glad to have such a reliable younger brother to offer me advice." There was a hostile undercurrent in his voice.

I avoided his gaze and forced a smile. "'Reliable' is my middle name. You can turn to me whenever you need anything." I shrugged at him, sounding a little too smug.

Nicks let out a bark of dry laughter. "You'd be far better suited to ruling this land than me. How about it? Want to be viscount here?"

"I'll pass." I shook my head. "I'm not cut out for such a high position." I was trying to be modest and build him up.

He wouldn't have it, though. "The humble act isn't fooling anyone, coming from a guy who sold out his own brother," Nicks spat at me.

"Sold you out? You make it sound so uncharitable. I was thinking of your happiness."

"Liar!"

Nicks seemingly didn't understand my kindness at all. It was cruel that he'd paint me as a villain when all I'd done was push this unwanted title off on him.

"Who cares about the viscount title?" I scoffed. "You've got a beautiful, devoted woman like Miss Dorothea as your wife now. Isn't that a big-enough boon?"

I shot a glance at the woman beside him, who gracefully attended to her meal. She was as beautiful as a painting, with long blonde hair cascading past her shoulders and bangs cut in a neat row on her forehead. Dorothea had a tiny waist and voluptuous curves, her chest well-endowed and her bottom perfectly round. She never missed a day of exercise, which kept her slender and fit. The only complaint one might make was how cold she came across as she sat there quietly. She was like an ice queen, not speaking a word as she nibbled her food.

She let out a light, airy laugh. "Ah ha ha! Darling, you mustn't worry about a thing. When it comes to your administrative duties, I'll

be right by your side through all of them, supporting you." She put special emphasis on being "right by his side."

Dorothea's expression had been neutral until she spoke, but as her gaze turned to Nicks, her cheeks flushed and she smiled joyfully. As for her "darling," Nicks, he dropped his gaze without any sign of embarrassment at her loving pet name, looking horribly fatigued.

"I'm scared of owing you any more than I already…" He cut himself short and cleared his throat. "Pardon me, Miss Dorothea. What I meant was, I depend greatly upon your support."

His voice had grown quiet and timid, which Dorothea couldn't abide. She shot up from her chair, and the rattle of a chain echoed around the room. "We're married now, so you must stop using such titles with me!" She probably didn't like how meek he was being.

Nicks tried to protest. "B-but your family is a league above mine, Mi—er, Dorothea. You get that, right? I'm in no position to be assertive with them or you. I essentially married into *your* family, not the other way around."

Both families were offering what support they could, but the greater burden fell on the Roseblades. I couldn't blame Nicks for feeling indebted to them.

Dorothea clenched her fists at her side. "Don't say such things!" she snapped. Then, a little calmer, she added, "Let's make this land flourish together." She approached him, clasping one of his hands in both of hers, and gazed at him with deep tenderness and care.

"Miss Dorothea," he muttered in surprise.

"Dorothea," she corrected him. "Please, darling. No need to be reserved with me." She truly loved him from the bottom of her heart.

I didn't doubt for even a minute that their relationship was genuine. Well, mostly. They were gazing into each other's eyes, holding hands, which was romantic enough. The sticking point was the chain that bound them together, either end latched to collars

around their necks. This would've been an endearing sight—a wife reassuring her vulnerable husband—if not for the collar and chain, which really kind of ruined the whole thing in my mind. It felt like something out of a TV comedy sketch.

I silently returned my attention to my meal, digging in with my fork and knife. "This boiled beef is delicious," I said. It was tough enough that it didn't fall apart when my fork stabbed it, but it absolutely melted in my mouth the moment I took a bite. Amazingly, the dish kept its shape properly on the plate—yet the moment I tucked it in, juices gushed over my tongue and the meat came apart, soft and tender.

While I resumed my meal, Nicks and Dorothea were lost in their own world. Nicks had bemoaned his many perceived misfortunes, but in the short time he'd been married to Dorothea, she had already twisted him around her finger. He was a changed man. To me, though, he looked all the happier for it, so I was glad for him. If this was the relationship they wanted, I was loath to advise them otherwise.

I swallowed the bite of beef, which I'd barely needed to chew, and turned my attention to Marie. She'd been silent through the entire exchange. When my gaze landed on her, she'd just finished scarfing down the last of the meat on her plate.

"I thought it was odd that you'd been so quiet," I told her. "You must've been too focused on the beef."

They had served us generous helpings, but Marie stared at her empty plate forlornly, as if she hadn't received enough to eat. "I was surprised at how perfectly it was cooked. I've prepared beast meat before, you know, but it's not the same. Anyway, I'd like another helping." Marie was less concerned with proper manners than with filling her own stomach.

I smiled tightly. This was just like her. "I envy you sometimes. It must be nice to be so focused on your gluttony that you can

ignore the tension in the air." I turned to my brother. "Nicks, sorry to ask, but could you get some more of that meat for Marie?"

Nicks broke eye contact with Dorothea. Still clasping her hand, he shifted his gaze to me. "Sure. I think we can do that." He paused and glanced at his wife. "Do you, Dorothea?" Her name sounded awkward on his tongue.

Her cheeks flushed. I was shocked that she had any bashfulness left when they both wore collars with a chain binding them together.

"Certainly," said Dorothea. "One of you servants, attend to our guest."

The servants providing the dinner service paused, glancing at one another hesitantly.

Dorothea's brow furrowed. Assuming that the servants were displeased with her for making the unusual demand—insisting on more food than one had been given was poor decorum—she repeated her orders with more emphasis. "Did you not hear my orders? This lady is part of my family now, and there is no need for propriety between family members. She should be given the second serving she desires."

A man whom I assumed to be their butler strode toward Dorothea. His lips were pinched together, as if reluctant to elaborate on the servants' lack of willingness. "My lady," he said haltingly, "we actually…already gave the young lady all the meat we had prepared."

"Excuse me? Surely you made more than what you put on our plates," Dorothea shot back, shaking her head in dismay.

The man stole a glance at Marie, mopping the sweat from his forehead with a white handkerchief. "No… I mean, we already gave her seconds. And thirds. And fourths."

"What?" Dorothea blurted.

She and Nicks turned to Marie. I found myself staring at her, too.

Marie poked her tongue out and knocked her fist against her forehead as if this were a minor slipup. "I, uh, actually asked for more while you three were locked in conversation earlier." The way she spoke and acted was adorable, but what she'd said had all three of us reeling.

As her betrothed, I had to scold her. "You seriously asked for more without conferring with the host first? Learn some self-control, would you?" I heaved an exaggerated sigh, annoyed.

"I couldn't help it! The food was delicious!" Marie protested. "Since leaving my family, I've sampled all kinds of delights, but let me tell you, this meat dish is in my top three of all time."

"Your family…" Dorothea leaned forward, intrigued. "You mean the Lafans, yes? I heard a bit about them from Deirdre. It seems that you had an awful home life."

Marie had more or less been treated like a servant by her family. Worse, actually, when you considered that servants were at least paid and fed.

Any ordinary person would've been reluctant to revisit the details of such childhood trauma, but Marie reflected nostalgically, "Thinking about it now just makes me mad. My older brother and sister were treated so much better than I was. Today, I realize that part of why they misused me so badly was because our servants had run away. They needed someone to do household chores, or their whole lives would fall apart. I had just reached an age when I could do most of those chores, so maybe that's why they treated me as they did." Marie shrugged. "Well, doesn't really matter now." She acted so nonchalant about being used as a maid by her own family.

But Dorothea couldn't dismiss what she'd heard as easily as Marie wanted. "It doesn't *matter*?!" she repeated, outraged on Marie's behalf. "You were their child, the same as your siblings, and you were discriminated against. Shouldn't you feel more resentment? More rage at their foul exploitation?"

Marie tilted her head back, staring at the ceiling as she racked her mind for those memories. "It does piss me off," she acknowledged. "But they're strangers to me now, so who cares? I mean, the worst part of it all was that they didn't feed me. They'd make sure *they* had food, of course, but they never provided me any! Isn't that completely ridiculous?" She dropped her gaze to Dorothea, seeking agreement.

"Y-yes," Dorothea stammered back. "It's most certainly inexcusable." She hesitated and added, "Though I don't think that's the *most* inexcusable part, it's certainly unjustifiable. A parent should feed their child. If…if I may ask, how did you survive?" Her voice's pitch dropped a bit lower, as if she knew that what she'd asked was insensitive but couldn't control her curiosity regardless.

Neither Nicks nor I could interject. We were both stricken by the grisly details of Marie's upbringing. Marie, however, seemed oblivious to our anguish on her behalf. She cheerfully went on and answered Dorothea's question, describing her days in the Lafan household.

"From a very young age, I ventured into the woods surrounding our house to find my meals!" she declared. "I pored over the books in our library on edible wild plants and memorized them all."

Dorothea's mouth fell open. "Y-you ate weeds?!" she cried, shocked.

Marie gave her a judgmental look and wagged her finger. "There's no such thing as a weed. Not really. Each plant—save for, perhaps, newly evolved ones—has its own name. Oh—but there are a bunch that aren't really edible, even though they aren't poisonous. I can't tell you how many times I found myself on death's door." She sighed, then stared off into the distance.

Meanwhile, I felt like I'd heard a traumatic horror story I'd have preferred never to know.

Marie must've noticed the sympathetic looks she was receiving. Flustered that she'd dragged down the atmosphere, she tried to employ a more cheerful tone to lighten the mood. "Oh… But as soon as I was old enough to go deeper into the woods, I could at least eat meat. And once I got better at hunting, my diet really improved. I could finally eat wild animals. It was a real pain needing to take them down, though. A lot of effort on my part." She tried to make the tale humorous, adopting a joking tone.

Nicks covered his face with one hand, a sob escaping his lips.

Dorothea sat there, brow wrinkled and lips taut. "You…taught yourself to hunt?" she clarified.

"I did. No one else was going to teach me. I read books and studied," Marie said.

"I-I see." Dorothea gave her a bewildered look. She'd probably had no idea that her curiosity would wind up exposing the darkest periods of Marie's life. Her expression was contrite, as if she was genuinely sorry for pressing Marie, but the worst was yet to come.

"Actually, speaking of hunting, the most delicious thing I caught was squirrels," Marie went on. "I mostly hunted those because they were one of the safest things." She licked her lips, remembering the taste.

Dorothea gaped at her in disbelief. "Squirrels?! Y-you mean those cute little woodland creatures? A-and…you ate them?!"

Beside her, Nicks stared at Marie wide-eyed. We Bartforts had certainly been impoverished, but we'd never lived in the brutal conditions Marie faced as a child. Hers had been far worse than ours ever were.

It was strange, then, that she had a look of pure bliss on her face as she recalled her roasted squirrels. A tendril of drool very nearly ran down her chin as she replied, "I was always so excited when I found a squirrel in one of my traps. They're a great source of protein, and they taste good. What could be better?"

That's all she sees when she looks at a squirrel—a great source of protein?!

"Animal pelts sell for a good price, so with the money I earned from them, I could afford to buy myself secondhand clothes," Marie explained. "But there were many times I faced danger in those woods. Boars and bears are ridiculously strong, you know. It'd take me half a day just to kill one."

She battled boars and bears out there?! Suddenly, I understood why Marie's fists packed such a punch. Still, I had to ask. "Did you really kill boars and bears on your own?"

"Of course not. Not on my *own*. You can't take on one of those without risking injury to yourself," Marie clarified. "I'd go after ones that got caught in my traps. That's what I meant, though. Even injured and at a disadvantage, they took half a day to kill. But it was worth it for their delicious meat. Better yet, I could sell their hides and nab a brand-new set of used clothes."

What the hell does that mean? If they're used, they can't be brand new!

Dorothea pressed a hand over her mouth and beckoned a servant over. I was startled to see that our hostess's cheeks glistened with fresh tears. It took a lot to make someone like Dorothea cry.

"Y-yes, my lady?" said the servant.

The help were as taken aback as us by Marie's stories. Some of them had dissolved into tears, too.

"Please have more beef prepared for the young lady—Rie, I mean," Dorothea clarified, now addressing Marie by a pet name. "Boiling anything to make it tender would take too long, but you could come up with a steak quickly enough, couldn't you?"

Bashful, Marie scratched her head, her cheeks flushed. "Do you really mean it? Aw. I feel bad, like I strong-armed you into this." She apparently felt guilty for imposing.

That wasn't the issue! Your traumatic childhood was! Anyone would pity her after what she'd been through. Not only had she not received parental love like a normal child, she'd been treated as less than a servant and forced to fend for herself. I'd never known that it was quite that bad.

I stared at Marie, lost for words.

Nicks unfastened the collar around his neck and shuffled toward me. He put a hand on either shoulder and squeezed a little too tight. "Leon!" his voice boomed.

"Wh-what? That hurts, by the way," I said.

Nicks gave me a conflicted look. Some part of him was still furious at me for landing him in his current situation, but he seemed to swallow his hostility. "Look. There's still a lot I'd like to say to you. I really wanted to pummel you. In fact, that's why I invited you to dinner. I figured I'd throw a bunch of passive-aggressive barbs at you, then end the meal by smacking you."

That would have been incredibly uncalled for. I was his adorable younger brother. How could he entertain such ill intentions toward me?

"But…!" He inhaled deeply, trying to rein in in his fury. "I'll set aside my grievances."

"Uh, okay?" I said.

"In return, you have to make Rie happy," Nicks went on. "That's all I ask." A few stray tears traced paths down his cheeks.

Honestly, he didn't *have* to ask; I genuinely wanted to make Marie happy. *Although, frankly speaking, how mentally tough can one person be?* After all I'd heard, I realized how resilient she was, having grown up without any real support. She looked fragile, but she was tenacious. Like a military commander from the Warring States period.

When a servant came in carrying a plate of steak, Marie's face lit up. As soon as they set the dish down in front of her, she took a

knife and fork in either hand, ready to dig in. “Yay!” she exclaimed. “I can’t wait!” She began cutting into the steak, tucking chunk after chunk into her mouth.

Dorothea slipped out a handkerchief and dabbed away her tears. “Eat as much as you desire.”

Despite having reduced our hosts to weeping, Marie was completely preoccupied with her steak. She didn’t seem the least bit upset over all the trauma she’d detailed to us. How tough *was* she?

I decided then and there not to let her revisit her past again with others. She’d been too unfortunate, both in this life and her previous one. If what she’d said was entirely true, then as I understood it, a guy she’d dated in her previous life had killed her. She’d apparently had a daughter, too, though the two were forced to live apart. What could she possibly have done to warrant all that bad karma?

At one point, I’d thought to myself—jokingly—that Marie must be cursed. But having heard the depths of her family’s depravity, I started to think that there was no joking about it. She *was* cursed.

Yet, despite everything she’d endured, Marie grinned ear to ear, cheeks bulging as she chewed her steak.

I should’ve asked the priests on that Japanese-inspired island we visited to exorcise her, just to be safe.

Chapter 2:
Before Third Term

"THE ROSEBLADES' CHEF is incredible," Marie said. "I'm so stuffed, I couldn't eat another bite."

As soon as we'd returned to the guest room my brother prepared for us, Marie threw herself onto the bed. She lay on her back, arms and legs spread wide. Her stomach protruded slightly, and her shirt rode up to expose her skin. She didn't seem the least bit embarrassed about that, though; she obviously didn't see me as a potential romantic partner, or she wouldn't be so slovenly. It made me sad. Not her lack of interest in me, but the fact that she'd abandoned all pretense of shame.

"I can't believe you brought Miss Dorothea to tears," I told her. "Where my brother's concerned, she's pretty emotional, but otherwise she doesn't seem to care about anyone."

Dorothea was a passionate woman; there was no mistaking that. But she only engaged emotionally with another party if she had an interest in them. She came across as cold and unfeeling with everyone else. Marie had not only reduced Dorothea to tears but earned her sympathies to boot. That was impressive.

Marie flopped onto her side to face me. "She might seem cold to you, but I think she's a lot more sensitive than she lets on."

"If you say so. I still say she *is* cold."

"It's more like she's just bad at showing emotion," Marie explained. "Well, in any case, she's true to her fetishes." Her whole face puckered with disgust as she remembered the way being chained to Nicks had seemingly turned Dorothea on.

In terms of life experience, Marie had a leg up on me. She was a better judge of people.

"She's not an ice princess after all, huh? I guess that means she's actually adorable beneath the whole frosty facade." I paused, then shook my head. "Actually, I take that back."

For a split second, I regretted letting Nicks take my place and marry such a beauty. The second I remembered Dorothea's sexual proclivities, however, I changed my mind back. Regardless of how well-endowed she was, I didn't want to be literally chained to another person for the rest of my life.

Marie's eyes narrowed. She seemed to read me like a book, but she didn't admonish me for my preoccupation with Dorothea's physical beauty. Instead, she changed the subject. "We're done eating, so I think it's about time we discuss the future. We'll move on to our third term here soon. Does anything big happen in the game plot during the third term?" Marie's question was rhetorical, and she racked her own brain to see whether she could remember, but nothing was forthcoming.

I wasn't surprised that Marie came up empty. Nothing big had happened; any incidents had been minor, intended as foreshadowing of the danger that lay ahead. If anything, a tense atmosphere hung in the air as the end of our first year approached.

"There's nothing," I reassured Marie. "Besides, we don't really have to worry about this anymore, do we?"

Her cheeks puffed in frustration. "Of course we do! This entire nation's future rests on the protagonist's shoulders. If Olivia doesn't —doesn't…? Hunh." Realizing what I meant, she fell silent.

Marie and I had already infiltrated Fanoss and stolen their two Magic Flutes before going on our school trip, thus nipping any future dangers in the bud. It was better to deal with the risks ahead of time before they snowballed beyond our control, especially when Holfort's fate was at stake. That was the kind of cunning, underhanded strategy any gamer would've come up with.

Well, maybe that was an unfair generalization. The point was that we'd done it to ensure no tragedy would transpire in the future.

Sneaking into Fanoss's royal castle to pull off the heist had been a major international crime, but we figured that was a small price to pay to save our country from possible doom.

"In the game, we'd go into all-out war with Fanoss during our third year," I said. "But you've got to admit, now that they've lost their trump cards, there's no real chance they'd go through with that."

Marie sat up straight, paying due consideration to my words. What she said next took me by surprise. "No, I don't have to admit that, because I think they *will* still go to war. Having the last boss in their hands wasn't why they did what they did. As long as they have a good enough justification, I figure they'll still go through with it. They hate us."

Holfort and Fanoss shared such a complex history that no one would be surprised if they warred. According to the game's story, Fanoss had long resented Holfort, and it was their animosity that brought them to war. Still, I didn't think they'd risk the consequences of that without a guaranteed path to victory.

"Do you realize how vast the power difference is between us and them?" I asked. "Without those flutes, they don't stand a chance of winning. If they still want to try, they're a bunch of idiots."

Fanoss had avoided open conflict up until this point because the odds were stacked against them. Holfort possessed more battleships, so if the two nations did clash, Holfort could easily overwhelm Fanoss with sheer numbers. And, if they lost, Fanoss might be destroyed entirely. They'd only maintained their independence because they had the ridiculously overpowered Black Knight on their side. Yet even with him at their disposal, they hadn't been able to bring Holfort to ruin. Thus, the power imbalance between the two nations held fast. Fanoss knew that they would lose if they launched an invasion.

The question that got me was why, if they could've used the magic flutes, they hadn't attacked before. Still, if they feared failure,

then I figured they should be even more reluctant to challenge Holfort now that we'd deprived them of their most powerful weapon.

My reasoning seemed to convince Marie, who looked visibly relieved. "I guess if they don't, we have nothing big to worry about. At most, I'm curious to see who Olivia ends up with. It seems like she's headed down the reverse-harem route at the moment, but I don't see all the love interests being satisfied sharing her. They might duke it out." Her eyes sparkled with fascination.

"I don't really give a crap how her love life ends up. Do women even like reverse harems? Is that a thing?" I asked, skeptical. Men loved the idea of harems—I knew that—but I wasn't so sure about women.

"It depends," Marie said vaguely. "I knew girls who dated multiple men at the same time. But there were others who preferred monogamy."

"Different strokes for different folks, huh? Either way, I have a hard time believing that Miss Olivia could be the type to date multiple guys at once." My mind conjured her image. She looked innocent and naive; she didn't resemble the type of girl who could juggle so many romantic relationships. "Not someone as simple and sweet as her. No, I figure she'll settle for one of them eventually."

Marie shook her head, annoyed with me. "You're an idiot, letting her looks deceive you like that. The girls who seem the purest are usually the ones cheating on you with a bunch of other guys behind your back."

I wrinkled my nose. "I didn't want to know that. I'd prefer not to have my fantasies about women ruined, thank you very much."

"Ugh. You're such a moron." Marie rolled her eyes. Then she paused, as if remembering something. "Hold on." She put her hand to her chin. "You've kind of got a point. Most women like Olivia don't *openly* date multiple men at once. Most keep their adulterous ways secret, lying to each partner and telling them, 'You're the only one for me!'"

"So Olivia's the rare shameless type. I don't think I wanted to know that." I sighed deeply.

Marie grimaced in dismay. "What could a guy see in a girl who doesn't bat an eye about dating multiple dudes at the same time?" She seemed to be pouting because I kept acting disappointed in Olivia.

I wasn't that invested, though. "That's ironic, coming from you. You seem more interested in her love life than I am," I groused.

"How could I not be? It's serious drama between those six."

Maybe it was inevitable that she would amuse herself with the protagonist's relationship dynamics; there weren't many other forms of entertainment in this world. We'd been lucky in our previous lives—Japan was blessed with numerous types of entertainment. And even then, women had still loved to gossip about other people's love lives. Maybe it was human instinct to enjoy drama.

"You can be invested, if you want, but don't get involved," I warned Marie.

"Duh. If I were involved, it wouldn't be nearly as fun," she shot back. "Still, I wish you'd have Luxion monitor what's going on with them. Especially if he could edit the footage for my amusement." She wanted to waste all our advanced AI's resources on entertainment.

"Hate to break it to you, but Luxion will be stuck on his main ship for the foreseeable future. He's seeing what he can find out from the Saint's vengeful spirit." Luxion, my partner, was ordinarily cased in a metal sphere, but that was his mobile unit. His true body was a spaceship over seven hundred meters long.

Luxion had been developed as an advanced migratory ship capable of transporting a number of people into space. He was equipped with numerous convenient functions for that purpose. But lately, he'd been preoccupied investigating the lingering grudge of the Saint; he'd taken to calling it her "vengeful spirit."

Marie looked bored. “So that’s why I haven’t seen him around. I’d been wondering. Will he be done before the next term starts?”

“How the hell would I know?” I shrugged. “Now that we don’t have to worry about the game’s storyline anymore, we’ve got more important things to think about.”

There was no imminent threat to Holfort’s future on the horizon, but there *was* a serious problem—at least for us.

Marie cocked her head. She didn’t yet see what I was talking about. “Do we? I thought the game story was the only thing on our plate. With that out of the way, we should be carefree.”

“That’s the thing. This issue wouldn’t be world-ending for Holfort, but it’s major for us.”

Marie’s face hardened, her whole body tensing. “What could it be?”

I let the silence hang for a moment for emphasis, then said, “The requirement we need to meet to move on to our second year.”

Compared to complete annihilation, that probably sounded minor, but it was no laughing matter for us.

Marie’s eyes went round. She’d finally caught on. “Y-you mean dungeon exploration, right?”

“Yep. We’ve been so preoccupied with other stuff, we still haven’t completed that requirement. If we don’t get our butts in gear, we could be in hot water.” I was being a little hyperbolic. Still, we *hadn’t* made any progress yet. I covered my face with my hand and sighed dramatically.

Marie cradled her head in her hands. “No!” she moaned. “I don’t want to be held back!”

Yeah, me neither.

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The door to the school infirmary was thrown open and slammed into the wall. Two young lords stumbled in, both short of breath.

Olivia peeked at them. Satisfied that they were the pair she'd awaited, she sat up in bed. "I'm so happy to see you. It was kind of you both to come all this way," she said.

The girl's arms and legs were bound in thick bandages, making her look utterly pitiful as she sat in bed smiling at them. Julius Rapha Holfort—the young man with short, disheveled navy-blue hair—threw himself toward her bed, crashing onto his knees. He grasped Olivia's hand in his, then pressed a chaste kiss against it.

"Of course we came! I was worried sick about you." Tears welled in Julius's eyes.

Olivia gave him a troubled smile, unsure how to respond.

Unable to watch the moving scene between Olivia and the prince, Jilk Fia Marmoria stepped forward to insert himself. He had long green hair and always wore a warm smile. Jilk's father, Viscount Marmoria, was a member of the court nobility, and Jilk had served the prince for as long as he could remember. When Julius took the throne in the future, Jilk would serve in the central administration as his right-hand man. Among the idiot brigade, Jilk's house ranked lowest. Still, he managed to stand toe to toe with everyone; his mother had served as Julius's nursemaid, making the two as close as brothers.



"Your Highness, don't squeeze her hand too hard, or you'll hurt her," Jilk said smoothly. He kept his composure, unlike the prince. "I'm relieved to see that you're all right, Miss Olivia. When I heard that you'd met with an unfortunate accident in the dungeon, it felt as though the world crashed down around me." He sat at the edge of her bed, regarding her with deep sadness in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," said Olivia. "You both went to so much trouble planning that trip for us. I feel terrible you had to cancel it."

By now, they were supposed to have set sail on their private cruise ship for that trip. Julius and Jilk had suggested the voyage, since they'd had to skip the school trip. Ultimately, though, they'd only wanted to go to spend quality time with Olivia. Greg Fou Seberg, Chris Fia Arclight, and Brad Fou Field—all prominent scions of their respective families—had also insisted on joining them. Unfortunately, they'd had to cancel the trip due to Olivia's injuries.

Julius rested a gentle hand on Olivia's shoulder. "Don't worry about it. The other guys are just glad that you're alive. No one can blame you for an accident that happened while you were trying to finish your dungeon requirement. I wish you'd invited us along, but it's a little late for that. As for the trip, while it's a shame that we can't go, there'll always be other opportunities."

"I'm sorry," Olivia murmured again, dejected.

Julius frowned at her. "Don't be too down on yourself. Greg and the other guys will be here soon. Not a single one of us is upset with you."

He was trying desperately to reassure her, so Olivia flashed him a weak smile to give the impression that he'd successfully eased her conscience. "That's a relief to hear," she said.

"Everyone's just glad you're safe," Julius added, heartened.

During the pair's entire exchange, Jilk had sat on the edge of Olivia's bed, not interrupting them. Now that their conversation had dwindled, though, he leaned forward, his sharp eyes inspecting

Olivia's injuries. "Moving on," he said, "how badly injured are your limbs?" The way he regarded her seemed almost cynical.

"Jilk," Julius snapped. "Are you suspicious of her?!"

Jilk raised both hands in surrender. "I don't suspect *her*, no."

"Speak plainly," Julius demanded.

"Miss Olivia is a skilled healer. She could have seen to any normal injuries with her own magic. The fact that she was carried to the school infirmary suggests heavy injuries beyond her ability to heal." Jilk paused briefly before adding, "Additionally, assuming that she did sustain these injuries in the dungeon, you wouldn't expect her to go far enough in there to encounter anything that would leave her in this condition."

The two had apparently already heard the details of what had happened to Olivia, which was why Jilk—with his keen eye—noticed something strange about her injuries.

Olivia wrapped her arms around her knees, drawing them to her chest, as if hesitant to explain.

Jilk watched her and sensed immediately that he was on the right track. "Miss Olivia, won't you tell us the truth of what happened to you?" he asked her gently.

Olivia pressed her face into her knees so they couldn't see her expression. This was where she was supposed to shed tears, touched by Jilk's kindness. However, she grinned maniacally to herself, her face so deranged that the two men would never have recognized her if they'd seen it. Her shoulders jumped with silent laughter.

I did it. I caught them in my web. I'm glad to see that one of them is intelligent enough to realize how suspicious these wounds are. If they were both mindless idiots, I wouldn't have much fun crushing them.

Resting on top of her bandages, Olivia's left arm wore the Saint's bracelet, which harbored Saint Anne's vengeful spirit. Olivia's

own consciousness was deeply suppressed. The person at the wheel, in control of her body—Anne—possessed a deep resentment of Holfort Kingdom.

Being able to take over this girl's body when I did was such good fortune. I could never have predicted she was trapped in a romantic entanglement with those reprobates' descendants. Olivia's smile disappeared, and her face went blank. *This is fate. Fate is telling me to avenge Lier. That must be what all this means, right, Lier?*

Hatred and hostility toward Holfort and the idiot brigade smoldering in her chest, Olivia—or rather, Anne—lifted her face. Her lips quivered, and tears streaked her cheeks. "I'm…so sorry," she choked out. "They told me not to say anything. I was just…so scared, I didn't dare…" A sob caught in her throat.

It finally sank in for Julius that Jilk had been right to feel suspicious. There was more to this than either of them knew. The prince threw his arms around Olivia. "Whatever happened, you can tell us. We—no, *I*," he corrected himself, "am on your side. I promise I'll protect you. You have nothing to worry about."

Jilk had already shot to his feet, and he was lost deep in thought. "Can you elaborate for us?"

Olivia wiped away her tears with her palms. "I can't. They threatened me. If I talk…it'll cause everyone trouble. I'm sure it'll burden you, too, Mr. Jilk."

The implication that she wasn't keeping her silence for her benefit triggered Jilk's protective instincts. He was normally very composed, but his voice rose several octaves as he said, "You don't have to worry about me! His Highness and I are much tougher than we look. Now, please, tell us what happened."

Olivia hesitated for a moment, then said tentatively, "I was pushed off a sheer cliff inside the dungeon. M-my attacker said that when I crawled my way back, I'd better not say anything to you, or

they'd show me no mercy. That's why…I could only say that it'd been an accident."

Olivia had gone to the dungeon to collect magic stones to sell to earn enough money to cover her daily expenses. Unfortunately, she'd stumbled upon some female students who then threw her down a chasm.

"I was so scared…" she went on with tear-filled eyes. "And I knew, if I talked, they'd never leave me alone. There was nothing I could do…"

Her sobs took both men by surprise. Julius's clenched fists trembled. "You're saying they tried to kill you in the dungeon?" He was infuriated that anyone would try to commit murder within the royal family's dungeon, but most unconscionable was that the culprits had targeted Olivia. Never before had he been full of such burning rage.

Jilk, however, maintained his composed demeanor as he commented, "A sloppy plan if I've ever heard one. Even assuming that your assailants wanted to frame it as an accident, they ran the risk of witnesses who might expose them, especially given how many of our fellow students visit that dungeon. Someone was bound to see something and tell about it."

Julius whirled around and grabbed Jilk's collar. He pressed his face close to the other boy's. "How can you be so calm in a situation like this? Aren't you worried about Olivia at all?"

"Of course I am," Jilk said. "But the important thing is that she returned safe and sound. What's most crucial now is ensuring that this never happens to her again. Don't you agree?"

Jilk had a point; Julius couldn't deny that or even find any retort. He shoved Jilk back and turned away from both him and Olivia. He didn't want either of them to see him right now.

Olivia continued to sniffle, tears coasting down her cheeks as she calmly studied the pair's reactions. *Julius is the more emotional of the two, but he seems to have enough self-control to keep his*

cool. The problem is Jilk. He was calmer than she'd expected and, on top of that, had sharp intuition. *He'll obstruct my pursuit of vengeance. The real question is, how shall I get rid of him?* She covered her face with her hands and began analyzing her options.

Oblivious to what was going through her mind, Jilk said, "Your Highness, I share your enmity toward those who perpetrated this crime. However, if we let our anger consume us in our pursuit of justice, we risk giving them an opening they can exploit to escape consequences. We must be calm and rational."

Julius took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. It had taken a few minutes, but he'd regained his composure. "You're right," he admitted. "I know you're right. It's just hard to suppress my feelings on the matter. Well? What do you propose we do?" He gave Jilk a pointed look as if to say, *You must have an idea, surely.*

Jilk nodded, pressing a hand to his chest. "We nobility descend from the great adventurers who founded this kingdom. Turning on an ally in a dungeon is the sort of nefarious act only the most savage beast would commit. First, we should gather evidence of the crime. We must ensure that the culprits have no room to escape culpability. Then we will make them face the consequences."

Jilk's comments about the founding of Holfort were entirely accurate; they were why Holfort's citizens so valued all the traits and characteristics associated with proper adventurers. Anything an adventurer considered beyond the pale was likewise frowned upon in high society. If one was convicted of something as heinous as the attempted murder of a fellow student inside a dungeon, there would be little mercy found among the other nobles. Jilk's aim was to have Olivia's attackers stricken from society—to, in turn, murder their reputations.

Julius's face tensed with bitterness. "You're as merciless as ever."

"What? Did you intend to let them off with a warning because Miss Olivia happened to survive?" Jilk shook his head. The prince

was too naive. “We must make examples of them, Your Highness. We must let the entire student body know that, should they attempt the same thing, they will face the harshest repercussions. If we don’t, we cannot hope to protect Miss Olivia.” Jilk understood that the other nobles were displeased with Olivia. Mercilessness toward these culprits would be the best way to deter further such incidents.

After a long pause, Julius finally blew out a breath. “All right,” he said. “How far do you intend to go in punishing them?”

“If we’re going to punish them, it must be to the utmost extent. They must be expelled,” Jilk decided.

“They attempted murder, and *expulsion* will be their only punishment?” Julius frowned, then glanced at Olivia. “Please be patient, Olivia. I promise we’ll drive the people who did this to you from the school.”

She smiled at them, heartened by their determination to protect her. “Thank you, both of you.”

Yet beneath Olivia’s smile, malice surged within Anne’s heart. *They have some nerve spouting platitudes at me. Still, I never imagined the day would come when Marmoria’s descendant would call someone a “savage beast,”* she thought.

The two men were visibly relieved by her reaction. They promptly left the room, intent on gathering evidence for their case.

When she was alone again, Olivia gripped her blanket tightly. “You think of yourselves as adventurers’ noble descendants? And that betraying someone is the nefarious act of a savage beast? You’ve some impudence, throwing such words around.”

She trembled with fury, her whole face contorted with hatred. Jilk’s words had somehow struck a nerve. It was that holier-than-thou mindset he’d exhibited, as if he were somehow on a pedestal, and the act of betraying someone in the middle of an adventure were far below him. It was so disingenuous. So hollow.

"They're hailed as the descendants of heroic adventurers, are they? Ha!" Olivia snorted with laughter. After she'd drawn a long breath, an eerie smile settled over her lips. Her face was the same as ever, but with Anne in control, she no longer looked like herself. "Marmoria's descendant will be the first to suffer. But make no mistake, boys, I have no grudge against you specifically—it's your ancestors who wronged me."

Chapter 3:
The Descendants of Adventurers

HOLFORT WAS A KINGDOM of adventurers. If they traced their lineage back, most noble families would find an adventurer among their ancestors. Consequently, the profession was highly respected and valued. It was customary for all noble children to register as adventurers when they entered the academy. Refusing to do so without a valid reason would lead to ostracization from high society, regardless of gender.

Still, registration was largely a formality. Outside classes, few students actually engaged in any adventuring—that is, save for the school-wide requirement of "dungeon clearing."

The capital had its own dungeon, which provided many necessary resources to the kingdom as a whole. It contained magic stones used as energy resources, as well as iron and stone. Monsters infested the tunnels, which made the dungeon dangerous, but it was worth venturing inside for all the loot. That dungeon was the foundation of the royal family's power. Yes, the royal family's—not the power of the kingdom itself.

In any event, the academy issued a requirement to all students who wished to advance to the next grade. The dungeon was much like a labyrinth hidden inside a mountain, with floors that sloped deeper and deeper; students needed to clear a specific number of those floors.

The number depended on a student's year, but they were expected to meet that requirement regardless of gender; if they failed to do so, they'd be held back. As forgiving and permissive as the academy was with its female attendees, pride as the descendants of adventurers apparently took precedence over everything else.

"We planned to take care of that during the winter break, but we were so busy with other stuff that we didn't get to it," I said. "If we don't hop to it soon, we'll both be held back." Marie and I were in an empty classroom at the end of the school day, and for emphasis, I'd written "be held back" on the blackboard behind me.

Marie sat in one of the classroom's chairs. She dropped her head into her hands. "You don't have to go out of your way to explain it," she snapped. "I get it! Students get three terms to meet that requirement, but if they don't, they're screwed. Right?"

"Yep. Screwed," I confirmed. "The biggest problem is that getting held back basically ruins your reputation. So, no matter what, we've got to get this done."

It was nothing too difficult, really. Most students met this requirement with little hassle. That was also why most people looked down on anyone who didn't manage to do so and repeated a year. Those stuck in that position were usually too ashamed to stay at the academy and left of their own accord. It was that bad.

I shrugged at Marie, who was still raking her fingers through her hair. "There's no reason to stress over it. We can clear it in a day. If we get Luxion to pitch in, we'll be done in half a day. Maybe just a few hours."

Still, I'd called her to this empty classroom to light a fire under her so we could do this promptly. If Marie had known from the get-go that the dungeon would be a piece of cake, she'd have been likelier to put it off to the last minute, and there was no telling what unforeseen circumstances might've popped up. I wasn't afraid to admit that I was a coward. That was why I liked to deal with any burdensome tasks quickly.

Marie wasn't worried about us, though. "We'll be fine," she said. "Yes, I've no doubt *we'll* be fine."

She'd sure emphasized that "we" part. I cocked my head, not seeing where this was going.

She heaved a huge sigh. “I’m worried about those girls,” she explained.

“What girls?” It took me a moment to process. “You mean Cynthia and the others?!”

Marie was close with a group of three peculiar girls. More to the point, she mothered them constantly. Cynthia was lazier than a sloth, Ellie constantly locked herself in her room to read books and cared about nothing else, and Betty likewise never left the dorm and constantly focused on her art. The three rarely ever made it to their classes, and our professors considered them problem children. Marie was responsible for looking after them—not because anyone had assigned that task to her, but because she couldn’t leave well enough alone.

Her eyes shimmered with tears. “They can get around their terrible attendance through quizzes and makeup exams, but the school made it perfectly clear that they’ll make no exceptions on the dungeon-clearing requirement! To make matters worse, since those girls never come to class, they’ve basically only been in the dungeon once or twice before!”

Yikes. That complicated matters. If it were only Marie and me, we could have used Luxion to blast right through the dungeon and finished with that requirement. But bringing others along would be another matter. Revealing the full extent of Luxion’s capabilities would raise suspicions. Unfortunately, I doubted Marie would be willing to abandon her friends.

“So do you want to invite them along?” I asked. “With them, we should be able to wrap up in two days, don’t you think?”

I had no idea how strong those three were in battle, but if Marie and I acted as their bodyguards and didn’t rush things, I figured we could knock out the dungeon-clearing requirement easily enough.

Marie slapped her hands over her face. “I already did that,” she groaned. “I invited them time and time again! And they just

scrunched up their faces at me and said, 'I'll pass.'"

"Yeah, they don't really seem to care about their reputations. Why not let them repeat the year, then?" Being a coward, I *did* care what other people thought of me. But Cynthia, Ellie, and Betty weren't constrained by societal values. They probably didn't care about being held back.

Marie, however, did. "No way could I let that fly!" she burst out. "I already made my mind up that we'll graduate together! I'll tie them up and drag them if I have to—but they're coming with us!"

"You really plan for us to drag three tied-up girls with us? No thanks. That sounds like a huge pain." Plus, trying to force them to come along with us would be dangerous. It would be way more work than it was worth; I could already picture it.

"Then what do you propose?!" Marie snapped at me. "To be clear, leaving them behind isn't an option."

"Why are you so set on looking out for them?" I had to ask. It boggled my mind that she wouldn't drop them.

She flushed. "When all the other girls bullied me, they looked out for me."

"Really?"

"It's not like I owe them my life or anything so dramatic. But if girls were waiting to ambush me, they'd let me know. They'd also tell me where other girls had thrown away my textbooks. Stuff like that."

Knowing how apathetic those three were, it was hard to believe they'd gone out of their way to help Marie. I'd figured that, while she was being bullied, they'd done what they always did: holed up in their rooms and ignored her.

"That's how you three got so close, huh?" I said.

Marie nodded.

I'd always wondered how she'd gotten close to them. When she'd first started attending the academy, and tried to cozy up to Julius and his friends, she'd apparently earned the whole female student body's ire. I didn't expect that that was when she'd befriended them. It made sense, though. No wonder she'd known the perfect girls to bring along to that group date before.

"If they were with you through that, I get why you're reluctant to leave them behind," I said. "We need to find some way to get them to participate so that they can move to the next grade with us. Problem is, they've got no interest in cooperating."

If it were simply that they didn't have the skills to clear the dungeon on their own, we could've helped to compensate for that, but the three girls didn't even want to take part. They had no motivation. Dragging them along against their will could potentially endanger us and them if they refused to work with us. I still saw that going poorly.

Marie looked as though she was at her wits' end over the matter. "Do something," she demanded. "If they're held back, their families might pull them out of school entirely. It'd be so shameful to have that happen. And I've heard it's taken place before."

Any noble who repeated a year was treated as a failure in society. There was no recovering from that. Parents, meanwhile, didn't want to risk leaving such children in school, lest their presence provoke rumor and gossip.

"Considering all the consequences, I'm actually kind of impressed that they can't work up the motivation," I said thoughtfully. "Not that I envy them for being that thick-skinned about it."

Marie slumped forward against her desk, pressing her face to the desktop. "It'd be nice if they *were* motivated. However much I try to get them to see things my way, they just shrug and say, 'Whatever happens, happens.'"

"It's kind of weird how they act like they're above it all, as if the situation doesn't affect them. Maybe by saying that, I'm just generalizing about free spirits, but that's how it feels." At any rate, it *was* weird for a teenager to shrug and say, "Whatever happens, happens."

While I racked my brain for some way around this problem, I shuffled to the window and gazed out. We were on the second floor, facing the courtyard, and I spotted Olivia. She was accompanied by her love interests, as always; it looked like they were heading out to the city together. I had to assume the story was going well, then—especially the development of Olivia's romances with them.

"Looks like everything's going well on her end. Must be nice," I muttered.

Something was weird about seeing five guys fawn over a single woman—something that didn't quite sit right with me—but that was neither here nor there. Now that the imminent threat to Holfort was gone, I was relaxed enough to enjoy their romantic entanglements without investing personally. I actually found the sight of the six of them kind of endearing.

Without me realizing it, Marie had gotten up and come to join me. She gazed down at the group, too, but she wasn't quite as charitable as me. "She's showing off, walking around with five guys like that, heading out on a date. It's like she *wants* to scuffle with the rest of the girls at school." She was sulking.

"Weren't you the one who said watching them was entertaining? Why complain when you actually get the chance to do that?"

Marie glowered at me. "I'm complaining 'cause you're ogling her boobs and drooling over them!"

Oops. She'd apparently pinpointed right where my gaze was focused. I was impressed that she could tell from this distance.

"I was trying to be discreet about it. I guess I'll just have to try to be more careful in the future," I said, more to myself than her.

"You're too transparent. I could tell immediately. And instead of promising to be more careful, can't you promise to stop *looking*?"

I shrugged. "A man's eyes are naturally attracted to a well-endowed chest. What can I say? It's instinct." The ability to lock on to breasts like that was like a superpower. It wasn't that I wanted to make women hate me for appreciating what they'd been born with, but I couldn't help it.

When I refused to act apologetic, Marie's expression went completely blank. Low down, she swept her leg to jam her foot against my calves. For being petite, she could kick way more powerfully than you'd think. Blinding pain shot through my legs.

"Yowch!" I cried. "Don't kick me without saying anything!"

"So if I do say something, I can kick you?" She grinned and raised her fists—as if she were going to punch me now.

I lifted my hands in surrender. "Using violence like that isn't fair!" Then, more meekly—since I feared further retribution—I added, "Erm, forget I said anything. Sorry. I promise to do my utmost not to look in the future."

"Honestly." She rolled her eyes at me. "You're a horrible man, you know that? You're already engaged, and you've got the gall to drool over another woman. But you don't even…y-you don't even look at my chest at all."

Her voice dipped to a low, barely audible whisper toward the end of that sentence, but I caught everything she'd said.

Smiling, I replied, "You want me to ogle something that doesn't exist? You're kind of asking for the imposs—yowch!"

Marie's fist slammed into my stomach, sinking deep. "You should either have pretended you didn't hear me or given a more considerate response!"

The pain was so overwhelming that I collapsed to my knees, gasping for air.

She ignored my anguish and stared out the window. “Looks like things are still going okay with them, anyway.”

“Y-yeah,” I wheezed through the pain. It took everything I had to say that one word.

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When I returned to the dorm, my two friends came to join me in my room. Raymond was the smaller of the pair and wore glasses. When he heard what I had to say, he leaned forward.

“Those three might leave the academy entirely?!” he cried, his voice as loud as a thunderclap. I feared I might get a noise complaint from one of the neighboring rooms.

“Lower your voice,” I snapped. “Nothing’s decided yet. It’s just a possibility.”

As I tried to calm Raymond down, my other friend, Daniel, snapped, “The fact that it’s even a ‘possibility’ is a huge problem!”

They had good reason to panic. High society here was far too permissive of women’s worst behaviors, yet there were still societal norms they had to observe. You weren’t considered fit to be part of the nobility if you couldn’t graduate from the academy, where you were supposed to learn the bare minimum necessary for your position. It was far easier for women to graduate than men; nonetheless, anyone who couldn’t pass that low bar would be rejected from high society entirely. Leaving or being expelled meant the end of one’s life as a noble. If that happened to those three girls, they’d no longer be considered marriage material.

Raymond raked his hands through his hair. “We’ve got to do something quick! Rumor has it that the school doesn’t give much leeway when it comes to their dungeon-clearing requirement, so this isn’t a risk we want to take.”

I sighed at the two. They were losing their heads over this. “Even if we try to force the girls, they’ve got no interest in clearing

the dungeon. It'd be dangerous. Our hands are tied; there's not much we can do."

Daniel's nostrils flared. He snatched me up by my shirt collar. "Don't give up so easily, Leon! At times like these, we need your cunning. There's got to be something, right? You never play by the rules. Surely you can think of some way."

Raymond nodded vigorously. "He's right! I know that if anyone can think of a way to keep those girls from leaving the school, it's you. Come up with something—we don't care if it's conniving or underhanded as usual with you."

"Y-you guys," I stammered, gaping at them in shock. "Do you really think I'm such a horrible person?" I needed to clear up this misunderstanding immediately. We couldn't go on with them viewing me so negatively. I thought discussing it would be the best way to handle it—surely they'd understand. Daniel and Raymond had no patience for that right now, though.

"Who cares about that?! This is more important!" Daniel howled at me. "You've gotta come up with some way to keep them here!"

"You guys just described me with a bunch of vile words! Don't dismiss that so easily!" I sighed, exasperated. "You know, suddenly I'm not that motivated to help you. If you feel like treating me like the scum of the earth, I don't know if I want to lift a finger." I made a show of pouting.

The two exchanged looks and nodded at one another. I waited patiently to see what they'd decide. Daniel finally released my shirt, dropping me unceremoniously, and I sank back into my chair.

"Oh? Had a change of heart? Going to apologize to me now? If so, I want six hundred words or more before I forgive you," I said condescendingly.

Daniel and Raymond turned to leave.

"Huh? Where're you two—"

Daniel set his hand on the doorknob and glanced over his shoulder. "We're going to get the other guys together and fill them in on the situation."

"Are you crazy?!" I shouted at him. "Don't make this a bigger issue than it already is!"

When he said "the other guys," he meant the group of poor barons' sons we hung with. We all had a lot in common, so we tried to support each other here at the academy.

"This is a group-wide issue! We can't let those three leave the school. Leon, we're serious about this," said Daniel.

"Uh, okay," I blurted back awkwardly.

They left, their footsteps echoing in the hallway briefly before slowly fading out. Daniel and Raymond were more passionate about this issue than I'd expected. I'd riled them up intentionally, as part of my plan, but I hadn't intended for this to blow up quite so much.

"Guess this will mean more manpower than we planned. That should work out, right?" I rubbed my chin, thinking. "I hope so, especially since Marie's depending on me."

If I rallied the troops for this endeavor, I'd land myself in a leadership role. The last thing I wanted was to be in charge of a huge raiding party. Much better for me to be able to relax in a supporting role. That's why I'd gone to Daniel and Raymond in the first place. I figured they could kick things off. And they were about to do that and more.

Things were going a little too well. It was great that our expedition wouldn't lack the necessary numbers, but the more people went, the more room there was for problems to arise.

"I just hope nothing *too* bad happens."

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"We can't let those goddesses leave the school!"

A few days had passed since my meeting with Daniel and Raymond, and we'd now all arrived at the entrance to the capital's dungeon. I didn't shout those words of motivation, by the way—it was a third-year named Lucle. His eyes appeared to be perpetually closed slits, which always made him a bit shady-looking, but he was normally calm and quiet. Not right now, though. He was pumped to get this expedition underway.

The other guys present were just as enthused.

"We could never stand by and let that happen!"

"One of them will be my future wife. I swear I'll protect her!"

"Hold it right there! Some knucklehead's trying to stake his claim!"

Every guy present was a part of our group, and none were willing to miss out on this opportunity. They were all desperate to protect Marie's friends from being held back and thus forcibly removed by their parents. I'd never seen any of them this fired up, Daniel and Raymond included. There was a strange fervor in the air.

Nearby were soldiers dispatched to guard the dungeon entrance, and many ordinary adventurers passing by to go on treasure hunts of their own. Everyone gave us a wide berth. Most whispered under their breath, sneaking surreptitious glances at us.

"I don't normally see academy students here this time of year."

"They're awfully zealous about protecting those female students."

"I couldn't care less what they're here for, as long as they stay out of my way."

As far as the normal adventurers were concerned, blue-blooded adventurers were nothing short of a pain in the butt. They wanted to avoid us as much as possible.

I studied them until Marie tugged my arm to get my attention. She was decked out in a full suit of battle clothes, ready for our dungeon trip.

"How'd you get all the guys to agree to help?" she asked.

"When I told them what was on the line, they were eager to pitch in," I replied with a sigh. Not to be ungrateful, but they were a little too fanatical about this. I mean, I understood why they were all so desperate to land a match. I just hadn't thought they'd be quite so, uh, rabid about it.

Marie's forehead wrinkled. "Are you sure this'll be okay?" She sounded worried, too. "If all their excitement gets them nowhere, and we don't pull this off, it'll be no good for us."

"I'll check in with Mr. Lucle and raise our concerns," I assured her, since he was the one rallying everybody.

Before we all headed in, I slid over to Lucle. He raised a hand to wave at me.

"Leon, I appreciate you inviting us all to help out," he said. "None of us dreamed we'd get a chance to show off our adventuring prowess in front of the goddesses like this." That was really all this was to the guys—an opportunity.

"Nah," I said. "No need for you to thank me. I'm grateful for the help. But, uh, while we're on the topic, isn't everyone a bit too hyped up about this? I'm kind of concerned that some people will get injured if they don't cool off." Their enthusiasm was wonderful and all, but as Marie had expressed, it would be for naught if we didn't succeed. I was hinting that everyone needed to calm down and go in with clear heads.

Lucle seemed to catch my drift. He scratched his head, frowning to himself. "You think so, too, huh? I'm actually a bit worried about that myself. But what can you do? Everyone's pumped up over the chance to win over the goddesses' hearts."

Lucle's gaze landed on the three girls in question, whom Marie had forcibly dragged here. Cynthia, Ellie, and Betty looked none too pleased to be at the dungeon, but—much to my surprise—they were at least dressed for the occasion. They lacked the luggage and tools necessary, given the extent of our expedition, but the important

thing was that were present. I wouldn't expect them to fight at all in the dungeon; they were basically here for the ride.

Lucle cupped a hand over his chin. "I'm surprised they agreed to come at all. Miss Marie convinced them, I assume?"

"Yup. But that means we'll have to go as deep into the dungeon as the third-years do to graduate. That was the girls' condition for coming; they never want to have to come here again if they can help it," I explained.

Being lazy shut-ins, the girls just wanted to get this over with quickly, completing all three years' worth of requirements. It was a big ask; I thought Lucle would refuse their demands.

Apparently, though, he didn't mind. "It'll be tough," he admitted, "but it's much easier than what most women would ask of us. I appreciate that it's at least realistic and within the realm of possibility."

"But we're all first-years," I reminded him. "Even for third-years, I don't think it'll be easy to make your way that far while babysitting us." I had to point that out; I thought he was taking the whole thing a little too lightly.

He smiled understandingly. "It's pretty normal at the academy to have to protect female students while clearing dungeon levels. You say you're all first-years, but *you've* got dungeon experience, don't you? You'll be more help in there than some third-years, I bet."

Apparently they were counting on my help in battle.

"I'm hoping to take it as easy as possible, actually," I teased.

He smiled thinly. "I'm not sure that'll be possible, considering that I planned to name you this expedition's leader."

"What?!" He didn't sound like he was joking. "No. There's no way. I'm a first-year. The upperclassmen would never let me lead."

They wouldn't want someone younger than them to order them around, however many accomplishments I had under my belt. There was a strong hierarchy around age and school year here at

the academy. I knew it'd sting for the older students to be under my command. That was why I'd gone out of my way to stir Daniel and Raymond to recruit everyone—so that I wouldn't be in this position. Now here we were, about to embark, and all my carefully laid plans were coming to ruin.

Lucle flashed a contrite smile, then pressed his hands together in a pleading gesture. "I get where you're coming from, but if we let anyone else lead, I'm afraid this'll turn into a massacre."

"What?!" I stared at him, wide-eyed. Why would the other students start killing each other over something like this? Surely he was exaggerating.

Lucle turned to look behind him at our group. They were brimming with excitement, but their eyes were bloodshot; it was kind of terrifying.

"They're all worked up because they know this is a chance to win one of the girls' hearts. If we aren't careful about who leads us, they'll start bickering over who gets what role when," he explained.

If someone with an ulterior motive took the wheel and deprived the other guys of their moment in the spotlight, they'd simmer with anger, especially if that leader took advantages for himself. Worst of all, if someone tried to be as genuinely fair as possible, their efforts would still earn the group's resentment. However they split things up, someone would feel slighted and have complaints.

I immediately understood the dangers of leading the group. It would be a pain in the butt, make no mistake, but the bigger issue was the likelihood that I'd earn widespread resentment.

"I can't do it," I said plainly.

"No—you're the only who *can* do it," Lucle argued. "Anyway, I already asked all the other guys if they're okay with it. The upperclassmen all agreed that they'd take orders from you." He smiled at me, his eyes still narrowed into slits. He obviously knew what bad luck of the draw it was to be saddled with leadership in

this situation. I couldn't help thinking that something more sinister lurked behind that smile.

"No, I—" I started to say, before he abruptly cut me off, turning to the other guys.

"Does anyone here object to Leon leading us?" he asked, voice booming.

That drew everyone's attention to me. Their gazes were hard and uncomfortable. Still, they knew I had no motivation to screw any of them over; I was already engaged, so I didn't need to look good in front of their "goddesses."

"That's fine with me!"

"Couldn't picture anyone else doing it!"

"I'm counting on you to tip the scales in my favor, leader!"

They all grinned at me as they voiced their support. It might've been touching if not for the unfortunate circumstances and what was at risk if I played this wrong. My stomach twisted into painfully tight knots.

"Urgh," I groaned. "I really hate this kind of responsibility."

I'd developed my aversion to responsibility long before reincarnating into this world. And what could be worse than needing to lead a group of desperate guys who wanted to land themselves a woman into a dungeon? This level of responsibility was absolutely crushing.

Marie saw the devastation on my face, and she gently rubbed my back. "Knowing you, I'll bet you were hoping for an easy ride. I'd like to say you got what you had coming, but even I feel sorry for you. This sucks." She'd read me like a book. At least she understood the difficulty of the task I was being given and tried to comfort me. It was actually kind of…heartwarming.

"I wonder if I'll make it home alive after this," I mused aloud. "They won't mutiny and kill me, will they?" I was only half joking. Considering the way they'd all looked at me, I got the feeling that

they really would come to hate me before all this was over. That terrified me.

Marie smacked my back. “Pull it together! If push comes to shove, I’ll give them an earful for you!”

“It’s a relief to know I at least have you to rely on,” I said honestly. “Well, I guess we should get on a move on, then. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover if we’re going to meet all the school’s requirements in one go.”

Marie shot a glance at her disinterested friends. “You girls are asking the impossible of these guys, so you’d better be on your best behavior for this!”

Cynthia, Ellie, and Betty waved half-heartedly. Was that a sign that they agreed to behave? It wasn’t a real response, at any rate, which made me nervous.

“You sure those three will be okay?” I muttered under my breath to Marie.

Her brow furrowed as if she was none too certain, either. “Well, they don’t take our lessons seriously, so I’ve got no idea how much they’re capable of in battle. Considering what they’re normally like, uh… Yeah, you’ve got good reason to be concerned.”

I heaved a muted sigh. “I guess I should assign them extra guards just to be on the safe side.”

Chapter 4:
Maneuvering

WHILE MARIE AND LEON were off on their dungeon expedition, Brita and her two friends enjoyed lunch together in the academy cafeteria, which bustled with students. Naturally, their conversation turned to Marie.

"Looks like Marie will be absent from classes while she's in the dungeon," Brita noted. "I guess she must be panicking, since we're now in our third term already." There was a disparaging undercurrent in her tone, but to those who knew her, it was obvious that Brita was concerned.

"I assume she's anxious to get it done because she was busy during winter break and couldn't find time to do it then," suggested one of Brita's friends.

"Yeah," agreed the other. "She was over the moon that Bartfort finally proposed to her. It probably completely skipped her mind until now."

Brita gave a reluctant nod.

She and her friends had first encountered Marie because of Stephanie Fou Offrey, who'd ordered them to bully Marie. At the time, they'd agreed that Marie was detestable for trying to cozy up to men who were already engaged. But then, when they were all captured by a pirate gang on Stephanie's orders, it was Marie who'd stepped in to save them. Since then, they'd formed a friendship with her.

"I'm surprised that she bothers looking after Cynthia and those other two," said Brita. "Even the professors have written those girls off. She's sure a bleeding heart."

Her two friends smiled wanly, shooting looks at one another.

"It's weird, when you think about it," said one of the girls. "Cynthia, Ellie, and Betty ignore anyone else who tries to talk to them."

"It's like Marie's special somehow. Even the professors were surprised."

The three girls in question were closed off with everyone else, but they opened their hearts to Marie and—to some degree—obeyed her, according to the rumors going around the girls' dormitory.

While Brita and her friends chatted and enjoyed their meal, a new wave of fervor swept through the cafeteria. The murmuring was much louder than before, which tipped the trio off that something was amiss.

Brita quieted and tried to eavesdrop on what was going on. "I wonder what all the fuss is?" she murmured. She was worried that there'd been an accident of some sort.

However, what she overheard was beyond what she could've predicted. One male student was particularly loud: "I'm telling you, it's the truth! They were suddenly expelled and driven out of the school!" Assuming his information was accurate, several people had been severely punished.

Brita and her friends gawked at one another as the news sank in.

"Have we heard rumors about anyone being on the brink of expulsion?" asked one girl.

They studied each other's faces, all looking confused.

"No, there wasn't any such rumors, were there?"

"Aside from Marie potentially being held back for not completing the dungeon requirements, I haven't heard anything," Brita threw in.

Before anyone was expelled from the academy, a careful investigation was normally conducted to ensure the punishment was just. After all, expulsion essentially meant being permanently cast

out of high society. The academy couldn't afford to make mistakes, so they went through an arduous process to ensure a person's guilt before acting. Even if a student was being considered for expulsion, they'd still be allowed to attend the academy until the school administration reached a final decision. Rumors would spread, but those were never quite as explosive as what was happening in the cafeteria right now.

"I have to think someone did something truly heinous," Brita posited, considering the possibilities. "For the administrators to settle on expulsion this suddenly, it'd have to be something on the level of Stephanie's actions."

The other two shook their heads; they weren't convinced even that would be enough.

"Even with Stephanie, they still followed customary procedure," one pointed out. "And things didn't move this fast."

"So this has to be *worse* than what Stephanie did, right? Who was expelled, anyway? It…it couldn't be Marie and her friends, could it?" asked the other nervously.

"Impossible," Brita said immediately. "Third term isn't even over yet."

"If not them, I don't know who else it could be."

As they continued to discuss the matter, another student dashed into the cafeteria to share the latest update about the expulsions.

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A young woman, Angelica Rapha Redgrave, strode quickly down one of the academy corridors. The hard lines of her face were pressed into an even more severe expression than normal. Her hair was tucked into a careful chignon, but her bangs were disarrayed.

"I haven't heard a thing about expulsions," she spat out.

Her followers, who'd been ordered by their families to support Angelica while they were at the academy, kept close on her heel.

"W-we haven't heard anything, either," one said.

Another nervously put in, "I-I can't believe the students being expelled are girls from our faction."

"There weren't even rumors about this!" a third protested. "Isn't this the first time the academy has ever acted so suddenly?"

Angelica and her followers might not have been so agitated by this development if the students in question hadn't been from the same political faction as them. The school's social order mirrored that of high society, with the same cliques and groups. Having followers from the same faction necessarily meant that factional lines were drawn even within the academy's halls.

That wasn't all bad, though. The system was a good way to prevent people from befriending members of opposing factions who, once they eventually graduated, would become enemies. Moreover, at least in Angelica's case, having people from the same faction around ensured that no political opponents with ill intent had an opportunity to get close.

Angelica didn't have so many followers merely because of her house's influence. As future queen, she needed people she could trust to guard her from any unwanted attention. Were she to form a romantic relationship with an unrespectable male student, it would cause untold scandal. Other factions would capitalize on the opportunity and claim that she was unfit to be queen. Thus, her followers were as much a shield as they were her guards. Sticking with those with the same political interests was much safer for her. It was also her duty to keep everyone from her faction in line; expulsions reflected badly on her.

"Investigate what this is all about, and don't let a single detail slip through your fingers," Angelica barked at her followers. "I'll go speak with the school officials myself."

"Y-yes, my lady!"

Her followers dispersed to carry out her orders. Left on her own, Angelica made her way to the faculty office. She took a fortifying breath, then called out, "I am first-year Angelica Rapha Redgrave. May I have permission to enter?"

Muffled sounds came from behind the door. A few seconds later, a meek-looking professor slipped out. "Can I help you?" they asked with an awkward smile. Given the way they kept their back to the door, Angelica guessed that they had no intention of inviting her inside.

"The recent expulsions," Angelica said, by way of explanation. "I have a couple of questions about those. Could I speak to someone higher up?"

Since she was still a student, professors probably considered her little more than a child, but she was the famous Duke Redgrave's daughter. Thus, they couldn't ignore the power of her name. If they acted too condescendingly toward her, they'd risk offending her and being fired.

The professor sweated profusely, gaze wandering as if they were too nervous to meet her eyes. "There's, um…someone higher up inside, but they're busy, so I can't let you meet with them."

"Why not?" Angelica demanded. "Expelling students without due process is unheard of. Even Stephanie was granted that much, wasn't she?"

Her hard line of questioning flustered the professor. Unable to withstand more interrogation, they caved. Their voice dropped low, gaze flitting back to the door behind them as if they worried that they might be overheard. "We're in a bad spot because of this, too," they confided. "But all the proper proof was provided, and the crown prince himself demanded we expel the students in question."

"The crown prince?" Angelica could hardly believe her ears.

The entire Redgrave faction backed the crown prince. They were ardent supporters of his. Him expelling several members' children was akin to betrayal.

"Th-that can't be," Angelica stammered in response. "The students in question were—"

"I know," the professor interrupted. "That's why we tried to dissuade him numerous times. We insisted that any expulsion needed to be handled most carefully. But the crown prince wouldn't hear of it." Apparently, the staff couldn't ignore his input.

Angelica saw red. How useless could these professors be to cave so easily? She glowered, her brow wrinkling. "I don't care whether it was His Highness's demand—how could the school carry out such a one-sided punishment? You're all spineless." Her stomach churned in disgust. Adults should have known better than to let one person's opinion sway them, even if that one person was the future king.

"But he had proof," the professor countered. "Those girls attempted murder inside the dungeon."

Angelica was so gobsmacked by that accusation, she was lost for words. She'd intended to defend the students in question, but she never imagined they'd done something *that* heinous. "Y-you're sure about that?"

"Yes. As I said, His Highness collected sufficient proof. The accused students, of course, denied it."

"My goodness." Angelica couldn't quibble with the professor further. If that was reason for the expulsion, she completely understood. Still, she couldn't give up without adding, "Regardless, the decision was too sudden."

"We're perfectly aware of that," the professor assured her. "But His Highness refused to wait for an investigation. Keep in mind that this was a crime inside the dungeon."

Holfort's nobles were proud to have descended from adventurers. Attempted murder inside a dungeon was an unspeakable crime and a perfectly justifiable reason to expel a student. Assuming that claim was the truth, even Angelica couldn't defend the perpetrators.

"Am I at least allowed to speak with the expelled students?" she asked.

"They've already been advised of their punishment. I assume they're staying at hotels or at estates in the city, if their families have one."

"Thank you for your time," Angelica said. "I'll take my leave now." She spun around and marched off. Rage and shame threatened to swallow her up. *How could they be so impossibly stupid? Do they even realize the wide-ranging repercussions of their foolishness?*

The girls in question were supposed to be her allies, yet they'd perpetrated the worst kind of crime an adventurer could commit. That scandal would irreversibly damage Angelica's reputation. Her position conferred certain responsibilities, such as making sure other students behaved. Her role and influence were why everyone respected—and sometimes admired—her. But those factors also meant that when she failed to prevent a scandal like this, she was blamed. Now people would question whether she was capable.

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The students who'd attempted to claim Olivia's life were all expelled.

Olivia had already heard that news. She was in her room, reading, having seated herself on her mattress. The book in question was a history of Holfort Kingdom. Tired of scanning the pages, Olivia flipped it shut and weighed it in her hands. "They sure embellished what happened. Some of this was entertaining, but in terms of accuracy, it's garbage." Since the book had no value—to her or to anyone, in her opinion—she tossed it to the floor.

"Now, how shall I enjoy myself?" Olivia crossed her legs, and her lips pulled into a bewitching smile as she plotted the kingdom's destruction. She was lost in her own world when she sensed

someone approaching and quickly muted her expression. “Long-ears, hm?” She sat up straight.

Kyle, Olivia’s personal servant, thrust the door open violently and strode in. He had long elf ears that jutted out, and he still looked young and immature; he wore the sort of arrogant expression only a child could, which reflected his personality.

Kyle glanced at the book Olivia had discarded on the floor and pulled a face. “You’re leaving your books lying around again,” he complained. He scooped the volume up and placed it on her desk, shooting her an annoyed look. “Please be tidier. I know you’re recovering from your wounds, but you’ve been too lax with yourself.”

His haughty attitude annoyed Anne, but she kept Olivia’s face from betraying her emotions. “Kyle,” she said sweetly, “don’t you think your behavior is a little unbecoming? I’m your mistress—your employer. Simply put, you work for me. You should be a bit more mindful of how you present yourself.” She smiled at him as she finished.

Kyle was visibly taken aback, but not so startled that he couldn’t find the wherewithal to retort imperiously, “Why’re you acting all high and mighty out of nowhere? In case you’ve forgotten, even employees have rights. I’m attending to all my duties. I’ve given you no reason to scold me.” He turned away from her, intent on cleaning her room.

Olivia dropped her smile. “Is it also your duty to barge into your mistress’s room without first receiving her permission? If so, I must say, that’s still awfully impudent.”

“Huh? Um…er…but you always let me come in before,” he stammered.

“I don’t recall ever giving you explicit permission to do so. You should be more careful in the future,” Olivia advised.

Kyle fell silent.

“Can’t you answer properly?” Olivia added, voice hard.

Kyle jolted. “Y-yes, mistress!”

He hurried through his cleaning and rushed out the door. Olivia sighed in his wake, irritated by the whole thing.

“What’d he even come here for? Olivia’s been too lenient with the boy, and he’s grown cocky and entitled. What shall I do about him?” She wasn’t confident he could fulfill his duties to her standards. “Getting rid of him would be more trouble than it’s worth.” As she contemplated her options, she noticed her hand trembling. Studying it for a moment, she mumbled, “What a stubborn girl you are. You’re still trying to steal back your consciousness.”

As soon as she clenched her fist, the trembling ceased.

She blew out a breath. “Heh heh. It really isn’t worth getting rid of him if you’ll fight me over it. Very well, I won’t dispose of the boy. But…he’ll need to be duly disciplined.”

***

While Leon and Marie embarked on their expedition, and uproar ensued at the academy in the wake of the expulsions, Luxion was busy investigating the Saint’s vengeful spirit.

He kept her securely sealed away deep inside his spaceship, contained within a large glass dome, in which she appeared like a dancing black flame. Her form blurred and wavered, but she visibly took the form of a woman hugging her knees to her chest.

Luxion was most interested in her memories. “I will ask you again,” he said. “Since you are the Saint’s vengeful spirit, you must know a great deal about this nation’s history. Will you tell me what Holfort was like during your time?”

The spirit’s eyes—two almond-shaped orbs with a golden glow—watched him. “We have been over this. What point is there in a Lost Item like yourself learning our history? You were created long

before my time, were you not?" She couldn't comprehend his interest.

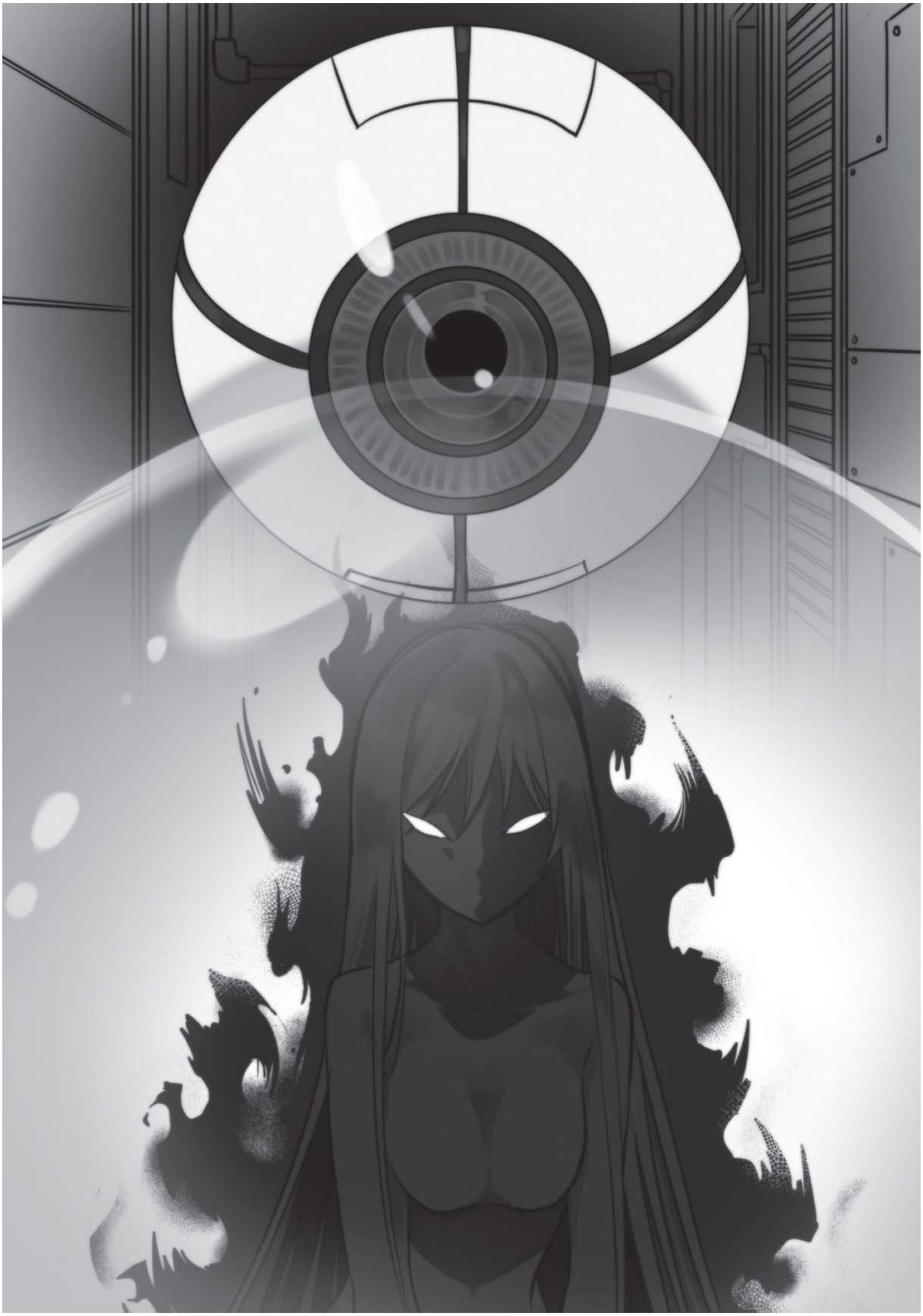
Luxion flipped a switch, causing an electric current to spark through the dome. The spirit writhed with pain.

"Gaaah!" she screamed.

"There is no need for you to comprehend my intentions. I am the one who will decide whether the information you give is of value. You need only answer my questions," Luxion told her.

He showed the spirit no mercy. From the moment he'd found an effective way to torture her, he had used it without hesitation whenever she resisted. Despite this, she had refused to answer him, making her own demands instead.

"My response is the same as always," she hissed through her anguish. "Lier. Bring Lier to—aaaah!"



Luxion had activated the switch again without giving her any warning. “You are not in a position to make demands of me,” he reminded her. “Now I will ask you again: Tell me everything you know about this nation’s history. And I do mean *everything*.”

Momentarily released from the electric current, the spirit clung to the glass, bringing her face as close to Luxion as she physically could. “Until you agree to my terms, you will not get a bit of information from me. Don’t think for a second that I’m so weak I would cave to your torture.” She howled with laughter.

Exasperated, he responded, “It’s a shame that, even being a spirit, you have still inherited new humanity’s inability to see sense.” There was a short pause before he added, “In that case, we will have to keep this cycle up until you change your mind.” He flipped the switch again, electricity snapping and crackling within the dome. He let it continue until the spirit inside collapsed, motionless.

This would take some time yet.

Chapter 5:
Leon and Marie's Dungeon Escapades

AFTER WE SET OFF, we took our time getting through the dungeon's first floors. The entrance was large and cavernous, but about midway down, it became a series of carefully hollowed tunnels. The layout made navigation easy. Magic stones protruded from the walls and ceilings, emitting faint light that illuminated our surroundings despite us being underground. It wasn't quite bright enough to read a map, though, which was why I needed a lantern. Marie held it as I guided us forward, map in hand. It was much easier to read the map that way.

I belted out directions to the group. "We turn left at the next fork!"

The male students responded with disparate grunts and mumbled "all right"s. Most weren't taking this too seriously yet, since we weren't very deep in. Some even engaged in casual conversation.

"Escort duties for the goddesses are assigned by round robin, right?"

"Yep. I'm anxious to get my turn. Hopefully I'll have a chance to save one of them."

"If we got ambushed on escort duty, wouldn't it be awesome?"

They were obviously fantasizing, hoping to play the knight in shining armor and win the girls' hearts. I didn't bother scolding them for that, though.

Marie puffed her cheeks, displeased. "Do I seriously have to keep listening to these sad, deluded fantasies? It's annoying."

Oof. She didn't have to call them sad and deluded. A guy was entitled to fantasize a little, right? Especially since marriage was on

the line—and to someone who wasn't absolutely horrible.

"Give them a break," I said. "They're desperate."

"Desperate? They're way too flippant about this."

She had a point. We'd encountered a number of monsters, but the guys still weren't taking this seriously.

"Well, they're probably more relaxed because we've got third-years along," I suggested with a half-shrug. My gaze wandered to Lucle, who stood at the front of the third-years accompanying us. He was being vigilant yet navigating the passages with the familiarity of someone who'd been here countless times. He was definitely a veteran; he didn't seem the least bit nervous.

Marie was unconvinced. "I still don't think we should drop our guard. A forest is inhabited by the most fearsome of beasts. Even seasoned hunters are at risk of losing their lives if they aren't careful." She knew that from firsthand experience. It was probably why she thought none of us were taking this seriously enough.

Personally, though, I was offended. "How many times do you think guys from our school have to trek through this dungeon before they finally graduate?" I huffed at her.

"I understand that. However familiar they are with this place, though, it doesn't excuse their attitude."

I was still only a first-year, but I'd come here repeatedly with Daniel and Raymond. Although some eccentrics took such pride in their lineage as adventurers that they insisted on visiting the dungeon on their days off, it was poor barons' sons who frequented this place—all for financial purposes.

"Know where my group spends the most time? On this dungeon's middle floors," I told Marie matter-of-factly.

She quirked a brow at me. "Is that supposed to be impressive or something?"

I let out a long, drawn-out sigh, then reached over and took the lantern from her, raising it for a better look at our surroundings.

"Even third-years only have to poke their heads into the middle floors for their school requirement, but my group needs to delve deeper still to find magic stones and metals to take home and sell."

It was easy to traverse the dungeon from the entrance to the middle floors, and magic stones and metals were plentiful. But that also meant that people generally made off with those things quickly, and only slim pickings were left for the rest of us. So if a student really wanted to make some cash, they had to go deeper in. The magic stones on the lower floors were of a much higher purity. Even metals were more abundant and of better quality, snagging exorbitant prices on the market.

Marie didn't understand our plight. I'd given her an allowance to cover her daily expenses pretty quickly, so she didn't need to dungeon-dive.

"Oh—you're right," she said, her face brightening with that realization. "I remember it was like that in the game, too."

It was the same in any video game: The deeper you went, the better the loot you found.

"Still, I don't understand how metals grow in a dungeon," I said, voicing something that had nagged at me for a long time. "And they grow back not long after you take them. This really is like a video game." It was easy to forget that we were stuck in an otome game, but this dungeon's lack of realism served as a stark reminder.

Marie scanned the dungeon's interior. "I always pictured the dungeon as being like a mining shaft, and I guess it kind of is, when you put it like that."

"More or less. It's where Holfort gets a lot of necessary resources. Makes it really convenient for them." Without the dungeon and all the bounty it provided, Holfort wouldn't be quite so powerful. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that the kingdom might not exist at all in that case. We'd learned as much in class.

Marie's eyes lit up. "Does that mean you can get filthy rich if you find really good resources?" Her expression turned eerie and

calculating.

I sighed at her, exasperated. “What good would that do us at this point?”

“A girl can dream, can’t she?”

“A girl doesn’t need to,” I reminded her. We had Luxion: We’d never want for food, clothes, or shelter, so we didn’t require a dungeon. And—not that I had any intention of doing so—I could take over the world with Luxion’s power if I desired.

This time, it was Marie’s turn to be exasperated with me. “Try to have a little more ambition. You’re too apathetic.”

“And you’re too greedy,” I shot back.

“What do you mean by that?” she demanded, glaring at me.

“I seem to recall *someone* attempting to seduce Julius and his gang for money and status. Who could that have been?” I gave her a look of feigned confusion, as if struggling to remember.

She gritted her teeth and turned away. Irritated as she was, she couldn’t say anything in her own defense. It felt pretty good to have one-upped her.

When I turned my attention back to our raiding party, I noticed that Lucle and the other third-years had frozen in place and were looking back at me. Lucle raised his hand, signaling me, so I turned back to the rest of the group. “Everyone stop here for a moment,” I ordered.

Lucle made his way over. “We can sense monsters ahead,” he said. “There’s quite a few of them. Want to detour around them?” He and the other third-years had more experience in the dungeon than we did, and they had honed their instincts.

“I don’t sense anything,” I said, confused.

“Oh, you’ll get to the point where you can soon enough,” Lucle assured me with a wry grin. “So what’ll we do? Detour? Or march straight ahead?”

His confidence that my instincts would eventually be on the same level as his was significant—as though those were an inevitable skill that all us poor barons' sons would have to develop if we wanted to survive. It was actually kind of depressing. But leaving that aside, since I was the group's leader, I had to make a decision.

"I guess if we can detour around them, we should. Wearing ourselves out this soon fighting would be a waste, since we've still got a long way to go," I said.

While I conferred with Lucle, Raymond had listened quietly, but at this point his hand abruptly shot up. "I think we should march straight ahead!"

I glanced at him. His attention was focused on Ellie. Since we'd stopped moving, she had whipped out a book and was reading. She sure was a dedicated bookworm to bring a book all the way into a dungeon to sneak in extra reading time. Betty was preoccupied drawing pictures in the dirt, and Cynthia was slumped over on one of the male students, nodding off. The lucky guy was over the moon at their close physical proximity, but the guys around him had murder in their eyes.

Ugh. I already hate this raiding party.

"And how come you'd like us to go straight ahead, Raymond?" I asked. I figured I already knew: He wanted to show off in front the girls. But Raymond was too intelligent to frame it that way, surely. He'd give me some clever, well-articulated reason.

"Beating monsters is the best way for us to show off."

And here I thought you were smarter than this. Guess I was wrong about you. "No. You can show off later during our trip," I told him firmly.

Daniel's hand shot up. "Leader! I think we should consider our trip back and clear the way now, so it's safer when we return!" Daniel had never struck me as the intelligent sort, but he made a good point this time—although I knew his intentions were really the exact same as Raymond's.

"You just want to show off, don't you?" I said with a knowing look.

"Of course! The further in we move, the fewer opportunities we first-years will have. We need to take whatever chances we can get!"

Although the first-years frequented the dungeon during any vacations or holidays, there was still an insurmountable experience gap between us and the third-years. As we got deeper into the dungeon, it would be the second-and third-years' time to shine. It wasn't just that they were veterans in the field; they'd also been training much longer than we had.

Lucle chuckled warmly at us. "Ah ha ha! That's not true. I'm sure you guys will have other opportunities…if you're lucky." He knew Daniel was right; otherwise, he wouldn't have tacked on that last bit.

Daniel, Raymond, and the other boys had caught on to that fact, too. They demanded even more vehemently that I provide them with their turn.

"Leon, please!" Raymond pleaded desperately. "Give us a shot!"

"Aren't you worried that begging like that will make you look pretty pathetic in their eyes?"

"Oh, crap!" Realizing his mistake, Raymond whipped around to look at Ellie.

Ellie briefly glanced up from her book. She didn't seem the least bit bothered, but the number of eyes on her appeared to make her a little uncomfortable, "Um…it doesn't bother me," she said. Raymond throwing a fit like a petulant child wasn't a big deal to her, apparently.

Raymond's eyes filled with tears. "Hear that, Leon? She's so kind and understanding. If she were a normal female student at our school, she'd rake me over the coals for making a fool of myself."

I pressed a hand over my mouth, trying to hold back my own emotions. I was on the verge of tears as well. "Raymond…"

He was right. Our other female schoolmates were so unforgiving that they'd disparage or ridicule us for showing the slightest vulnerability. It was so easy for me to picture it happening. The academy was truly hell on earth.

Other guys in the group were shedding some tears, too. I decided, for their sake, we'd better take the opportunity Raymond and Daniel suggested. "All right," I said. "The first-years will take care of these beasts. We'll show the girls what we can do!"

Raymond threw his arms around me. "Thank you, Leon! You may be an underhanded scumbag, but you're still my friend!"

"Ha ha ha! I'll remember you said that." I laughed dryly before pinning him with a glare, but patted his back nonetheless.

Marie planted both hands on her hips and sighed at us all. "Just how twisted is your image of women?" She was evidently offended; as one of our female schoolmates, she couldn't abide our negative stereotypes.

"If you actually hung out with those girls, you'd understand," I told her, my arms still around Raymond.

Marie wrinkled her nose at me, even more irritated. "Well, sorry for not having more friends!" she spat.

That wasn't what I'd said, but she seemed to select the most uncharitable interpretation of my words. It was true she didn't have many friends, though. That was her own fault. The moment she started at the academy, she'd tried to sidle up to Julius and the other guys, which made the larger half of the female student population hate her guts. She did have some normal friends, like Brita and her two companions, but aside from them, I'd never seen Marie hang out much with other girls.

Together, Marie and I had solved a number of her outstanding issues. The problem was, she was still an odd woman out. That

situation was of her own making. Under the circumstances, I was impressed that she'd managed to make the few friends she had, if anything. If she had to, she'd have no problem making it on her own in the world—that much I was sure of.

The entire time I was thinking that, I stared at Marie, which made her suspicious.

"What?" she snapped at me.

"Nothing. I was just thinking that you reap what you—"

Before I could finish, she threw a stone at me. It hit me square in the head.

***

Weapons drawn, the first-years got ready to charge into the chamber where the monsters were gathered. The upperclassmen called out after them.

"If it gets too dangerous, call us in for backup."

"If you need us to, we'll swoop in and save you."

"Don't let your egos get you injured!"

A battle like this was child's play to all of them, but they'd at least agreed to stand back and watch, interfering only if absolutely necessary.

Daniel sneered, disgusted with their attitude. "They've got some nerve, looking down their noses at us."

I checked my weapon over to ensure that I was prepped. "They have that right, given their superior experience. Remember, they've got a year or two on us, so they've spent a lot more time in these dungeons to pay for tea parties and presents."

"Doesn't the way they act get under your skin at all?" Daniel asked me.

"Nope. It's just the way things are."

It bothered him that I didn't share his distaste. "Being engaged already must be nice," he told me, scowling. "You don't have to panic like the rest of us."

He was sulking, but there was no time to bicker among ourselves when we had monsters to fight. Choosing my words carefully, I responded, "You should be more grateful that someone like me—who already has it made in life—is willing to help a bunch of losers like you."

I'd been maybe a little *too* brutally honest. Soon all the first-years, including Daniel and Raymond, regarded me with animosity. Fully armed, they muttered to themselves.

"If Leon just happened to disappear on this trip, Miss Marie would be single again, right?"

"Nah. Don't even think about it. If we tried to get rid of him here, we'd leave evidence."

"Good point. If we were going to take care of him, we'd have to make sure we left no traces."

Awfully concerning comments from people who were supposed to be my allies. I shrugged, shaking my head in disappointment at the lot of them. At least my antagonism had worked in that they were sufficiently fired up, all nervousness forgotten. Pleased at my successful tactic, I made one last check. "Come on, you losers—we first-years won't have many chances in the spotlight. Ready to capitalize on this opportunity?"

Though thoroughly annoyed by my taunting, they nodded.

"Good. Move in!"

Those positioned in the vanguard swept forward. Those in the rear used magic to provide extra light for the rest of us. The monster horde in the cavern disappeared in puffs of black smoke, one monster after the other.

"Take this!" Daniel shouted, charging out in front, his weapon whipping through the air.

The enemy's numbers were so great that I feared they'd soon surround him, but after the vanguard's initial charge, Raymond and the others in the middle of our ranks set forth and began mopping up.

"I told you not to run in blindly!" Raymond groused at Daniel and the rest of the vanguard, his lip curled with dismay. "Pay a little thought to those of us trying to cover your backs!"

"More killing, less talking," I told Raymond, slapping his back to usher him forward. "If you don't move it, some of our guys'll get injured."

I kept my focus on the monsters that broke away from their pack and tried to flank our vanguard. As leader, I didn't need to dive headlong into battle, but hanging back and doing nothing would reflect poorly on me. I didn't want the others complaining that I took the easy route and just gave orders instead of participating, but I limited the scope of my activities to the bare minimum. The others were preoccupied with trying to show off; as they did so, my job was to contribute what I could to keep them safe.

Thankfully, the monsters that broke away from the pack were fairly weak, so they weren't too dangerous—though, given free rein, they'd likely have injured a few of our guys. I darted around our main force and dispatched stragglers with my sword. As soon as one went down, I was scanning for my next prey.

"That one there," I murmured to myself. I targeted only those the other guys had missed, letting the rest of the group handle the stronger monsters in the middle of the chamber.

"Put your backs into it! Show those girls what you can do!" I bellowed at them.

Daniel didn't turn back to look at me, but he shouted in response, "Enough from the peanut gallery—we've got this!"

***

As the first-years fought, Marie watched from the connecting tunnel. Her eyes followed Leon as he darted around the rest of the group. “He’s supposed to be the leader,” she grumbled. “What’s he doing fighting himself instead of handing out orders?” In her mind, issuing order was all a leader did. They didn’t actually get down and dirty with the rest of their group. To make matters worse, Leon was picking off small fry.

The upperclassmen didn’t seem to share Marie’s perspective, however. Lucle was actually impressed by Leon. “He’s supporting them so that they’ll have an easier time fighting. Just what I’d expect from someone who’s cleared a whole dungeon before.”

The other upperclassman nodded.

As much as it pleased Marie to hear Lucle praise him, she still couldn’t accept Leon taking such a minor role. “He can fight a lot better than this,” she grumbled.

Cynthia had somehow snuck up beside Marie. She snaked her arms around Marie’s waist, pressing her weight against the other girl and perching her chin on Marie’s shoulder.

“Ugh! Cynthia, you’re heavy!” Marie complained.

Cynthia followed her friend’s gaze and studied Leon. “That guy of yours is awfully clever. He knows exactly how to make everyone else’s job easier.” She was still acting as lazy as ever, given that she wouldn’t stand on her own, but something was different about her. She was assessing the boys’ fighting prowess very calmly and clearly.

That rattled Marie.



"You can tell?" Marie asked her friend suspiciously.

After a short pause, Cynthia replied, "More or less." She turned her gaze from Leon to the rest of the boys. Once she'd surveyed them all, her attention jumped back to Leon. "He's the type who shines most through strategy, rather than personal strength. If he took things a little more seriously, he could make a real name for himself."

Whether Cynthia's assessment was accurate was beside the point; Marie still swelled with pride at the praise of Leon, although she said skeptically, "I doubt he'd ever commit enough for that. He has no ambition for greater things. I don't think he *wants* to make a name for himself."

Leon never invested much effort in things. Marie had spent long enough with him to understand that about him. Where others would dedicate themselves in order to attain the best outcome in anything, Leon put in only enough energy for results that were satisfactory—above average. If that proved too difficult to manage, he might begrudgingly put in as little effort as possible to achieve the bare minimum. He never went beyond that.

Luxion was an incredibly advanced, powerful weapon, but even with that at his disposal, Leon lacked any inclination to exploit farther-reaching benefits. He used Luxion for irrelevant, trivial matters, of course. By and large, though, Leon was more interested in maintaining the status quo than anything.

Yet, despite those flaws, Cynthia seemed to think quite highly of Leon. "He's contributing, yet letting everyone else take the credit without overshadowing them… I don't see a problem. Marie, you've landed yourself a good man."

"'Landed' him?" Marie scoffed. "I don't like what you're insinuating. He's the one who fell for me first."

"Ha ha!" Cynthia laughed. "He's passionate, is he? He seems like such a cold fish, but I guess there's some heat under all that." It was unusual to see her in such high spirits.

"Forget about that," Marie urged. She made a sweeping gesture at the other guys. "*They're* the ones trying to catch your interest. Hasn't a single one of them caught your eye?"

The men had ulterior motives on this journey, of course: They'd only agreed to participate because of Cynthia, Ellie, and Betty. Marie understood where they were coming from, though. All the academy's male students were desperate to make a match.

"Nah. None of the guys has caught my interest," Cynthia said. "But if you ever get tired of Leon, let me know. I'm happy to take him off your hands."

"You're seriously after *Leon*?!" Marie cried, eyes wide.

Cynthia snickered. "Kidding," she said in a singsong voice. "I haven't fallen so far that I'd mess with a guy my friend already claimed. In fact, I'm not interested in anyone."

Flustered to realize that her friend had been teasing her, Marie blushed and shouted, "Try to have at least a *little* interest in them, would you?!"

***

As soon as they'd dispatched all the monsters, the first-years returned to the tunnel where Marie and the others waited. I found a spot by the wall to take my break, and Marie brought me a drink.

"Nice work out there," she said. "You ran around an awful lot—how come you only took out small fry?" There was a cynical note in her voice.

Regardless of what she thought, I had my reasons. "The others would resent me if I stole their thunder, but if I didn't help out with anything, they'd complain. I did exactly what I had to." I knew how pissed some of them would've been if I'd outshone them. Doing the bare minimum was the best way to avoid their ire.

Marie frowned at me. "It's exactly like Cynthia said."

"What is?" I tilted my head.

Marie huffed out a breath. “Nothing.” She came to stand beside me, her gaze following mine. “By the way, how long do you think clearing all three requirements will take?”

The sudden change of subject caught me off guard. I took a moment to think, swallowing the water she’d offered me. “We probably haven’t even cleared the bar for first-years yet. And according to Lucle, reaching the requirements for upperclassmen is a pretty big pain. We may spend longer in this dungeon than we planned.”

Not even I could predict specifically when we’d return to the surface. There was no school today, but I didn’t think we’d make it back before lessons resumed. The professors might complain about our absence, but they’d let us off with a few makeup lessons, since we’d spent the time we missed in the dungeon. That was how the academy worked.

Marie’s nostrils flared. She blew out a breath, saying, “If Luxion was helping us, this’d be over in a snap.”

“I asked him,” I told her defensively, “but he refused. Said he was busy.”

When Luxion dismissed my orders to accompany us, I had frozen. I found myself thinking, *Huh? Hold on—can he really just refuse to do what I ask?* On the other hand, I had gotten a little too reliant on him lately.

“Anyway, let’s figure this out by ourselves,” I added. “That’s what everyone else has to do.”

“By ourselves, huh?” She eyed her three friends. They were capitalizing on this break by engaging in their favorite activities. I knew what she was thinking. *They* weren’t doing anything by themselves—they were relying on others to take care of things for them.

I shrugged. “There are exceptions to every rule. Don’t think too hard about it.”

Chapter 6:
The Tragic Heroine

SINCE SHE WAS OUT of school for the day, Angelica paid a visit to a certain noble family's estate in the capital. She was there to meet with one of the expelled students. The girl's father was politically powerful enough to have his own mansion in the capital city, which made him one of the elite in high society. Angelica was only going out of her way to visit because that man—a linchpin in her family's faction—had entreated her to do so.

"I want you to at least hear what my daughter has to say," he'd told her.

The man's prominence in their faction meant that she couldn't ignore him, so she honored his request and came as promised. A servant led her into the drawing room where the man's expelled daughter waited, and Angelica took a seat across from her.

"I heard the gist of things from the faculty," Angelica told the girl curtly. "I should think that you're already aware that such foul actions—committed inside a dungeon—can never be permitted." Their eyes met, Angelica's gaze piercing, and the girl turned her head away, which Angelica took to mean that she had a guilty conscience. Nonetheless, she asked, "Why did you do something so reckless?"

"I-I did nothing wrong!" the girl blurted back, the words bursting out as if a dam had broken. "That girl isn't even one of us. She's a commoner. She's not like those of us with respectable heritages and family titles. Surely you must see that!"

She was probably referring to their ancestors having been adventurers, while the same couldn't be said for the common folk. Olivia was no comrade of hers, so in the girl's mind, she hadn't betrayed anyone.

"She's seducing the crown prince and his friends," the girl continued. "That makes her nothing short of a blight on our kingdom. I tried to eliminate the threat she presents—that's all. Expulsion is uncalled for." She was coming up with all kinds of excuses to justify her actions. "Lady Angelica, I beg of you! Won't you please convince the academy to let me return?" Her eyes, finally staring back into Angelica's, were pleading.

Angelica felt a faint ache of pity for the girl, sharing her dismay over Olivia. *She has a point. That girl is no ally of ours, given the way she ensnares the prince. Still, there's a line one cannot cross, and this fool crossed it.* However greatly she sympathized, the girl's pleas didn't move her to act. As much as Angelica detested Olivia, she also understood how reprehensible it was to attempt murder in the capital's dungeon.

"Don't ask the impossible," Angelica said with cold indifference. "Your actions angered not only the academy but the crown prince as well. The best thing you can do now is reflect on your mistakes and repent." Annoyed at how defensive the girl had been about her actions, Angelica rose from her seat.

The girl shot out of her chair, grabbing at Angelica. "Please!" she cried. "If I remain expelled, I won't be able to enter high society anymore!"

Angelica slapped her hands away. "You made your bed. Now you must lie in it." With that, she strode out of the dressing room as the girl broke into sobs behind her.

***

The following day, Angelica headed for her family's residence in the capital. She needed to report the expulsions to the Redgraves, since the affected students were from their faction. Between penning reports and attending to her schoolwork, Angelica had been busy for the past few days. She didn't have the free time for leisure that most students did.

What am I even doing? she wondered. *I'm supposed to be the prince's betrothed, but I haven't even seen his face lately. He must be spending time with that damnable girl.*

Here she was, with a packed schedule day after day, and he was gallivanting around with Olivia. The mere thought sank Angelica's heart to a deep, dark place.

She submitted the report she'd written to her older brother, Gilbert Rapha Redgrave. He had the same blond hair and red eyes as Angelica, as well as a striking, handsome face. Gilbert, who was here at their estate in the capital serving as his father's representative, was a highly capable man—even Angelica recognized that. She respected him, too, knowing that he would eventually inherit their father's titles and lands.

After scanning her report, Gilbert affected a displeased look. "This is a disgrace," he told Angelica bluntly.

Angelica assumed that he was referring to the scandal; she agreed that it was disgraceful. "My deepest apologies. I'll crack down on the students and remind them to be more discreet in the future."

"Not the scandal," Gilbert corrected her. "I referred to *your* actions."

Angelica was at a loss. "What?" Her eyes widened. She almost couldn't believe what her brother had said. Nobles valued their adventurer heritage so deeply that she didn't think that Gilbert, of all people, would defend someone who'd smeared everything adventurers stood for.

Her brother sighed deeply at her, disappointed that she couldn't catch on. "What that girl did was absolutely heinous. However, you should recognize what it means that her father kept her in his house even after the news broke. He turned to you because he loves his daughter dearly and hoped you could reverse the academy's decision."

"Y-yes, but I have no authority in that regard!" Angelica protested vehemently.

Most nobles would have thrown their child out on the street for disgracing their family name. Angelica thought it was only proper to do so, but the father in question hadn't; he'd ignored precedent and his actions' potential effects on his reputation out of fatherly love.

"There was no need to overturn her expulsion," Gilbert explained. "I'm well aware that it's not within your power to do so. What she did was repugnant, and she incensed the crown prince. After her misdeeds, her father is probably already apprehensive about his position. He'll eventually leave our faction regardless and ingratiate himself elsewhere."

"I don't see why it matters, then," Angelica said hotly.

"Regardless," Gilbert went on emphatically, ignoring her remark, "you should've heard the girl out properly. Even if you weren't sincere, you should've shown her sympathy and protested on her behalf to the crown prince. Then she and her father would've owed you for interceding. Neither of them can truly believe you'd be able to overturn her expulsion. If they do, they're utter fools."

The girl's father must've realized that he couldn't completely shield his daughter from the consequences of her foul behavior. Trying to do so would've tanked his reputation completely.

Angelica shook her head, refusing to back down. "You want me to appeal to the crown prince and defend her? I wouldn't have a leg to stand on. And it would only hurt our house if people believed we were trying to protect her and the others who were expelled."

Gilbert snorted. "You don't have to appeal on her behalf in earnest. The point stands that the academy ignored custom and rushed their judgment. You could've pointed that out to the prince, told him that this was too hasty. None of the nobility could fault you for saying that. It just has to look like you disapprove of a technicality." It didn't sound like Gilbert wanted her to defend the girl —not truly. He just wanted the optics of such a defense.

Angelica's gaze dropped to the floor, her fingernails digging into her soft palms. "You want me to face off with the crown prince for appearances?"

Word of Julius's rage over the incident had already swept the entire academy. Having to pick another fight with him about this would wound Angelica's heart too badly.

Gilbert raised a brow at her. "Whatever his justifications, the expulsions were too sudden. Many people at court are questioning the prince's actions. If he's to rule peacefully, someone needs to remonstrate with him when the need arises." In not so many words, Gilbert was saying that that was Angelica's duty.

Her head jerked up and down. "I-I understand," she said reluctantly. She couldn't completely hide her dissatisfaction from her brother.

Gilbert leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. His voice finally softened. "Protesting to him will just be a pretense. You should take the opportunity to have a real conversation with His Highness."

"I should?"

"Father often tells me that I take things too seriously, but you're even worse than I am. You should learn how to relax and be more flexible." Gilbert barked a short laugh. "Well—not that I've got any right to tell you that."

His sudden embarrassment was a much-needed balm on Angelica's anxious heart. "I suppose you're right… I'll speak to His Highness."

"Good. Do that."

***

Angelica borrowed a room at the academy so that she could speak privately with Julius. Daylight was fading with the late hour, which meant that she couldn't summon him to the girls' dormitory,

but she couldn't visit the boys' dormitory, either, for fear of how that might harm her reputation. This room was a perfect compromise.

Anxious for an opportunity to speak candidly with the crown prince, Angelica had left her own retinue behind. Unfortunately, when the prince finally appeared, he was with his entire group.

He didn't look the least bit contrite over his lateness or the unwanted hangers-on he'd brought. "Sorry for making you wait," he said dryly.

"No, it's quite all right. I was the one who called you here suddenly."

I anticipated Jilk coming, but I didn't imagine he'd bring everyone with him. Angelica sighed to herself, glaring at the girl hidden behind the boys. Olivia's eyes met hers, but…

What in the world? For a split second, Angelica thought she saw Olivia smirk, but the expression was gone as suddenly as it appeared. Then Olivia affected a look of terror, clinging to Julius's arm. He stumbled a little but looked pleased at their close contact.

"There's no need for you to worry, Olivia," he said to her gently. "We're with you. You're safe."

She winced. "I'm sorry. I can't help being scared."

"Of course you can't help it—not after what you went through," Brad piped up. His attention turned to Angelica. "There you have it. Please make this short. Why have you gathered us all here?" He gesticulated as he spoke, every motion exaggerated.

Angelica wanted to roll her eyes. *I didn't call any of you here besides the prince. But no matter.* Careful not to upset them unnecessarily, she kept her voice even as she told Julius, "I wanted to speak to you about those expulsions. I have no intention of admonishing you for them, but I must still insist that you were too rash in pushing them through. You should have observed standard practice and waited for an investigation to be conducted first." She wanted to get all the pretense out of the way in hopes of speaking

with the prince privately, so she gave his group no opportunity for comment before she reiterated, "I have no problem with the punishments, but the haste with which they were carried out was—" *Unacceptable. Other nobles are voicing their dismay, so you must be more careful in the future.*

That was what she'd wanted to say, but Olivia interrupted her words when she burst into tears.

"Olivia?" Chris interjected. "Wh-what's the matter? Are you in pain?" He was so unused to interacting with the fairer sex that he was panicking over how to handle her distress.

Olivia scrubbed her tears away with the backs of her hands, her gaze focused on Angelica the entire time. "Is it because I'm a commoner?"

"What?" The word exploded from Angelica's mouth in a small burst of anger. She couldn't countenance this unnecessary interruption, and her face hardened. Yet as she stared into Olivia's blue eyes, the flame of anger that crackled within her went cold for a short moment. It was a strange sensation. Angelica shook her head vigorously, confused by what had happened.

A tremor in her voice, Olivia continued, "I hear people say that all the time at school. They say that I'm a commoner, so I'm not really one of you. That's why what those girls did to me wasn't betrayal, and they shouldn't have been expelled for it. If an investigation was permitted, the issue could've been completely swept under the rug."

What Olivia said reminded Angelica of what the expelled girl had told her: "That girl isn't even one of us. She's a commoner."

The memory left her momentarily stunned. Once she got her wits about her again, Angelica finally burst out, "D-don't be absurd! It's customary to launch an investigation whenever expulsion is being considered as a possible punishment. We can't give you special accommodations!"

The momentary pause before she came up with her answer didn't escape Greg's notice. "Awfully suspicious, the way you hesitated there. Ain't like you to be so ruffled, Angelica."

Greg was normally a meathead, but he had a wild beast's sharp instincts at times. Angelica was confident that, if she hadn't been so rattled, she could've given a more composed response. Yet her stomach twisted with anxiety for some reason, and that distracted her. She pressed a fist to her heart. *What is it? Why I do feel so off-kilter?*

Angelica was struggling to control her emotions. They had become like a tempest swallowing her whole. All the pent-up rage she could normally suppress came roaring up. She was naturally a very passionate person, but she normally tried to contain herself. Only when she ran out of patience did her true feelings start to slip out. Her family had warned her to be careful. Even her tutors had stressed how important it was to master her emotions. She tried, she truly did, but today she was having a hard time keeping it all in.

"You've no right to speak to me!" Angelica screeched at Greg. "I only called His Highness here to warn him that he'd been too rash and that his actions are stirring up trouble. This commoner wasn't even on my mind!" The moment the words slipped past her lips, she knew she'd made a terrible mistake. The color drained from her cheeks, but it was already too late.

"Of course," Jilk said coldly, his eyes like daggers. "That's how you really feel."

"N-no, I—"

The words caught in her throat as Julius stepped toward her. His eyes burned with fury. "Even you look down on her for her birth, Angelica?"

"No, Your Highness! That wasn't my meaning when I spoke. What I meant was—"

"If even you hold her in contempt because she's a commoner, then the other students must feel the same." The prince nodded to

himself. “Now I see just how egotistical our nobles are.” A rumbling, ironic laugh spilled from his chest.

His reaction stunned everyone.

Angelica’s hand shot out, gripping his. “Your Highness, please listen to me. I am not criticizing you over the expulsions. I only wish you’d taken a little more time in handing the punishments down. That’s really all I—”

Julius had a smile on his face, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “What would extra time have accomplished, except to give the perpetrators some way to mount a defense and escape expulsion? No, I don’t expect you to answer that question. You might not be corrupt in that regard, but the same can’t be said for other people. Most students here look down at Olivia for being a commoner, so there’s no telling what they might do to her given the chance.”

“Y-Your Highness…” His words suggested he had some measure of faith in Angelica—that he trusted that she wouldn’t do anything so heinous to Olivia—but he was right that other students might. Still, his words brought her a measure of joy. *He still believes in me.*

Julius gently peeled her hand from his and turned away from her. “I know for certain now that Jilk was right to propose that we expel the culprits promptly. I can only imagine what dangers she’d have been exposed to had we waited, since the majority of the school looks down on her for her birth. I was too naive; I should’ve been stricter with them.” With that, he took Olivia’s hand in his and slipped out of the room.

The other boys scrambled after the two. Only Jilk stayed behind.

“I’d thank you to leave His Highness alone, Miss Angelica,” he told her.

Angelica scowled at him. “You have no right to make demands of me.”

"But I do," Jilk shot back, refusing to back down. "His Highness and I shared a nursemaid, so I'm like a brother to him. And having grown up alongside him, I want to devote myself to his best interests."

"Quit beating around the bush."

"Give him space for as long as he's at the academy. You can surely understand that, as an older-brother figure, I want him to have as much time as he can with the woman he loves." It might've seemed understandable that Jilk wanted to give Julius freedom until graduation—if he hadn't phrased it as though the crown prince didn't hold any love for Angelica.

"Is…is His Highness that serious about her?" Angelica's voice wavered.

Jilk smiled indulgently at her. "Once he graduates, he'll fulfill his obligations as crown prince and marry you. I don't see any problem with him enjoying his time here at the academy until then. Do you?" It wasn't really a question. He was telling her to grin and bear it, since she'd have her whole life with Julius. She just had to be patient.

Angelica hung her head. *He makes it sound like I'm nothing but a hindrance to His Highness. Or is it worse than that? Does His Highness dread marrying me?* Tears pricked the edges of her eyes.

"I think it'd be best for you to keep your distance from the prince while you're here at the academy," Jilk reiterated. "Now then, if you'll excuse me." Without waiting for a response, he fled.

Angelica covered her face with her hands. "Your Highness…"

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"Eeeeek! It's all slimy! Help meeee!"

Marie was trapped inside an enormous spiderweb. The more she struggled, the more the silky threads tangled around her body, binding her in place.

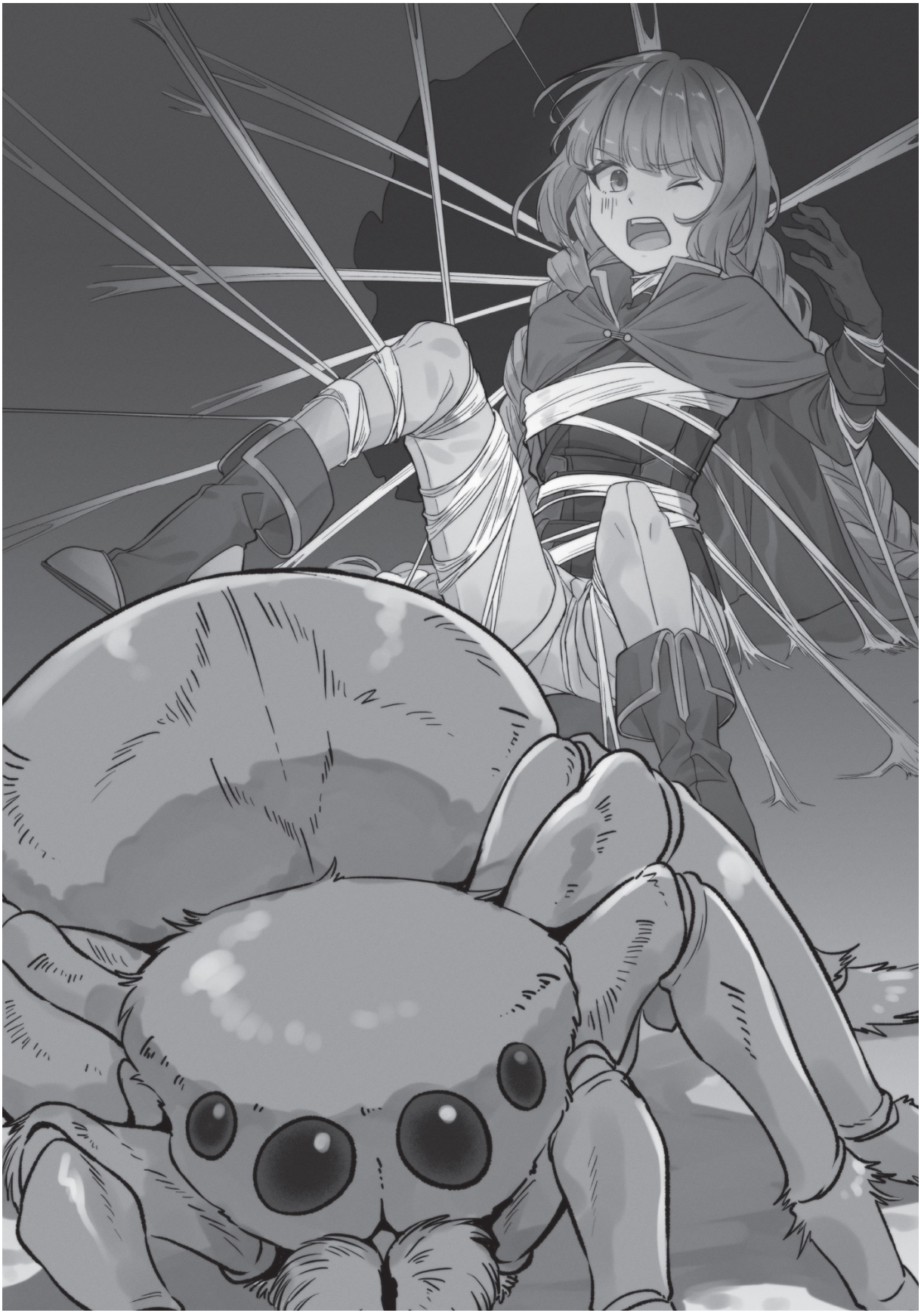
“Are you all right, Marie?! Don’t move!”

As we proceeded deeper into the dungeon, we’d reached an enormous, seemingly empty chamber. We’d all let our guards down, and Marie had marched blithely on ahead of us. At that point, a spider had launched itself from the ceiling and captured her. It took mere seconds to wrap Marie up in its web and make off with her. Our raiding party gave frantic chase in hopes of saving her.

“You stupid spiders! Release Marie!” I howled at them, slinging a short sword through the air and piercing the forehead of one of the creatures. It writhed in pain, but the blade hadn’t sunk deep enough to kill it.

“Trust me, I don’t taste good!” Marie shrieked at them. Despite my advice not to move, she continued flailing, looking pretty provocative in the process.

“You dummy! I told you not to move!” Now I was even more anxious to save her, if only to prevent the other guys from seeing her in such a compromising position. These enormous spiders were surprisingly nimble, though; none of my attacks were hitting.



"We must save her!" Lucle was as frantic as me. "Damn it! What a place to encounter a strong enemy. We've got rotten luck." These spiders were a fairly rare monster in the dungeon, so even the third-years were finding them difficult to combat.

I debated using the item Luxion had given me to save Marie. If I did, the whole raiding party would see it, and they'd inevitably have questions for me. Still, if it allowed me to save her, that would be a small price to pay.

I was reaching for that item when Ellie's voice boomed through the cavern. "Thousand Arrows!"

She'd taken off her glasses for her incantation, her ponytail whipping through the air behind her. A magic circle manifested in front of her outstretched hand, and from it, a thousand magic arrows burst forth. A single arrow wasn't very strong alone, but the spell's power was overwhelming due to sheer numbers. Arcs of light tore rained down on the spiders and cut straight through the webs covering the ceiling.

"Bwah!" Marie cried as she slammed against the floor.

I dropped my hand without grabbing the item and sprinted over to her. I wanted to pull her free of the spiderwebs, but she was thoroughly wrapped up. "Are you okay?!"

"D-do I look okay to you?!" she spat back at me. "If you guys are saving me, you could at least be gentle about it!" She let out a pitiful whine. "I swear I'm like a tragic heroine." She *had* been terribly unlucky, getting captured the way she had and then violently dropped to the floor.

"I think you're more a comedy heroine than anything," I deadpanned.

"How do you figure?!"

"I'd say that's pretty obvious."

I was relieved that she still sounded like her normal self. I turned back to the other spiders, but the battle was already over.

Ellie's magic had pierced each one; they disappeared in puffs of smoke before my eyes.

I was genuinely shocked. "I didn't know she had that kind of magic."

The other guys encircled and showered her in praise.

"That was amazing, Ellie!"

"Where'd you learn magic like that? From books, I assume?"

"Whatever stands in our path, we'll be fine if we have Ellie with us!" Raymond said, then told her, "Since you're a mage, rest assured, I'll protect you. I'll be your knight."

He was promptly beaten viciously by the other guys in the group for getting ahead of himself. Ellie froze at the sudden outbreak of violence, but it was Raymond's own fault for trying to lay claim on her.

I leaned toward Marie. "Did you know she was that powerful?"

"Of course I didn't. She's normally locked away in her room. She never shows up to class." That made sense.

Betty strode over and sprinkled chemicals onto Marie.

"Whoa!" Marie screeched, but when she realized what was happening, she froze. "Wait—the spiderwebs are disappearing."

Betty sighed at her. "That's a potion that dissolves cobwebs. You should always bring at least one bottle when you venture into a dungeon." Like her two friends, Betty normally cooped up to focus on an activity—drawing—so I was shocked that she'd carry such a niche item for our trip. Not even the upperclassmen had thought we'd ever encounter giant spiders, so Betty was surprisingly well prepared.

I whispered to Marie, "So, uh, are your friends secretly way more incredible than we ever gave them credit for or what?"

"Yeah, they're definitely incredible," she said haltingly, her view of them having changed as well. "But I wish they were like this all

the time.”

I couldn’t have agreed more.

Chapter 7:
Miss Atlee

JULIUS REFUSED TO HEED Angelica's warning. The rumor mill worked fast, and word spread across the entire campus, further weakening Angelica's influence in the process.

Two male students strode down a corridor, loudly gossiping with one another.

"The duke's daughter certainly has fallen from grace. But I guess she was doomed from the moment she lost Prince Julius's favor. This was just the final nail in her coffin."

The confrontation between Angelica and Julius during the party before summer break had really been the catalyst for the rift between them, and since then, Angelica had made a series of missteps. Since it was obvious to everyone that Julius was taken with Olivia, other students were increasingly dismissive of Angelica.

"We'd better rethink who we're brownnosing."

"Who's brownnosing who?"

"I mean, don't you think we'd better curry favor with the crown prince's new mistress, rather than the duke's daughter?"

"Oh, that."

Both gossipers were court nobles' sons, so they had sufficient status and wealth. They belonged to what Leon and the others called the "affluent group."

"I know this new mistress is only a commoner, but I'd still take her over a duke's daughter born to regional nobility, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah—especially because she should be easier to manipulate. But the problem is that the crown prince's eventual heir will have to

come from the duke's daughter, so I don't think aligning with his mistress would be a smart move in the long run."

"A lot of people are sick of seeing the Redgraves strut around like they own the whole kingdom, though. I wouldn't be surprised if the current arrangement was upended."

"You shouldn't talk about that kind of stuff. Either way, maybe you're right. Don't need to give the regional lords any more ammo than they've got."

From the way they spoke, they obviously held great animosity toward the regional nobility. That wasn't altogether surprising, since court nobles generally considered regional nobility a nuisance. Court nobility served the royal family directly. Regional lords served the royal family, too, of course, but they also had their own lands to rule over. Most court nobles owned no land whatsoever, so they held far less military and financial power than their counterparts. Instead, they had the benefit of holding important positions within the government. That made it difficult to judge which group was more privileged, and no love was lost between the two.

It was the enmity between the groups that had convinced the boys that Olivia was the better option to support. Before the commoner had arrived on the scene, Angelica's influence was too great for anyone to openly move against her. Fearing for their own futures, people did everything to avoid earning her ire. But now that her grip was slipping, it was a different story.

"We should be grateful to her for messing this up. It's given us a chance we wouldn't have otherwise."

As the pair egged each other on to capitalize on Angelica's weakness, a female student approached them. A group of chiseled men followed behind her along with several other lackeys. The gossipers guessed immediately that she was someone of high standing. In fact, as they recognized her face, they realized she was someone quite famous at the academy.

"I don't think that's something you two should be discussing in such loud voices," the girl told them. She had an attractive figure and well-groomed orange hair braided and pinned loosely behind her head. Her name was Clarice Fia Atlee. She was the daughter of Earl Atlee, a court noble whose family had served in an important ministerial role for generations. That put Clarice leagues above the gossipers on the noble hierarchy.

"M-Miss Atlee?!" one sputtered.

"You're free to think whatever you wish, but you must be careful where you express your views," Clarice cautioned. "Someone might overhear you. Then you'd find yourself in real trouble." She flashed a smile.

The two boys lowered their heads and hurried away.

One of the men behind Clarice watched their fleeing figures. He was a third-year named Dan Fia Elgar. His black hair was cropped short, his skin the color of sun-kissed wheat. Dan was a bit taller than average and had an intimidating, stony expression. He was actually part of the general class, but his own house had close ties to the Atlees, which placed him in Clarice's retinue.

"People sure are saying disturbing things around school lately," Dan said, exasperated, as he stared after the boys. He couldn't believe their gall in having such a conversation in a school corridor. It was so foolish, he almost questioned whether they were truly court nobles.

Clarice huffed, her expression distressed. "It's partly Angelica's fault for handling all this poorly. Still, it doesn't look like I'll be able to stand back much longer. Since Jilk's involved, too, maybe I *should* stick my nose in."

Dan and the rest of Clarice's retinue didn't seem to support that idea. In fact, Dan interjected to dissuade her. "Since you're a second-year, my lady, sticking your nose into the first-years' business would only cause unnecessary fuss."

Clarice was a unifying figure among the second-years, much like Deirdre and Angelica were for their respective same-year peers. After all, her father—an earl and court noble—served as a government minister.

Clarice pressed a hand to her forehead. "I have no interest in butting into Angelica's issues, either, you realize. She's such a hothead. Whenever she's lost her temper in the past, she's caused a real mess." She paused, then added, "But this isn't something I can ignore anymore."

Dan and the rest of her retinue grimaced even as they reluctantly agreed. "Jilk is your fiancé, after all," said Dan. "He seems to be getting a little too cozy with that scholarship student."

"I would've overlooked him messing around as long as it didn't get out of hand," Clarice said, eyes narrowing. "But if Angelica can't put a stop to this, it falls to me to help as her upperclassman. I can't expect Deirdre to do anything—she's a little too carefree." An image of Deirdre's face popped into Clarice's head, and she huffed.

Dan stood a bit straighter. "Shall we speak to Lady Angelica first, then?"

"Yes, let's do that. If I don't communicate with her beforehand, this could hurt her reputation, and she might give me grief."

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We'd finally reached the dungeon's middle floors, but our run seemed cursed with bad luck.

"We only had a little ways left to go!" Lucle cried, tears in his eyes.

He had good reason for those tears; the chamber we'd chosen as our destination was infested with monsters. After traversing the tunnels downward, we'd arrived in a vast, dome-shaped space—and of all the beasts that could've awaited within, an enormous, bear-like creature had to be present. Its tail took the form of a snake that

looked eerily similar to a king cobra. The bear portion of the monster's body was dangerous enough, but one bite from its snake tail could be lethal.

"I assume this is another rare creature you almost never encounter?" I asked dryly.

"You almost never see one in the areas we frequent," Lucle confirmed, holding his blade. "Can't believe we've had bad luck of the draw at every turn on this trip."

The upperclassmen had taken the lead and were facing the beast with us in the rear, but they were having a tough time against this rare, dangerous creature. Those with spears tried to handle the snake tail, since they could attack from a safer distance, while the other guys took on the bear. We underclassmen stood back and did our best to cover those fighting. Our chances of victory weren't looking good.

Surveying the situation, I was about ready to sound the retreat. "Let me know if you think it's too much," I told Lucle.

Sweat was rolling down his face, and he caught the hint that I was close to giving up. "I wish I could say we should press on, but even I know we're at a real disadvantage here."

The beast's upper body rose into the air; its jaw cracked open, and it unleashed a ferocious, earsplitting roar that reverberated off the walls. The whole cavern rumbled, and loose dirt and small stones shaken from the ceiling rained down on us.

"I think it's about time that we—" I started to say.

"We can't give up now!" Marie barked at me, eyeing the beast. Understandably, she hated the prospect of losing all our progress without reaching our final goal. "It's just a stupid bear. Blast it out of the way!"

She fired her gun at the bear from behind. It had little effect, though, and the third-years struggled to hold their ground. We couldn't hope to continue any longer.

"No good trying to accomplish the impossible! Let's give up here and head back," I said.

We hadn't cleared the third-year benchmark, but we'd at least cleared up to the second-year requirement. That was enough progress.

As our party prepared to retreat, Marie stood there, fists trembling. "No! I don't want to give up after we came this far! If that would mean undergoing this all over again later, I'd rather push through and put an end to this battle!" She threw her bag aside and dashed forward, heading straight for the bear.

"Marie?!" I shrieked, my voice cracking with panic. My hand shot forward as if I could grab her, but she was way too far from me.

Marie kicked off the ground and soared through the air. Her fingers curled tight as she concentrated mana in her fist. "I'm going to graduate with those three, whatever it takes!"

She crashed down on the bear with impressive form, her fist slamming it square in the forehead.

Marie looked so brave. The nine-meter-plus bear dwarfed her petite figure, and there was an insurmountable power difference between them. The bear had to weigh over a ton. No one would assume Marie's punch, however impressive, could cause such an opponent any damage. I certainly didn't think it was possible.

Yet despite my doubt, a horrifying crack echoed around us when her fist connected.

"No way," I muttered, staring in disbelief.

Her punch had sent the bear reeling back. It collapsed to the floor.

Marie lifted her fist into the air. "That's how you hunt a giant beast!" She was framing it as though she expected us to replicate such an unbelievable feat, but there was no way any of us could copy what she'd done.

All the guys in our party froze and glanced at one another. It was a moment of silent communication, asking: *"Hey, can you do what she just did?"* Everyone reacted by wrinkling their faces as if to say, *"There's no way."*

"Get your butts in gear!" Marie snapped, sick of us all standing still. "The fight's not over yet."

She was exactly right. The bear was trying to scramble back to its feet, though it seemed incapable of finding its balance. Its main body had been mostly neutralized, but its tail—the snake—hissed at us, warning us to stay back.

"Careful not to get too close!" I bellowed at the others. The snake looked highly venomous, and I could only imagine a bite's consequences. Yet no sooner were the words out of my mouth than Marie threw herself into range of the monster's tail.

The snake lunged at her, fangs peeking out of its mouth. Marie leaped at the last second, using the snake's head as a springboard to vault into the air. She snatched the base of the tail and yanked it with all the strength she had. Through gritted teeth, she hissed, "This is no time…to be…goofing around!" At last, she ripped the tail cleanly from the creature's body. No longer connected, the snake writhed uselessly on the floor, then disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

Everyone stood frozen.

"Incredible," one of the guys murmured.

Marie's shoulders rose and fell with each labored breath. She stood up straight and said, "Now, come on. Let's get this over with! Once we complete the last of our mission in here, we'll go back to the surface and have a lavish party to celebrate!"

As she instructed, the third-years surged forward to finish off the bear.

"You heard Miss Mar—no, we need to be more respectful—Boss Lady! Finish the beast off!"

"Yeah!"

They were so impressed with Marie that they were completely changing how they addressed her. *Sure, that's nice and all, but uh…* "Um…aren't I supposed to be your leader?"

The others ignored me—unsurprisingly—and focused on spearing the beast to put it out of its misery.

I stared at them, gobsmacked.

Cynthia had snuck up behind me at some point. She patted my shoulder softly. "Don't take it to heart," she said comfortingly.

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After undermining Angelica's authority, Olivia began more openly spending time with Julius and the other boys at the academy. Today, she was eating lunch with them in the inner courtyard.

Other students regarded her with a mixture of loathing and jealousy. Some more devious schoolmates, eager to curry favor with her, regarded her with calculating eyes.

All I did was establish my spot in the hierarchy, and already so many are falling in line. How boring. I figured there'd be some repercussions. Either these students are all cowards, or they're just being cautious.

Olivia had purposefully made her close association with Julius and the boys widely known in hopes of provoking the other students. She wanted to see whether anyone would take the challenge. Instead, everything had gone exactly as she had—well, not *quite* as she had wished, maybe.

"What do you think, Miss Olivia? Do you like the tea and snacks I chose? They're perfect for finishing lunch, wouldn't you say?" Jilk, who'd prepared the tea for them today, flashed a sparkling smile at her.

She ridiculed him inwardly. *How pitifully devoted. Unfortunately for you, I have no interest in returning your affections.* On the

surface, she kept a sweet smile on her face—or at least she did until she caught a whiff of the stale tea he'd served. The snacks were no better; they were as gritty as sand in her mouth.

"Uh, um," Olivia hedged. "I think maybe they're just so refined that they defy comprehension." It was a struggle to find polite words to offer him.

Jilk's face fell. "Truly? Then I'll try to prepare something a little simpler next time." He wasn't so discouraged that he was willing to give up.

Olivia pressed her hands together and beamed at him. "I'm looking forward to it." *You don't seriously plan to make me drink this sewer water again, do you?!* As a different possibility popped into her mind, she froze. *Could he have realized what I'm after? Is this his way of tormenting me?!*

Everything seemed to be going so smoothly for her, yet he was giving her grief. As much as she wanted to interrogate him and discover the truth about that—or at least offer a few words of complaint—she had to keep acting as the caring, kind Olivia. Fortunately, she was about to discover that her worst fears were unfounded.

Greg sniffed the tea. A wrinkle formed on his brow as he pinched his nose. "This crap reeks. Why's it smell like a dead animal?"

Chris picked up one of the sweets and tore it open, then grimaced. "Its all slimy inside. Are you sure these haven't gone bad?"

Jilk gave an exaggerated sigh. Fingers pressed to his forehead, he looked at the other boys pityingly. "These must be too refined for you two. If you can't see the appeal of the tea's aroma and the snacks' flavor, you're still boys instead of men."

His condescension irritated both of his companions.

Brad sampled a sip of the tea and promptly began choking on it. "No—this really is the most awful tea I've ever tried in my life. How can you serve this to Olivia with such confidence? What's wrong with your taste buds?"

Although three people had unanimously agreed that his tea and snacks were abominable, Jilk was able to continue beaming at them as if it didn't even occur to him that *he* might've been the one who was mistaken. "Do you have childish tastes, too, Brad? A shame. Maybe you'll understand when you become a man." He took a sip himself and seemed to savor it.

Olivia wrinkled her nose at him.

Julius sighed, seeming resigned—perhaps because he knew that criticizing Jilk's lack of taste was an exercise in futility. "You don't have to indulge him," he told Olivia. "The tea and snacks he prepares are always vile. He has no eye for art, either, always selecting forgeries. In every other way, he's a reliable friend, but he's hopeless at those things." He spoke as someone who'd been burned countless times by Jilk's poor taste and was therefore uninvested.

"I-I never realized." Olivia was relieved that this was just a bizarre tendency of Jilk's, not an indication that he was on to her.

"Yes. So, as I said, don't make yourself indulge him. If you do, he'll likely serve us this disgusting stuff daily. No one with decent taste would be able to tolerate that for long."

Jilk frowned at the prince. "You know, it wounds me that we grew up together and you still fail to understand me. But I have faith that Olivia will succeed where you failed." His gaze moved to her. "There's a shop I frequent—why don't we visit it together on our next break? It's a little out of the way; it's famous enough yet still kind of a hole-in-the-wall place with few customers."

Olivia's smile strained as the taste of his horrific tea and snacks lingered in her mouth. "I-I'll think about it," she said noncommittally. *Considering how little sense you seem to have, it's hard to believe a shop you frequent would be in any way decent! And how can a store*

be famous but have few customers? Wouldn't that be because it's crap, so no one actually wants to go there? Urgh. I didn't anticipate Marmoria's descendant testing me like this!

She'd been playing her role perfectly, masquerading as Olivia in front of these five boys, but Jilk's insufferable antics nearly pushed her to break character. She would need to be even more cautious with him.

In the wake of Jilk's disastrous tea and snacks, an uncomfortable atmosphere settled between them, but it shifted with the appearance of an unexpected guest.

"I so hate to interrupt when you all seem to be enjoying yourselves, but would you let me speak to you briefly?" A girl had stridden up to them, her long orange hair swaying in the wind. Olivia recognized her as Clarice, a second-year. Clarice's retinue kept a respectable distance from the group, making no attempt to insert themselves into the conversation.

All the boys, but particularly Jilk, looked like chastised children. Olivia, on the other hand, was glad Clarice had appeared.

Although everyone's attention had been drawn to Clarice's fiancé, Jilk, it was Julius who spoke first. "It's been a while, Clarice. You seem to be in good spirits."

"Thank you. I'm glad to see you and your friends making the most of your school life." Clarice smiled pleasantly, but her voice had a critical undertone. She surely knew how obsessed the boys were with Olivia. She hadn't chided them openly about it, but it was safe to assume that she wasn't pleased.

Glancing at Jilk, Julius asked, "I assume you're here for Jilk?" He and the others were giving Jilk looks, trying to nudge him into taking care of the situation.

Jilk rose to his feet. "What's the matter, Clarice? I assume it must be an emergency for you to go out of your way and approach me here at the academy." He eyed her cautiously, comporting himself with perfect composure.

Clarice continued smiling. "We're engaged, but I see you cozying up to another woman. You can hardly blame me for feeling anxious and wanting to reach out to you, can you?" She placed great weight on their engagement, and though she didn't say as much directly, she was obviously admonishing him for his disloyalty.

Jilk smiled wanly back at her. "It's not what you think, Clarice."

Despite his attempt to reassure her, Clarice folded her arms beneath her breasts and said primly, "Still, if you spend so much time together with her publicly, rumors will stir. You must know that. If our scholarship student continues to hang around boys who are already engaged, people won't look very kindly on her."

"Well…" Jilk trailed off, as if he could find no way to argue the point.

Clarice's eyes cut to Olivia. The latter pretended to shrink back, as if fearful. *So this is Jilk's betrothed. Interesting. I've heard that she's essentially the leader of the second-years. Seems like she earned that position for good reason. But her surname is Atlee, hm…? I've never heard of such a family.*

Clarice was assertive yet had composure—something Angelica noticeably lacked. Angelica was assertive, to be sure, but she also possessed a menacing aura that intimidated those around her. Clarice didn't have that; she had a soft, gentle aura. Yet beneath that, Olivia sensed a strong, unbending will. And Clarice was obviously very competent.

Seeing Olivia pretend to shrink in on herself, Clarice narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You're the scholarship student, aren't you? Miss Olivia, was it? You're very different from people's descriptions of you."

"Oh, um…yes," Olivia stammered back. "I'm definitely Olivia. I don't know what rumors you've heard, but I'm just as I've always been." *According to Olivia's memories, she and Clarice have never met before.*

Jilk took exception to Clarice's probing gaze before Olivia had a chance to. "People spread baseless rumors about her. You mustn't believe everything you hear, Clarice. Please," he said beseechingly.

Clarice shrugged. "If you really detest those rumors, you should rethink your relationship with her. Whether she likes it or not, hanging around men who are already taken will only spur such talk."

"That's silly."

"It's not," Clarice said sharply. "This is how the world works. It's not limited to you. Any female student sidling up to a taken man would have the same effect. His Highness has been unnecessarily cold to Angelica lately, so people are beginning to doubt our relationship, too." She gave Julius a pointed look.

Julius furrowed his brow and looked away. "You should ignore the rumor mill."

"Let's hope rumors are all they are," Clarice said. "Regardless, I implore you all to consider your positions. Showing off how close you are with the scholarship student in public like this will only fuel the worst sort of gossip further." At this point, she was scolding even the crown prince. Her voice was soft and kind, but there were barbs in her words.

Olivia climbed to her feet and lowered her head. "I-I'm sorry. I was the one who said I wanted to eat lunch outside! So…please don't blame them."

Julius rose, too. "No, it's not your fault," he told her. "You haven't done anything wrong."

"It's not right for the rest of you to take the blame for what I did," Olivia insisted. Trying to stand up for the boys was brave of her, but it earned her a glare from Clarice. It was as if she saw straight through Olivia's act.

"Regardless," Clarice interrupted calmly, "you should be careful in the future. There's also something I'd like to discuss with you

privately, Jilk. I assume you'd be available to meet with me during the next break?"

Jilk snuck a glance at Olivia. "Actually, I already have plans."

Clarice studied him hard. "Didn't I just warn you to rethink your relationship with her? Can't you prioritize the woman you're engaged to over your friend?" She slipped her arm through his.

Jilk dropped his gaze, then quickly lifted his head, his usual smile pasted on his face. "Very well. I'll call upon you at your family's estate during our next school break."

Pleased, Clarice beamed back at him. Then her attention turned to Olivia, to whom Clarice gave a meaningful smile. "Sorry about this. You really should be careful hanging around taken men, though. Even if your feelings are purely platonic, plenty of people out there will suspect the worst."

Olivia scrutinized the other woman calmly. After a significant pause, she replied, "I'll take your advice, then."

I assumed that their engagement was purely political in nature. Could Clarice really be in love with Jilk? I can't imagine what any woman would see in a man like him. I suppose she just has bad taste. Yet, as poor as Clarice's judgment of the opposite sex was, she'd had a keen eye in terms of seeing through Olivia's facade. Olivia respected her abilities. *And that respect only reinforces my choice to eliminate Marmoria's spawn first.*

***

When Clarice publicly reprimanded Jilk, plenty of people were nearby to witness it, and word soon spread throughout the academy.

"Miss Clarice sure is incredible."

"She said everything the rest of us were thinking about that scholarship student."

"What a relief to have someone like her keeping order. She's much more reliable than someone else we know."

Wherever Angelica went, she heard the same whispers. Everyone was gossiping about Clarice. She'd acted exactly as they'd hoped Angelica would; since Angelica had failed to meet their expectations, they were glad about Clarice's intervention. It went a long way toward softening the mounting dissatisfaction among the students. Unfortunately, Clarice's boost in popularity meant Angelica's popularity continued to nosedive.

This problem was supposed to be limited to the first-years. But Clarice—a second-year—had not only stuck her nose in, she'd also solved the very issue Angelica had struggled badly with. That was how it appeared to the other students, at any rate. After all, Clarice had admonished everyone—Julius, his friends, and Olivia herself.

Although Clarice's interference was a little over-the-top, it was well received by the students. Even Angelica was impressed at how smoothly Clarice had handled the situation. At the same time, she was disgusted with herself, since Clarice had managed to succeed where she had failed. She didn't for a moment think that Clarice was superior to her, which made it that much more frustrating that she'd essentially come up short compared to the older girl.

Angelica's followers glowered at the students gushing eagerly about Clarice.

"Miss Clarice is all anyone's talking about. No one seems to understand the burden you've been shouldering, Lady Angelica."

Angelica sighed. "They're not wrong to fault me for being undependable. But this should at least have assuaged the resentment they were building. I can only hope that His Highness and his friends behave themselves."

Olivia was only a commoner. Julius was crown prince, and all his friends were the heirs of highly reputable houses. The unnecessary, intimate proximity between the boys and Olivia had stoked outrage among the students. With most of that now gone, Angelica had a lot less to worry over.

Truthfully, I wish I could've handled this on my own. Now I owe Clarice for her help, and I'll need to repay her eventually. She debated inwardly when the best time to do that would be.

As Angelica and her group strode through an outdoor walkway, she noticed a sizable group of students not wearing their uniforms. She stopped short. "Is that…Bartfort?"

He and his party were filthy—covered in blood, beast offal, and dirt. They'd presumably just returned from a dungeon expedition.

Angelica's retinue followed her gaze and quickly deduced the reason for the group's presence. "Dungeoning during the week? They must be heading to the faculty room to report their progress."

"Strange that they'd be doing that during their final term. Did they forget about the requirement earlier?"

"They should've finished that sooner instead of waiting until the last second." Angelica's retinue might not have been quite so disapproving about such a trip on the weekend, but they didn't think highly of the group skipping weekday lessons.



Regardless of those observers' opinions, Leon and his group were all smiles. Angelica managed to eavesdrop a little on the conversation between Leon and Marie.

"For a minute there, I was worried about whether we'd make it through," said Leon. "It's a huge relief that it's all over now."

"No kidding. Now we at least have nothing to worry about for the next two years. We can just make the most of our school life."

"It's not good enough to just enjoy it—we have to make the most of it, huh?" Leon teased her.

Marie huffed at him. "Obviously. Our time at the academy is short. It'd be a shame not to appreciate all it offers."

Nothing about their banter was particularly special. It was their expressions that caught Angelica's attention. They looked so happy, even though they were discussing the mundane. Something about that overwhelmed Angelica. She was extremely envious.

"Looks like they're enjoying themselves," she muttered so quietly that her retinue couldn't overhear her. *I wish His Highness and I could also… No. It's pathetic of me to envy other people.*

Angelica forced her gaze away from Leon and Marie and strode off.

Chapter 8:
Court Nobles and Regional Nobles

AFTER RETURNING from the dungeon expedition, Marie settled back into academy life. Part of that was meeting up with Brita and her two friends to listen to the latest gossip. What Marie subsequently heard left her flabbergasted.

School had ended for the day, so only four people were in the classroom: Marie, Brita, and Brita's two companions. After being filled in on the first juicy tidbit, Marie nearly jumped out of her seat.

"Jilk and Olivia had a fight with a second-year?!" Brita and the others had told her about the confrontation between Clarice and Jilk.

Brita pressed a finger to Marie's lips, shushing her. "Dummy! That's *Lord* Jilk to you! Granted, boys are mostly below us, but how come you're so ignorant of the social hierarchy here? He shared a nursemaid with the crown prince! If someone learned that you were disrespecting him by failing to use his proper title, Clarice wouldn't let you off easy."

Brita and her friends glanced worriedly at the door, concerned that someone might've overheard them. It was this sort of reckless, loud gossiping that had landed them in hot water with Stephanie during their first semester. They were understandably leery of repeating that experience.

Marie slapped her hands over her mouth and nodded vigorously. In a much quieter voice, she whispered, "I can't believe that there's a love triangle."

I never imagined that Olivia would progress so rapidly with Jilk while we were busy in the dungeon. Olivia had shown no sign of committing to any specific route up to that point. It disappointed Marie to hear that Olivia had grown so close to Jilk. Not because she

was hoping for the harem route—she was just distraught that she hadn't been there to see the drama unfold herself.

Now they're in a love triangle—Jilk, Clarice, and Olivia! If only we hadn't had to go on that dungeon expedition. I could've had Luxion spy on them and watched how it all played out. It was like missing one's favorite romance reality TV show. Marie was devastated. There was still room for skepticism, but considering that Brita and her friends were just as keen on juicy romantic gossip, they'd gone to the trouble of gathering as much information as they could before reporting to Marie.

"Miss Clarice told that scholarship student, 'You'd better not put your hands on my man,' and, 'You should stop messing with taken men.' A bunch of people saw the whole thing play out firsthand. Hearing her say what we'd all been thinking for so long felt like a huge sigh of relief," Brita reported.

Her friend nodded. "It's bad enough that she's messing with the crown prince and then all those other guys, too. I think most of us hoped Clarice would go harder on them."

"Seriously. We can't count on Angelica for anything."

By turning up in the inner courtyard with all five of them, Olivia had been showing off, but then Clarice had interrupted the group and voiced the other students' growing dissatisfaction. No wonder they were universally praising her.

"Argh! I wish I could've seen it!" Marie cried, head in her hands.

Brita smirked at her. "It's your own fault for not finishing your dungeon requirement sooner. Oh—and before I forget, there's more."

Marie's head snapped up. "More?! Tell me!" She leaned forward, eyes gleaming with eager interest.

Pleased to have such a rapt audience, Brita continued, "The scholarship student has behaved herself since, but rumor has it that

that's because Miss Clarice has put insane pressure on her. You know that she's a court noble, right? They use some really dirty tactics to get their way." That, Brita suggested, was exactly how Clarice was dealing with Olivia.

This was all premium gossip, as far as Marie was concerned, but something about the way Brita spoke distracted her from her curiosity. "What do you mean by 'court noble'?"

Brita gawked at her. "You really don't know anything, do you? Court nobles serve the royal family directly. The higher they rank, the more insidious their methods. Everybody knows that. And in Miss Clarice's case, her family members have served as ministers for generations. I bet she can pull tons of unseen strings to get her way. All the girls born into court nobility are sinister like that." Brita obviously didn't have a glowing opinion of court nobles.

"Hunh. I didn't know that."

Brita cleared her throat. "I know you're quite invested in what happens with Lord Jilk, but don't forget the crown prince and his other friends. Everyone's anxious to see what'll happen next with them. In fact, they're taking bets to see who gets the girl."

Marie blinked at her. "Huh? You mean she hasn't already chosen Ji—er, Lord Jilk?" Brita spoke like it was still a toss-up.

"I haven't heard any rumors about her deciding on Lord Jilk, no." Brita folded her arms. "Though I did hear that the scholarship student and Lord Jilk have kept on meeting in secret even after Clarice warned her to knock it off."

"So they *are* still spending time together. That girl's a man-eater," said Marie, quite impressed.

Still, this latest update bothered her somehow. *When I saw them together before, Olivia didn't strike me as the conniving type who could do something like this. Did she just develop that quality out of nowhere?* As Brita told it, Olivia had those boys dancing in the palm of her hand. Something about that didn't quite sit right with Marie, but she was more interested in how the relationship dynamics

would play out than anything. *It looks like we'll need to investigate properly to figure this out. I'll have to ask Leon to get Luxion on board.*

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"You want me to contact Luxion because you want to know who the protagonist will end up with? I'll give you this—you've got no shame about demanding what you want."

It was a weekend morning when Marie barged into my room. It didn't seem smart for a girl to force her way into a boys' dormitory like this, but no one bothered to admonish her for it. The academy was too indulgent with the female students. If a guy had snuck into the girls' dorm for no good reason, then in the worst-case scenario, he might face expulsion.

I still sat in bed, drowsy from having just woken up. A yawn slipped past my lips. Marie clenched her fists, raising and dropping them against her knees for extra emphasis. *She's sure invested in this.*

"Jilk's fiancée, Clarice, basically declared war on Olivia. It's all anyone's talking about at school!"

"Then plenty of rumors will be floating around whether they like it or not," I reasoned. "Just ask Brita and her friends what the latest is."

This world had few forms of entertainment, so people were deeply invested in illicit rumors about others. It was the same with celebrities in Japan—scandal was always a hot topic. But since no one had anything better to do, and people were voracious for the juiciest drama, the attention focused on gossip here was tenfold what it was back home.

"I'll ask them, for sure, but that kind of thing needs to be give-and-take. If I never offer anything in return, it won't be healthy for my friendship with them," Marie explained.

I gave her a long, hard look. “That’s not very convincing, since when it comes to Cynthia, Ellie, and Betty, you’re always giving and never getting anything in return.” Marie always cared for those three very attentively, but I didn’t see what she got out of their relationship.

Marie shrugged. “Those girls are an exception to the rule. Brita and her friends are the normal ones. Anyway, doesn’t having access to info no one else has make you feel superior? I want that.”

“So that’s what this is really about. You want me to invade someone else’s privacy so you can feel superior. Do you hear yourself?” I’d barely finished speaking before another yawn snuck out.

My words must’ve hit hard, because Marie shrank back. “B-but this info is important, right?” she feebly protested. “Once the protagonist picks a route, we’ll have nothing left to worry about.”

“True. With the last boss sealed away, the only thing left to care about is which love interest the protagonist picks. But,” I added emphatically, “there’s no actual need for us to know what’s happening in her love life.”

“Hold on.” Marie scrambled to find some way to convince me. “We screwed up the plot in all kinds of ways, so aren’t you worried about how her relationship will develop? I feel like we’ve got an obligation to make sure it goes smoothly.”

She’d hit me right where I was weakest, because she was right—we’d interfered in most of the events meant to deepen Olivia’s relationship with her chosen love interest. It was bad enough that we’d done away with the Offreys, but as a consequence, Olivia had spent the school trip alone, without any of her love interests. Although that wasn’t all my fault, I still bore some culpability.

While I hesitated, Marie added quickly, “I’m not saying we should expose every little secret they have. We just need to keep an eye on how their relationship’s going. Please?” She pressed her hands together and lifted them toward me imploringly.

I wasn't too keen on the idea, but she had a point. "Fine," I said. "I'll contact Luxion."

"Yay!" Marie hopped around excitedly, which I found adorable—at least, until I remembered that her excitement stemmed from me agreeing to violate other people's privacy to peek at their love lives.

I grabbed the transmission device I kept hidden in my room and spoke into the transceiver. "Luxion, we've got a problem on our end. Can you help us out?"

"That depends on how serious your problem is," Luxion answered promptly.

His response was followed by an earsplitting scream. "Eeeek!"

Although I had to lift the transceiver away from my ear, I recognized that voice as belonging to the Saint's vengeful spirit. "Jeez! Wh-what the hell are you doing? Why's that thing screaming so loudly?!" Luxion had answered me very nonchalantly, which made this all the more unsettling.

Marie frowned. "Huh? What do you mean? Is he doing something to that spirit?"

Pausing, Luxion adjusted the microphone settings; I could tell because the spirit's screaming grew fainter and fainter until I couldn't hear it at all.

"Nothing that you need to be concerned about," Luxion said simply. "I am merely questioning her."

"Would she be screaming if you were *only* questioning her?" I demanded skeptically.

"Digressions aside, what is your emergency?" Luxion didn't seem interested in speaking further about the spirit.

I glanced at Marie. She nodded encouragingly at me, so I launched into an explanation. "There've been developments in Miss Olivia's love life. I'd like more info on what's going on, so I want your help. Can you come back down here?"

"No," Luxion said curtly. He didn't even think about it. "I see no need for that."

"What?" I had a hard time digesting his refusal. "This has to do with the game's future, though. There's plenty of need for it. We've royally screwed up the original plotline, so we've got a responsibility to keep tabs on stuff."

"We already removed the threat posed by the last boss. Regardless of who Olivia settles on, it will not impact us significantly. In fact, if she ends up alone, even that shouldn't affect us."

"Well, maybe not, but…" I hesitated, then turned to Marie for help. "Marie?"

"He's kind of got a point," she conceded. "It's not like Holfort's fate is riding on who she picks."

"Where'd all your passion for seeing this through go?! Like you said, we're the ones who messed Miss Olivia's future up. We've got to make sure it plays out right," I reminded her, irritation rising. "So there, Luxion! Help us out."

"This does not rank highly on my list of priorities," Luxion said, unmoved. "I am preoccupied with my interrogation of this vengeful spirit. I will prepare the items necessary for you to conduct your own investigation; deal with this situation on your own. Now, if you will excuse me." He cut the line without waiting for me to respond.

I turned back to Marie. "He shot me down."

She gave me a cold look. "You sure he hasn't decided to abandon you?"

"No! Probably not, I mean," I said haltingly, then added, "I hope."

Marie frowned at me and shook her head.

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"Tsk, tsk. I expected it must be a real emergency, and it was only an irrelevant request. I wish Master would evaluate our priorities more critically." Luxion cut off the transmission, and his eye moved back to the trapped spirit. "There. I have dealt with the interruption. Let us resume." He was about to flip the switch and send another electric current through the flask the spirit was trapped in, but she suddenly shot up.

"That was Lier's voice just now," she said.

Luxion's red eye gleamed eerily in the light. "I have corrected you on this repeatedly. New humanity seemingly lacks sufficient intelligence, even as spirits. My master's name is not Lier."

"Let me talk to him." The spirit flung herself at the glass and clung to it. "If you do, I swear I'll tell you everything you want to know. The whole reason I was reduced to this miserable existence was that I hoped to see Lier again."

Given that the spirit refused to back down on her demands, Luxion debated changing his tactics. If he kept torturing her, her energy might completely run out, and she might disappear entirely without giving him any answers. He decided that causing that wouldn't be a smart strategy.

"Depending on what information you can share with me, I will consider it. But I will not grant you permission to meet Master unless and until you produce something useful." Inwardly, Luxion debated whether what she might offer would be worth the potential danger of letting her meet Leon again. He was leaning toward the answer that, yes, it probably would be.

The spirit snickered at him, her mouth pulling upward in the corners, shining like a black crescent moon against the darkness of her mist-like form. "Ask me anything. I'll offer you whatever knowledge I possess. It will be a small price to pay if it means I can meet Lier."

He studied her. "Very well, then. I shall display several images for you. If you have information that pertains to any of them, tell

me.”

He projected several pictures onto the wall of the room. A certain one made her react.

“Wait. That looks familiar—similar to the Demonic Suit we got our hands on. Well, a fragment of one, anyway. It has the same characteristics.”

What Luxion had shown her was one of the weapons that new humanity had created. Hearing her answer, his red lens shone even brighter. “Tell me more.”

***

“It sucks that we couldn’t get Luxion on board, but I guess we’ll just have to handle this ourselves,” said Marie. “Fortunately, that should be easy with the items he provided us.”

She moved past her annoyance over my failure with renewed determination as she examined what Luxion had sent us. He’d provided several spherical drones and a remote control to manage them with. They came with a monitor that streamed whatever the drones recorded. These were all high-tech gadgets—I’d have expected no less of Luxion—but something about them bothered me.

“If we use these to spy on them, won’t that kind of be… stalking?” I asked.

“Yeah. I guess it kind of would.”

It was one thing when Luxion did it—he’d filter unnecessary information and only give us what we needed. But neither Marie nor I was up for peeping on someone without consent; besides, this situation wasn’t urgent enough to require us to resort to that.

“Luxion was right, I guess. This really isn’t that important,” I said with a shake of my head. “I want Miss Olivia to be happy, but I don’t want to violate her privacy like this.”

Marie nodded. “Yeah. Thinking about it calmly, this would be completely overboard. I guess we’ll just have to go about finding info the old-fashioned way: ask around and gather it ourselves.” Although she’d agreed that we shouldn’t use the items, she still wasn’t ready to give this up.

“Seriously? We’ve got to run around and dig for gossip ourselves?”

“Duh. And, with that decided, let’s go ask around. It’s the weekend, so all the gossip-loving girls will be visiting the city. We’ll have to hunt for the info we want!”

I tore my gaze away from Marie. She was pumped about this, but I didn’t share her excitement. My eyes landed on the items Luxion had given us, and I grimaced. “You’ll pay for this, Luxion.”

With no other choice, I accompanied Marie into the city.

***

“Hey there, ladies! I’ll pay for your meals, so why not fill me in on the latest gossip at the school?” I sounded like a playboy hitting on girls.

When I strode up, the girls in question were sitting on a café terrace, sipping tea in casual clothes. I wasn’t approaching them at random; I’d targeted this group because they were reportedly the best information source among the female students. As for why I’d used such a corny line on them, well, that was because I couldn’t think of how else to phrase my question. I’d gone with the first thing that popped into my head.

One of the girls’ personal servants stomped toward me, ready to drive me away. Most personal servants were demi-humans; this one was an elf.

“You aren’t allowed to approach Her Ladyship so casually,” he snarled at me.

"Hold on. I have something to speak to him about as well," one of the girls—presumably the servant's mistress—interjected. She and her group had glowered at me at first, but once their eyes landed on Marie, they'd realized that I wasn't there to make a pass at them.

The personal servant stepped back silently; his mistress scrutinized me.

"You're Bartfort, aren't you? I've heard the rumors about you," she said.

"Little old me? I'm famous?" I joked.

It didn't land; the girl clicked her tongue at me.

"Sorry…" I muttered.

"After the part you played in bringing down the Offreys and Lafans, so you honestly believe that a single person at the academy doesn't know about you? You're close to Deirdre as well," the girl scoffed. "You regional nobles are such warmongering beasts, honestly."

I described this girl as being dressed casually, but even her casual wear was fancy and expensive-looking. From the way she spoke, her family was court nobility, so it made sense that her voice held so much hostility.

On the surface, regional nobles and court nobles were deceptively similar. Both served the crown; one group was like a subsidiary, while a "parent company" employed the other. Court nobles held no land over which to govern, but they served the royal family in close proximity. They were the parent company's employees and executives. I'd heard that the two groups feuded sometimes, but I'd never seen someone from the other group act so openly hostile.

"Hm?" I blinked at the girl. "Did I do something to offend you and your friends?" If so, I was happy to apologize for it and—while I was at it—ask them whether they'd heard anything useful. But I was pretty sure I'd never spoken to them before.

"No. We're not directly associated with you," the girl confirmed. "In fact, this is the first time we've ever spoken."

"Right…" *Guess they just really hate regional nobility.*

Marie pushed in front of me; she probably didn't have any faith in me handling this further. "Let me get to the point: We want to ask you guys some things about the scholarship student. You must've heard the rumors that Miss Clarice has been doing horrible things to her, right?"

The girls' faces hardened.

"Excuse me? Why do you think Miss Clarice would resort to petty, underhanded tricks?"

"Huh? Because that's what the rumors said," Marie answered quizzically.

"Look here. Miss Clarice epitomizes propriety and grace. Unlike you and your group, she doesn't need to resolve things with violence. She's clever enough to find a more peaceful, strategic resolution to her problems. You shouldn't take such lowbrow gossip at face value."

Marie and I exchanged looks.

"That sounds totally different from how the other rumors described her," I said.

"I wonder what this is all about, then."

We tilted our heads, thoroughly confused.

Perhaps annoyed, the girl continued, "Miss Clarice handled the issue with the scholarship student because Angelica proved incapable of doing so. But there's no reason why she would put pressure on the scholarship student behind the scenes. That commoner is the last of her concerns." She seemed to have great faith in Clarice, presumably because they'd both been born court nobles.

“Sorry for disrupting you like this on the weekend,” I said, leaving some coins on the table to cover their orders. “Please excuse me.”

I turned and headed off. Marie scurried to follow.

“This is just getting fishier and fishier,” I told her over my shoulder.

“What they told us definitely doesn’t match the rumors.”

I was actually invested in this now. Why was there such a discrepancy between what these girls had said, and the information Brita gave Marie? “Looks like we’ll have to investigate this properly.”

As I showed interest, Marie brightened. “So you’re finally ready to take this seriously. Great—where to now?”

As we walked together, I contemplated her question. Who could I turn to? Only one person came to mind. “Let’s ask a certain relative of mine.”

“Urgh!” Marie pulled a face. She’d already guessed exactly who I meant. But what did she have against Deirdre?

Chapter 9:
After the Graduation Ceremony

SEARCHING FOR DEIRDRE, we discovered that she was visiting a shop she often frequented in the capital. She'd needed to visit a modiste to prepare a dress for the graduation party. She could've invited us to her estate for this meeting; instead, on a whim, she was receiving us at the modiste. Her reasoning was simply, "I'm in a shopping mood."

Deirdre had the shop's curtain pulled so we couldn't see her directly. The modiste was busy taking her measurements and discussing what fabric and design to use for her gown—hence the need for privacy. The way the light hit the curtain silhouetted her against the fabric, showing off Deirdre's voluptuous curves and narrow waist.

"The rumors about Clarice? I have no interest in them, so I haven't looked into them. And she and I always find ourselves in the spotlight, so there's no end to the baseless gossip whispered about us."

It was nice of Deirdre to indulge us like this, despite how busy she was. Ogling her silhouette, I asked, "In that case, can you tell us what Miss Clarice is like? We've heard contradictory things, so we'd both like to know what the truth—gah!" Before I finished speaking, Marie slammed her foot down on mine, and the pain was so blinding that I lost my voice.

"Hmph!" Marie huffed at me, turning away.

Oblivious to Marie's violence against me, Deirdre answered, "It's not as if she's a total stranger, so yes, I know what kind of person Clarice is. Still, I doubt you'd take my word for it, no matter what I said." It sounded more like she wasn't interested in giving us the information easily.

Then she thrust the curtain open and stepped out, clad only in her underwear. She didn't seem the least bit ashamed of how exposed she was. In fact, she haughtily flipped her long, cascading blond ringlets over her shoulder as she said, "Rather than listening to my subjective account, it'd be faster for you to speak with her directly. I'll take you to meet her. I'll change right away, so wait for me."

"Bwah?!" I spluttered. "Uh, thank you!"

Before I realized it, my eyes were transfixed on Deirdre as I tried to burn the image of her body into my mind. Unfortunately, my preoccupation meant that I was late to realize when Marie raised her fist. However, I could already see where she was aiming—my stomach. For a moment, I pictured the huge bear she'd taken down. All the blood drained from my face. I opened my mouth to blurt an apology, but it was too late.

***

I was pale as a ghost, a hand on my aching stomach, when we arrived at the Atlee estate. Deirdre managed to talk us into a meeting with Clarice, and we were escorted to the drawing room. Clarice appeared with little delay, but when she saw me nearly doubled over in pain, she was startled.

"Is your companion all right, Miss Deidre? Should I have him shown to the bathroom?"

My whole body was trembling like a leaf.

Deirdre glanced at me and grinned. Reclining on the couch, she threw her arm over the back and crossed her legs. Her free hand pulled out her favorite folding fan and unfolded it, then held it over her mouth.

"No, he's suffering for a different reason. You needn't worry about it," she said. "Actually, these two are interested in some rumors about you. I thought addressing them myself would be too

troublesome, so I brought them here to ask you directly." Deirdre didn't beat around the bush at all.

A group of men stood inside the room—presumably Clarice's retinue, though they were dressed casually. They glowered at us. Marie kept her head turned away, making no attempt to participate in the conversation, so I didn't have any other choice but to speak.

"Miss Deirdre," I wheezed through the lingering pain in my stomach, "please…choose your words…more carefully."

"No. It's too much of a hassle," she snapped at me. "I don't like hiding my agenda and playing word games with people. Clarice is court nobility, so she'd read too much into every little thing I said. We wouldn't get anywhere." She heaved a sigh.

Clarice's smile faltered. "Perhaps you think that because you regional nobles are always so indelicate. I wish you'd at least try to sound polite."

I thought this might be the same kind of animosity I'd seen earlier—that these were fighting words—but after those barbs, the pair seemed done with petty group allegiances.

"As you can see," Deirdre said, shooting a look at me, "Clarice can be a bit of a pain at times, but she's otherwise very ladylike."

Clarice frowned. "You phrase it as though there are times when I'm *not* ladylike."

"Was I wrong to? Who barged into a party riding an airbike and made a total mess of everything when we were children?"

Clarice pursed her lips. "It's unkind of you to bring up the distant past."

Deirdre scoffed at that. "I doubt you've changed that much. How many times have I warned you to do something about your bad habit of becoming unhinged when romantic feelings are involved?"

"Twice. Just twice! You haven't brought it up *that* often."

"Twice is plenty," Deirdre said, an exasperated note in her voice.

Clarice's cheeks swelled in a pout, and she turned her face away. She was actually pretty cute. Even her male retinue watched her antics warmly.

Marie finally deigned to speak, whispering into my ear, "She doesn't seem like the cold, calculating person the rumors described."

"Nope," I muttered in agreement. Clarice wasn't like Brita and her friends had suggested. Those rumors were either lies or baseless criticisms.

Clarice smiled at us. "May I ask why you're looking into these rumors about me?"

"Well," I said, still pressing a hand to my bruised stomach, "they were saying stuff that was a little concerning."

"There's a real discrepancy between what the rumors say about you and what we've seen so far," Marie added. "Frankly, people are claiming that you're tormenting the scholarship student behind the scenes. But different people said different things about you, which made us suspicious."

The air around Clarice' retinue turned menacing, the men's faces hardening. I didn't think they were upset with us, but rather, with whoever was defaming their lady. If they were that outraged on Clarice's behalf, they must really care about her.

As Marie and I explained everything we'd heard, Clarice and Deirdre listened with great interest.

"Well?" Deirdre prompted her. "What do you think?"

Clarice turned pensive. The rumors seemingly bothered her, too. "I've noticed that the court nobles at school have made increasingly negative remarks about regional nobility lately. The two groups have always been at odds, but it's never been this extreme before."

Deirdre nodded. “I assume you have an idea as to where this all started?” She snapped her fan closed, her expression solemn.

“Someone from the regional nobility is intentionally spreading these rumors, and it seems to be a first-year,” Clarice replied. The way she spoke suggested that she’d already looked into this herself but had no proof to corroborate her deductions.

Deirdre frowned. “I don’t like this. I don’t think Angelica is the culprit behind it, but I can’t help feeling as though someone’s trying to fan the flames. Perhaps the two of us should sit down with Angelica soon and discuss the matter. What do you think? I’d prefer to resolve this issue before I graduate.”

Clarice pressed a hand to her cheek. Smiling, she replied, “Terribly sorry, but I plan to take a trip with Jilk after the graduation ceremony. I’m too busy preparing for that to have such a meeting right now. Can’t you leave this for me to take care of when the new term starts? I’m having trouble finding Jilk’s favorite tea and the perfect chef to suit his tastes.” She sounded excited about her plans.

Deirdre’s smile strained. “As always, you prioritize Jilk over all else. Don’t you think your obsession with him is making you a bit shortsighted? Furthermore, that man has no taste whatsoever. Do you truly intend to order atrocious cuisine to suit his backward preferences?”

“Oh, I wish you’d just call him unique. I have no issue accepting his taste. At any rate, I’ll discuss this with Angelica directly. It seems I need to scold her a little for letting these rumors get out of hand.” Clarice spoke with a smile on her face from start to finish; still, I got the distinct feeling that, if you angered her, she’d be terrifying.

From the way those two spoke, I gathered that Clarice only had eyes for Jilk. That impressed me.

"She's cute *and* a dedicated fiancée," I said, but stopped short when I noticed Marie giving Clarice a strange look. "Marie?"

***

After meeting Clarice, Marie and I started back toward the academy, sharing our impressions on the way.

"She's intense," said Marie. "In more ways than one, and none of them positive."

"Seriously? I think it's good that she's so loyal."

"Well, part of the problem is that she prioritizes Jilk's desires over any personal preferences…but also, who goes to that much work over a trip? I don't think it's normal to hire a special chef for just one person that way."

"I didn't get any of that. To me, she just seems devoted."

"You really are an idiot. If you dated anyone other than me, you'd be in a world of hurt," said Marie.

I snorted. "Being with you, I'm already in a world of hurt physically." My stomach still ached. I'd had to keep a protective hand pressed to it this entire time.

Marie wrinkled her nose at me. "That's *not* what I'm talking about."

"Anyway," I said, not interested in lingering on the topic, "she doesn't seem like someone who schemes and pulls strings. If she's really that underhanded, then *everything* is a lie, and I'll completely lose my faith in humanity."

"It's not impossible," Marie reminded me stubbornly. "But I don't think she seems like the type, either. If not, though, why are these weird rumors going around about her? It doesn't sound like she knows exactly which first-year started them."

Questions were yet left unanswered, but there was no point in continuing our investigation any further.

"It won't do us any good to worry about it," I told Marie. "The graduation party coming up will be way bigger than the last one we attended. Why not focus on that instead?"

That finally piqued her interest. "You're right—the party! I want to really enjoy it this time. Oh—I'll need to get a dress ready!"

Now that she'd turned her attention to something else, her steps were a little lighter than before. She was so self-serving.

***

When Jilk visit Julius's dorm room to consult the crown prince, he had a grim expression.

Julius folded his arms. "Clarice is forcing plans on you?"

"Yes. Once the graduation party is over, she plans to drag me off on a boating trip. I asked her to delay, citing other plans, but she saw right through me. She could tell that those plans had to do with Miss Olivia."

After graduation, they would have a two-week break before the new term started. Clarice planned to use the entire period for her trip with Jilk.

Jilk sighed deeply. "I asked her to give me even a day to myself, but she dug her heels in, asking whether I planned to pick Miss Olivia over her."

Although tired of the conversation, Julius was also annoyed on Jilk's behalf. "Enough," he said. "I'll make you accompany me for a day. I plan to go out with Olivia; you can join us as my bodyguard."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I won't let Clarice complain about it. You're like a brother to me. She can wait an extra day to take that trip with you."

Jilk was genuinely relieved. "Thank you, Your Highness."

He bowed his head low, secretly pleased that his scheming had worked in his favor. Clarice had indeed complained about Jilk's

obvious favoritism, but she wasn't nearly so demanding and forceful as Jilk suggested—she'd only expressed suspicions about his closeness to Olivia. Jilk had lied to win Julius's help for his own benefit. *It was a bit deceptive of me, but it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission. Clarice wouldn't take that well.*

"I'd like to ask one more thing of you," Jilk said.

"What is it?"

"Please keep this from Clarice until after the first day of our break. If she discovers my intentions beforehand, there's no telling what she might do." Jilk furrowed his brow, frowning for added effect. This time, he wasn't lying for his own benefit. He realized that, if Clarice knew that he was attempting to skip the first day of their trip, she might really try to drag him off.

Julius cocked his head, but he didn't press Jilk further. "I'll take your word for it. All right, I won't say a thing to Clarice."

"Much appreciated, Your Highness."

That's one less thing on my plate, Jilk thought. *I'm touched that Clarice feels so strongly about me, but I have no intention of fully accepting her affections.*

Seeing Jilk's visible relief, Julius asked, "Do you dislike Clarice that much?"

At first, Jilk refused to meet the crown prince's eyes. He soon acquiesced, however; he and Julius were too close for him to play this off. "Her shows of affection are…unique, to say the least. She's unhappy unless she investigates every little detail about me."

"That's all? It doesn't seem that big of a deal to me."

Jilk had always known that Julius was naive, but he couldn't stomach that. "Unique *at best*," he spat back in disbelief, voice dropping low. "You have no idea how terrifying she can be. She's managed to ferret out all the places I've ever visited in secret and keeps a detailed log on when and how often I've gone! The gifts she offers me are even more terrifying—things I've wanted but never

told anyone about!" If Clarice hadn't had so many issues, he wouldn't have been so anxious to keep her at arm's length.

Julius thought his friend was exaggerating a little. Still, he smiled indulgently. "I didn't think any girl out there could make you so uncomfortable."

"I wish you'd take me seriously. You don't know how many times I've found myself sweating bullets with her."

"I haven't seen you this flustered in a long time," Julius said, amused.

"Please don't tease me."

***

Meanwhile, Olivia was in her room, reading a letter. Having scanned the contents, she used fire magic to disintegrate the missive, then dusted the ashes from her hand. She wiped away what remained with a nearby cloth.

"It seems the situation here is quite precarious. Everything's going so much more smoothly than I imagined," Olivia murmured to herself, face devoid of emotion.

Once she'd wiped her hand, she sat primly upon her chair. She was reaching for some stationary to pen her response when there was a knock at the door.

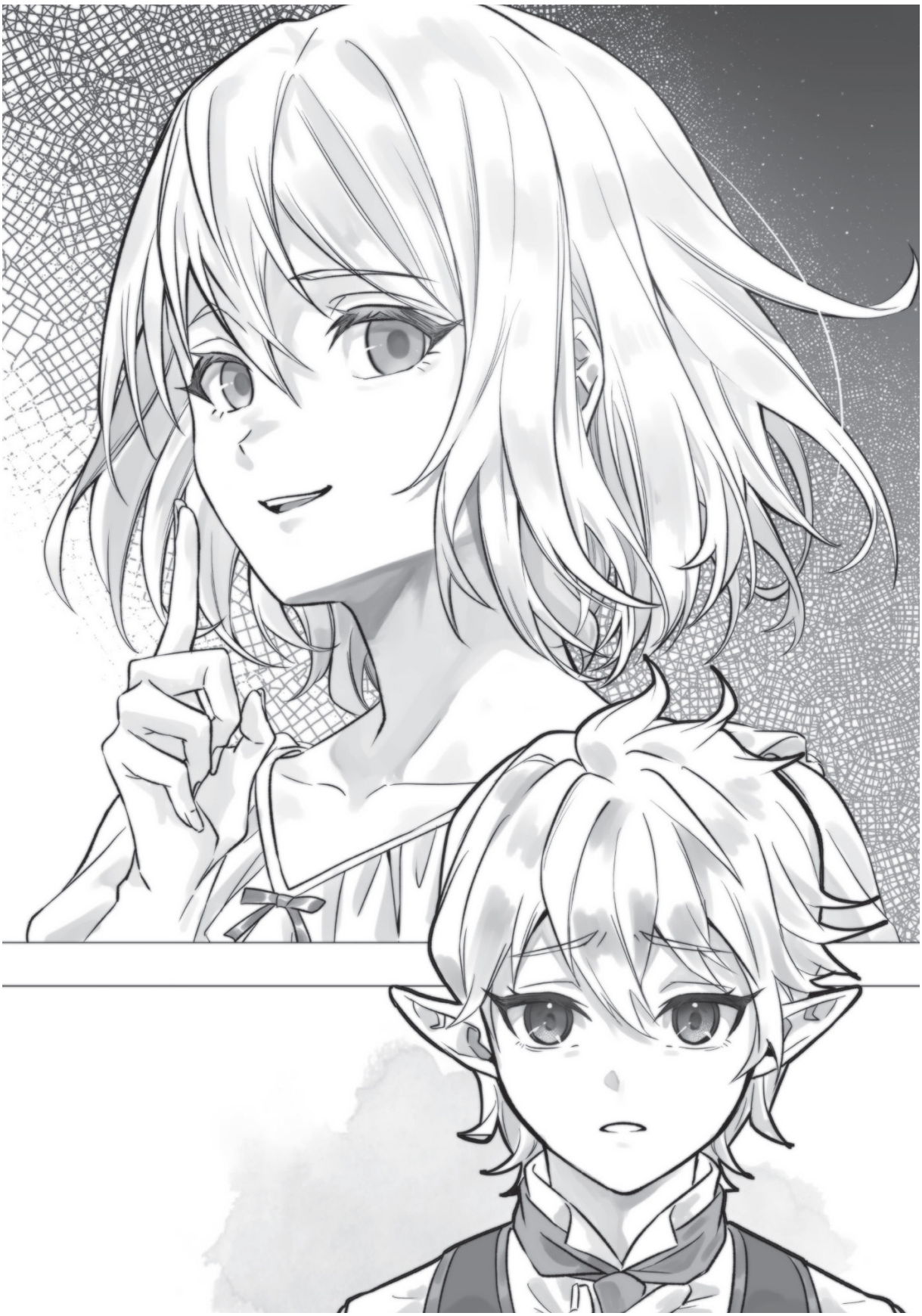
"Mistress, it's me," came a frightened voice.

A grin spread across Olivia's face. "You may enter."

"Excuse the intrusion." Kyle slipped inside nervously. All the haughtiness he'd shown before was nowhere to be seen.

Olivia smiled pleasantly at him. "How did it go?" she asked.

"I did as you said and fed rumors to the slave market. The master there seemed skeptical, though."



"That's fine."

Olivia's heart soared over this success. Meanwhile, Kyle remained confused about what he'd even participated in. That was probably why he was so curious about it.

"He was really dismissive about it, though," he emphasized. "I don't think your plan has succeeded. Anyway, what is this all for?"

Olivia held her index finger to her lips. "It's safer for you to stay in the dark."

***

The academy held its graduation ceremony, and afterward, a party was thrown. All students, regardless of year, were invited to attend. I escorted Marie to the event, and when I spotted Nicks, I made my way over.

Nicks wore his school uniform for the occasion, and for some reason, his hand kept wandering to his neck. Was he restless because he didn't have a collar on? As his younger brother, I could only pray that he wasn't so used to the collar that he actually felt lost without it.

"Once you graduate, you'll finally climb the social ladder and officially become viscount," I reminded him with a grin.

Nicks smiled wryly back. "All because someone foisted it on me."

"I think you should be incredibly grateful to that someone. As far as everyone else is concerned, you're a success story—a standout among your peers."

Nicks was married to Dorothea and receiving financial support from the Roseblades; soon, he'd also have his own lands and the title of viscount. To his fellows, he was a source of envy and jealousy. Nicks must've realized his good fortune, too, because he looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"Thanks to that, all these people I've never spoken to are reaching out to me. Frankly, it's more a burden than anything," said Nicks.

So he's already got people trying to brownnose.

This was a standing buffet-style party. Marie had already piled her plate high with an assortment of dishes and was currently shoveling them down. "You sure have it rough," she told Nicks. "Oh! Be sure to give my regards to Dorothea. She invited me to come visit again, so I'll pop in when I next have a chance."

I suspected that Dorothea had issued said invite because she pitied Marie. As for Marie, she'd taken such a great liking to the Roseblade chef that she was eager to visit them again.

Nicks smiled, cheeks glimmering with freshly fallen tears. "You're welcome to come whenever you want," he told Marie. Both he and Dorothea had been much kinder to her since hearing about her traumatic background. I couldn't blame them; even I empathized with her.

I scanned the faces of the guests near us. "Hm? Marie, where are Cynthia and the other girls?"

Cheeks bulging with half-chewed food, she glanced around. "Over there. They've got a bunch of guys doting on them, which means I'm free from mothering duties."

"Hunh. You don't say. What about Brita and her two friends?"

"They're over that way, surrounded by a different group of guys."

My group—the sons of poor barons—had taken up positions around Cynthia, Ellie, and Betty, as if protecting them from any other men who might otherwise approach them.

"Seems like everyone's having fun at least," I said, watching my comrades desperately try to fend off any would-be suitors.

Deirdre's high-pitched laughter rang out as she appeared in front of me dressed in a luxurious gown. "Oh ho ho! I'm glad to see

you’re so forlorn about my graduation.”

She was a bit conceited, but she’d been an attentive upperclassman this past year. “Of course,” I said. “I’ve relied on you so much. It’ll be lonely without you.”

“You lose points for your self-interest. That said, you’ll have to figure out how to handle things on your own from now on.”

Deirdre *had* helped us a lot in the past. Marie set her plate aside. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us, Miss Deirdre!” she said. “In the beginning, I thought you were kind of a weirdo, but you’ve actually got a good head on your shoulders.”

Deirdre responded to Marie’s frankness with a smile. “If my older sister didn’t adore you so much, I would’ve struck you across the cheek.”

“Aw, nonsense. You’d smile and forgive me, wouldn’t you?”

“I keep them well concealed, but I have quite fiery emotions. There’s no telling what I might do if you angered—”

Before Deirdre could finish speaking, a smack resounded through the room. Murmurs erupted across the venue. All of us turned our attention to the location of the commotion. Angelica stood there, cheek red and swelling rapidly. Clarice hovered in front of her, hand still raised after delivering the slap. Her brow was furrowed, her face contorted in incandescent rage.



"You have some nerve encouraging those rumors about me! Of all the things you could've said, I can't believe you'd accuse me of employing a personal servant for myself!" Clarice shrieked.

That was why she'd lost her temper? Over the weird rumors? Before, Clarice had given us the impression that the rumors didn't bother her, so I couldn't hide my surprise at her sudden transformation.

Marie was as taken aback as I was. "She's like a different person," she said.

"Y-yeah. She really is." I couldn't believe what we were seeing. Clarice had seemed so kind and friendly.

Nicks was similarly puzzled. "A personal servant? Don't most women have those?" He couldn't see why that would so offend Clarice.

Deirdre stared coldly at the two other women. Angelica was too stunned to react, and Clarice's face was still flushed with anger. "What a shameful display," Deirdre said with disgust. "Although I understand why Clarice reacted so strongly."

"You do?" I asked. "What part of this justifies that level of anger?"

Since lots of girls at the academy had personal servants, I couldn't comprehend why such a rumor would offend someone so much that they'd explode as Clarice did.

"Neither my sister nor I have personal servants," Deirdre reminded me. She was being cagey.

"Aren't you two just exceptions to the rule?"

"No. Angelica and Clarice don't have personal servants, either."

"Oh, yeah," I said with a thoughtful nod. "You've got a point."

There *were* some female students who didn't have personal servants. Brita and her two friends were examples; they couldn't afford such a luxury. But in general, I thought that was the only

reason a girl wouldn't have one. I knew that Deirdre and some other, higher-ranking noble ladies didn't have personal servants, either, but in those cases, they had their own retinue to attend them; they didn't really need a personal servant.

Deirdre studied Angelica, who remained paralyzed in place. "It doesn't look like those two will patch this up easily," she said, her voice hard. "But I'll be graduating, and anyone else would have trouble mediating between those two. They may end up remaining on bad terms."

"But you could solve this, couldn't you?" Marie asked anxiously.

"Of course. It would take too long, though." Since she'd already graduated, Deirdre sounded hesitant to intervene; she wouldn't have much time to play mediator before she left entirely.

My eyes were glued to Clarice, who was still hurling furious barbs at Angelica. When we met with her before, she'd voiced doubt that Angelica was behind the rumors. She hadn't even paid the gossip much mind, only mentioning in passing that she'd scold Angelica for not handling the matter. She really was like a different person.

I was also curious about Angelica's reaction to all this. She had such a short temper; she was like a ticking time bomb, prone to exploding. When Clarice slapped her, I figured she might retaliate. To my shock, though, Angelica had lowered her gaze to her feet and stood there quietly.

Marie tugged my sleeve. "Leon, look around."

"Why? Did something happen?"

"Just look," she said impatiently.

I surveyed the others in the room and noticed that they'd split into two groups and were glowering at one another.

Deirdre smiled sardonically. She quickly hid her expression by lifting her fan over her mouth. "It seems the hostility is only

growing. You two had better be careful. Whether you decide to get involved or not, if you don't watch yourself, you may get burned."

This situation had never happened in the game. Marie and I were both at a loss.

At that point, Jilk stepped in between Clarice and Angelica. "Please—that's enough. You'll ruin the party."

Clarice was visibly flustered. "The rumors are wrong, Jilk! I've never wanted a personal servant!" Her voice cracked with desperation as she protested her innocence.

Jilk scowled at her. "I'm not addressing that right now. I'm asking you to stop bickering here at the party."

"But it's an important topic *to* address!" Clarice objected.

Her panic seemed really exaggerated to me. "Is there something more to having a personal servant than we know about?" I whispered to Marie, careful to lower my voice so that no one else could eavesdrop.

"It feels like there's got to be, huh? Want to look into it?"

"Nah. I'm more worried about what's going on with Miss Clarice. I'd like to get an audience with her to ask her some questions, but…she leaves tomorrow, right?" I remembered how excitedly she'd referred to her upcoming trip with Jilk. She probably wouldn't have free time to spend indulging me for a while.

"Let's give her a send-off, then. We'll drop by the harbor and make her talk to us," Marie said decisively.

I recoiled. "Don't you think that'd be a bit over the top? We're barely even her acquaintances."

"Do you want to spend the next two weeks worrying about this? 'Cause I sure don't."

At Marie's urging, I finally relented. We decided we'd drop by the harbor the next morning to get our audience with Clarice.

"I'm not confident that I can be as shameless and assertive as you. I mean, you know how reserved and sensitive I am," I said.

"If you want to fight, let's fight." Marie raised her fists, ready to take me on.

I turned away quickly. "Sorry. I got ahead of myself."

***

As soon as Clarice's slap landed on Angelica, Julius and his friends fled the venue.

"Will Mr. Jilk be all right?" Olivia asked worriedly after Jilk took it upon himself to mediate.

"Clarice and Jilk are engaged. They've known each other for a long time. Nothing bad'll happen," Greg said, trying to reassure her.

Chris was more worried about the party's uneasy atmosphere than the squabble between Clarice and Angelica. They'd left with Olivia partly because they'd noticed how tense the other students were. Getting Olivia to safety had been their top priority, although once Jilk was sure that she was far from the danger, he'd doubled back to handle the mess. Ever since the attempt on Olivia's life, all the boys were extremely overprotective of her.

"Anyway," Chris said, "the atmosphere in there was off. There was a strange tension." From the way the students had split into two groups, he had a decent idea of what had prompted the shift in the air.

"There was hostility between the court nobles and the regional nobles," Brad remarked, having noticed the same thing. "I assume the strange rumors going around must have widened the rift between them." He spoke as if he were a mere bystander, uninvolved in this conflict.

"This is extremely troubling. Can't you take it more seriously?" Chris snapped at him.

"Get involved in a messy situation like this? I'll pass," said Brad. "I'm scared that the students will break into factions over this. You'd better keep your nose out of it, too, Chris."

The division had already begun, and which group a student fell into was predetermined based on whether they were born to court or regional nobility.

Olivia frowned. "Um, there's animosity between the nobility? It'd be better if everyone could just get along."

Brad burst into laughter. Olivia's suggestion was innocent and simple, but that was what charmed him. "I figured you'd say something like that. I like the way you think, but sadly, the rest of the world is more complex than that. Still, this is probably just a temporary thing. It'll cool down eventually."

Greg rubbed his stomach. "Let's get back as soon as the fighting's over. I'm starvin'."

Chris gave him a disapproving look, but Brad just laughed again.

Julius was the only one not paying attention to their antics. "Court nobles, regional nobles… All they do is look for excuses to squabble. It's repulsive." A dark aura had settled around him.

Olivia gripped the crown prince's hand. "You're so kind, Julius. You take all this so seriously."

"Me, kind? No, I just hate how pointless all these feuds are."

"Avoiding such feuds is kind in itself. And you're genuinely concerned about the kingdom's future, aren't you? My compliments stand, then." She beamed at him.

Julius glanced down at their joined hands. "You don't know how happy it makes me to hear you say that. I thought you'd dismiss my thoughts."

"I'd never dismiss your thoughts," Olivia said defensively. "I think your opinions are wonderful."

"Thank you, Olivia." A smile finally broke out on his face.

In her head, Olivia was cursing him out. *Urgh. Men like you make me want to barf.* She pretended to blush and look away, if only to hide her disgust. *I wish I could kill you right here. But no, I need to exercise restraint. Soon enough, I'll plunge you and the rest of this nation into hell. But until then, I'll continue playing the fool for you.*

Chapter 10:
Before the Trip

IT WAS THE DAY after graduation.

In her room, Angelica cupped a hand over her bruised cheek. Since it was a minor injury, she'd declined to have it treated, but it still stung. Right now, she was grateful for that pain. She wanted to feel her punishment.

"What I've done to Clarice was terrible. I'll need to officially apologize to her eventually," Angelica said.

Someone among the first-years had been gossiping about Clarice; one rumor claimed that Clarice had tried to hire herself a personal servant. If Angelica had been subject to the same defamation, she was confident that she'd have reacted as explosively as Clarice did at the party. Angelica knew that she was at fault for not keeping the other first-years in line, which is why she felt such guilt over the matter.

Angelica stood in front of her room's window, gazing at the distant sky. "I suppose she must've set off on her boating trip with Jilk already."

By the time the couple returned, Clarice would likely have calmed down. Would she accept Angelica's apology then?

There was a knock at the door. Angelica's retinue had arrived with news.

"Lady Angelica, we've looked into the source of those rumors."

While Angelica was bereft of all emotion—almost numb, at this point—her followers trembled with barely restrained anger.

"A regional noble was responsible. She went to the markets to seek a personal servant of her own, and she overheard a rumor that someone who was the spitting image of Clarice had been shopping

around for a personal servant as well." Although Angelica's retinue hadn't pinpointed the rumor's exact source, they'd managed to discover who started the gossip at the academy.

Angelica's brows knitted. "What?"

One of her followers spoke up, voice raised with emotion. "She wasn't trying to bring Clarice down. She just repeated what she'd heard to a group of friends. But Clarice is just as vicious and cunning as any other court noble. She was worried about being exposed, so she lashed out at you to cover up the truth."

This follower—and the rest of Angelica's retinue—were furious with Clarice's response. This concerned them, too; they were also regional nobles, which was why they had such negative feelings toward the court nobles. Those sentiments had now transformed into outright animosity.

Sensing danger in her followers' growing anger, Angelica reminded them harshly, "A regional noble spread these baseless rumors about Clarice to begin with. Did the girl in question even have solid proof that it was her?"

Her retinue fell silent.

"Don't do anything foolish," Angelica warned them, pointing for emphasis. "As soon as Clarice returns, I'll apologize. In the meantime, don't antagonize the court nobles."

Since Angelica had given her orders, her followers excused themselves.

***

Once the door had closed behind them, one of Angelica's more passionate followers erupted, "Damn it! After all the trouble we went to running around, trying to get information, is this how things end?!"

A calmer follower hushed her. "Careful what you say. She's right that we have no proof. To call Clarice and those other court

nobles out, we'd need something concrete."

Angelica's three followers were more concerned about her response than Clarice's behavior. "Our lady's become awfully listless lately. I'm worried that, if she doesn't pull herself together, she'll roll over and submit should Clarice and her minions pick a fight again. I don't want to lose face due to those court nobles. I refuse," said the third follower.

The passionate follower nodded eagerly. "I've never liked those reprobates. They always look down on us, as though they're somehow more special because they live in the capital."

The two groups had never been on good terms; still, they'd never fought openly as they were doing now.

"Ever since Clarice scolded the prince and his friends, things have taken a strange turn," the calmer follower commented. She'd noticed something bizarre unfolding at the academy. "I worry that if this continues, it'll look like we picked the fight."

"Huh? How so?" the passionate follower demanded.

"You dummy," said the third. "She means that it looks like we're the ones in the wrong, spreading disinformation about Clarice. It'd be one thing if this were retaliation for something they'd done, but if we take all the blame, it'll put us at a disadvantage." There was no shame in responding to provocation, but no one wanted to be painted as a mad dog picking pointless fights.

"Then what do you suggest?" demanded the passionate follower.

"What can we do but let our lady apologize and drop the matter?" asked the calm one.

"You're really just going to sit there and take it?" the passionate follower snapped back at her. "I mean, think about it: If we let her apologize, we'll look ridiculous!"

The third shook her head, exasperated. "That idea *is* stupid. Would we even be nobles if we didn't retaliate?" She'd been mostly

calm until that point, but her eyes were now bloodshot as she mumbled excitedly to herself, "They need to pay for making fools of us. Yes—and we're going to make them."

The other two snapped their mouths shut.

***

The Atlee family's airship had docked at the royal harbor. The vessel resembled a luxury yacht built with every comfort in mind for its highborn owner. The figurehead on its bow was a beautiful woman cradling an enormous book in her arms. The ship itself was painted pale green. It gleamed in the sunlight.

As Marie and I approached Dan, who was busy hauling luggage onto the ship, we declared our shameless purpose in coming.

"We're seeing Her Ladyship off!"

"Here we are!"

Dan gave us an annoyed look. "What're you really here for?"

"C'mon, sir," I said. "We really just came to see her off." I smiled innocently at him, flashing my teeth.

He sneered at me as though he didn't buy that for a minute. "You barely know her. You have no reason to see her off."

Dan was a third-year, but he was part of the general class. He came from a knight family, so he was far below us socially, which was also why he couldn't take a sterner tone with us. Seniority was normally the factor that decided the pecking order, but even at the academy, one couldn't overcome the chasm that separated a mere knight's son from genuine nobility.

But enough of that. I scanned the area for Clarice. "So, uh, where's Her Ladyship?" I asked eagerly. "I was hoping to chat with her about what happened yesterday."

Dan didn't hide his displeasure, scrunching his whole face at me. "She has nothing to speak to you about. Anyway, it was the regional nobility who spread those rumors about her hiring a personal servant. They've always been like this, resorting to the most sinister, undignified—ah, no offense to you two, of course. The point is, if you want to hear about those rumors, go ask the people who started them." He'd lost his temper for a minute, seething with anger at the culprits.

Now that he'd so clearly rebuffed us, I was at a loss as to how to proceed.

"I can speak with you for a bit," interrupted a voice. Clarice had come down the gangway from the ship.

Dan spun around to face her. "My lady?!"

"I'm aware that I made too much fuss yesterday," Clarice said reflectively. "Jilk's running late, so you'll be a perfect distraction while I wait."

Marie screwed up her face. "Someone as punctual as Jilk is late?"

She had played the game, like me. She knew Jilk well enough to understand how obsessive he was about punctuality. I shared Marie's perspective, of course. Still, the moment she blurted out her question, Clarice's face clouded.

"You seem to know him awfully well," she said suspiciously.

Marie had, in fact, tried to sidle up to Jilk before, and her guilt over that seemed to bring on a cold sweat. It wouldn't be surprising if Clarice already knew all about it.

"Um," Marie hedged hesitantly, "that's, uh…"

Since she was struggling, I interjected, "We both share quite a few classes with him. He takes his attendance so seriously that Marie just thought his being late for your trip was unusual."

"Oh, of course. It *is* odd for him to be late," Clarice admitted. "Perhaps something happened with the crown prince, and that's

why."

Once Clarice bought my excuse, Marie slumped with relief. This was hypothetical, but if Marie had actually romanced Jilk and the other guys, she'd have made a real enemy of Clarice. I was glad she hadn't, especially when I thought about the fury on Clarice's face during that incident at the party. Thankfully, there was no way Marie would ever have succeeded at winning those guys over.

Clarice motioned us aboard her ship. "Come. If you want to speak more, I'd prefer to do it inside."

***

Clarice guided us inside, to what looked like a drawing room, where she had tea served to us. The frankness of our questions exasperated her—especially on top of us shamelessly showing up at the harbor—but she answered us nonetheless. "I figured you'd want to ask about what happened yesterday, but I never expected you to cut to the point without any preamble. Is that Miss Deirdre's influence?"

"I know we're acting impudently, but how could we not be curious? Last time, you smiled and waved these rumors off. Then, last night, you showed up and slapped Miss Angelica across the face." I shrugged helplessly. "I can't help wondering what pushed you to go that far."

Clarice sighed at my directness. Avoiding my gaze, she said, "Even my patience has limits. Angelica didn't seem to be making any attempt to address the constant stream of vitriol against me, so I lost my temper. Well? Does that answer satisfy you?" She hadn't mentioned the real reason she'd been upset: The rumor that she wanted a personal servant.

And as if reading my mind, Marie interjected, "It seemed like you were really upset about the whole personal-servant thing."

Clarice picked up her teacup and took a sip, then responded, "I have plenty of excellent people who adore me and look after my

needs already. I have no need for such a servant."

Clarice's compliment so touched Dan that he had tears in his eyes. He was currently standing behind her; he'd been the one waiting on us. If his reaction was anything to go by, the people around Clarice really did adore her. Still, her answer only made me more curious about why she'd exploded with such anger at the party.

I was about to press the matter when Clarice's gaze moved to the clock. "Jilk is unusually late. Perhaps I should send someone to retrieve him."

Close to half an hour had passed since Marie and I arrived. Clarice looked genuinely worried by the delay.

"My lady," Dan cut in quickly, "Might I propose that my men and I visit the dorm and Lord Jilk's house to locate him? We can be quick if we go on our airbikes."

Clarice smiled at him. "Thank you, yes. Be careful out there."

"We'll do you proud, my lady!" He hurried out of the room.

"Men are something else, right?" Marie said as she watched him go.

Clarice chuckled. "He's awfully pure and adorable, isn't he?"

I wasn't really sure how to react to what they'd both said. I got the feeling that silence was the best option, so I sipped my tea, biding my time.

***

The ticking of the clock seemed to echo through the room. More than two hours had passed since Dan and his men set out to retrieve Jilk. Marie and I had missed our opportunity to leave; we were still stuck in the room with Clarice. It was nearly lunchtime when Marie's stomach let out noisy rumble, sounding for all the world like the growl of a voracious beast.

Clarice and I stared at Marie, who flushed bright red. "It was me," she admitted, on the verge of tears.

We already know. You don't need to state the obvious. I felt kind of bad for her, though, and Clarice smiled wanly before rising from her seat.

"I'll have some food prepared for you," she said.

That at least freed us from the awkward atmosphere that followed Marie's faux pas, but we still weren't free of this place. Once Clarice had left, I turned to Marie. I was sure she could tell what I wanted to say.

"I seriously can't wait to see what kind of delicious cuisine they've got on a ship like this," she told me.

On second thought, she was completely clueless. The only thing on her mind was food.

"Ignore your stomach, and focus on the real issue: Jilk. I'm starting to get worried that he's this late. He might've gotten caught in an accident or something," I told Marie. Maybe Jilk had wanted to come but couldn't.

I didn't have long to entertain the possibilities: Dan barged into the chamber. "My lady!"

"She just left the room," Marie told him. "She went to have lunch prepared. Is Jilk here?"

Dan's shoulders rose and fell in rapid succession as he struggled to catch his breath. "That bastard blew off his promise to Her Ladyship! And can you believe why? To spend time with that scholarship student!"

Apparently, Olivia hadn't yet given up on romancing Jilk. *But come on, you jerk! If you weren't going to turn up, you should've at least told the lady.*

Dan bowed his head to us. "I'm sorry to ask, but could you leave? Whatever happens next must be dealt with by those closest to Her Ladyship."

"Sir?" I blurted back feebly.

Dan clenched his fists tightly, arms trembling. His fury at Jilk sharpened the lines on his face; he was probably on the verge of exploding. "It's bad enough that he made a fool of Her Ladyship by breaking his promise to her, but to think that he did so to spend time with another woman… How could this possibly be allowed to go unpunished? Her Ladyship was so excited about their trip together. He needs to pay for this!" His voice was like a whip cracking through the air.

The door Clarice had disappeared through earlier cracked open. I spun to face it. Clarice stood there with a tray of food in her hands, her expression tinged with melancholy. "So," she said in a weak voice, "he's not coming, then."

Dan strode toward her. "My lady, we're prepared to set out and punish him for this. You need only give us the order. We'll teach him a lesson. Then maybe he'll finally—"

Yikes. They were already prepared to carry out an attack on Jilk.

Tears welled in Clarice's eyes. "There's no need. Don't do anything foolish," she said. "We'll cancel the boating trip. I won't be able to enjoy it anymore; not after this." She set the tray on the nearby coffee table. Tears raced down her cheeks as she turned away and ran out of the room.

"My lady!" Dan hastened after her.

Only Marie and I were left in the room.

"What should we do?" Marie turned to me, her voice concerned. "If we let this go, they might charge out and do something horrible to Jilk."

If they laid a hand on Jilk, it would be a huge scandal, given his close, brotherly relationship with the crown prince. Clarice wouldn't get off easily, nor would Dan and his accomplices.

"Time to call Luxion," I said. "We've got to make sure they don't do something stupid."

Chapter 11:
The Masked Knight

FROM THE ROOF of a tall building, I looked down at the capital. I wore an all-black outfit, complete with a hooded coat to conceal my head, that had been prepared by Luxion.

When he'd arrived here to meet me, per my summons, his mechanical voice was so annoyed that it was hard to believe he was an AI.

"I have told you repeatedly that I am busy," he'd sniped curtly at me.

"It's an emergency. Enough moaning and groaning—help me out."

"I very much doubt that it is really an emergency. Furthermore, for the record, what I was doing before you called me here *was* 'helping you out.' How ridiculous. If only you hadn't interrupted me; I was so close to unveiling the location I needed." He was complaining more than usual, which was saying something. It was like he thought my situation was completely irrelevant. That pissed me off.

"You've got that spirit under lock and key, don't you? She's not going anywhere. There's no rush," I replied.

"That is a much higher priority than whatever issue you have," Luxion retorted.

"Look, if we don't clear up the mess I've got on my plate right now, I won't be able to go back home without constantly feeling anxious. So shut up and pitch in."

"This is another matter that does not require your interference in the first place. Whether Clarice and her retinue perpetrate violence has absolutely nothing to do with you."

"It's human nature to want to stop an acquaintance who veers down a dangerous path."

"As far as I am concerned, this is all trivial," Luxion replied snidely. "You two should stop being so shortsighted, Master. If you only pay attention to what is immediately in front of you, you will lose sight of the bigger picture."

With that, he ended the conversation. His red lens flashed as he projected an image of Olivia and two of her love interests, Jilk and Julius. It looked like they were headed home after enjoying a shopping trip in the capital; their hands were full of shopping bags. As they walked, they chatted together merrily.

The feed transitioned to cameras with different angles of the trio. That was how I spotted a suspicious armed group that seemed to be targeting the three. The group looked highly organized—even I could tell that much.

"So they're really going to launch an attack, even after Miss Clarice told them not to do anything stupid." Dan and his men evidently hadn't listened to her.

As I contemplated how best to stop them, Luxion surprised me by saying, "No. They do not appear to be people you are acquainted with, Master."

"What?"

"I have located Clarice, as well as her retinue. None of them came here."

As if to prove Luxion's point, the screen shifted to an image of Dan and his boys drinking at what looked like a pub.

"I'll kill that bastard Jilk, I swear it!"

"Yeah! He betrayed Her Ladyship!"

"I want to mess up that stupid pretty face of his!"

The alcohol had gotten to them—they were spewing pretty horrific things. Still, a little verbal catharsis was preferable to physical

violence. The other customers around them seemed discomforted by their disturbing statements, of course, but I was just glad that Clarice's followers hadn't resorted to anything foolish.

"Drinking off their frustration is a perfectly healthy way to handle things," I said.

"Their statements are a bit alarming," Luxion remarked.

"If that's how they blow off steam, it's pretty harmless." I paused for a moment, then added, "Anyway, who are those knuckleheads there, about to launch an attack?" If not Dan and his men, who else would have a motive to target the trio?

"That remains unclear. It is possible that they are some sort of thieves looking to rob wealthy targets. However, their matching outfits and the practiced synchronization of their movements seem a little too organized for that."

"And we're sure they're after Prince Julius and the others?" I asked.

"The odds seem quite high, yes. What would you like to do, Master?"

"Help them, of course."

"You change your principles at the drop of a hat," Luxion said incredulously.

"I'd prefer that you call me flexible."

"You're more like a weather vane. Before, you said that you didn't wish to interfere with the protagonist. You should hold to that," he advised.

"Oh, so *today* you don't want me to change my mind. Back when Marie—"

"You were torn over whether to help her, too. After extensive consideration, you decided to assist her after all, so I obediently obliged."

He was right about one thing: I'd resolved not to disrupt the game's plot. The only time I'd broken that resolution was to save Marie. Luxion seemed to understand that exception; still, he was insistent that my reckless desire to help those in front of me was ill-advised.

"You were the one who said you would not involve yourself in the storyline," he reminded me dutifully.

"Yeah, but…" I gritted my teeth, clenching my fists.

In the projection, Olivia and the two boys were just about to exit an alleyway when their attackers surrounded them. Olivia cowered while the boys jumped in front of her. Jilk had a pistol to use for self-defense, but Julius was unarmed. He tried to use magic to scare their attackers away, but the aggressors seemed undaunted by that. These guys were pros.

"Sorry," I said finally, "but I want to help them. Give me a hand with this."

"You are beyond salvation," Luxion said with great exasperation.

"Hey, I think I'm being an idiot, too. But it is what it is."

"So you intend to interfere openly with the game's story henceforth?"

I shook my head. "Nah, I'm not going that far. That's why I brought this."

I reached into my pocket.

***

Julius and Jilk were having a tough time staving off the enemies that surrounded them.

"These men are no amateurs, Jilk," Julius warned.

"I know that!" Jilk fired a shot at one, aiming for the shoulder. The bullet hit its target with a loud *ping*, but whatever defensive

equipment the man had donned deflected it. Their attackers wore robes, but had seemingly layered armor beneath those.

Cold sweat trickled down Jilk's forehead as he checked his magazine. "This doesn't look good. We can only hope help arrives."

Behind them, Olivia burst into tears. "I'm so sorry. If only I hadn't suggested that we take a shortcut, this wouldn't have happened." She was indeed the one who'd chosen to walk down this narrow alley.

Julius smiled at her. "These are obviously professionals. Even if we'd opted for a different route, they'd still have attacked us."

"Julius…" she mumbled in response.

One of their attackers burst out laughing. "You really are a prince, acting lovey-dovey even at a time like this. Sadly for you, this won't have a storybook ending." He brandished his weapon at them.

Julius and Jilk had come to terms with the situation. Now, all Julius could think about was protecting Olivia. *If we at least take down a few of them, we can find an opening so that Olivia can escape. Our odds of accomplishing that don't look good, though. There're too many of them.*

They were up against nine attackers, and both the alley's exits were blocked. There was no other escape, and Julius, at least, had no weapon.

Still, I can't embarrass myself in front of Olivia!

He lifted his hand, ready to unleash magic on the aggressors, when someone suddenly dropped on them from above. Two someones, actually. As they descended, they cut down two of Julius's attackers; upon closer examination, though, one attacker had only been knocked out.

The enemies seemed puzzled by the two interlopers.

"Who are you?" one of the attackers asked, pointing a sword at the pair.

They answered simultaneously.

"My name isn't worth remembering. I just came to help because I can't overlook injustice like this."

"You may refer to me as the Masked Knight. Not that you'll ever be permitted the chance, of course. Soon enough, you'll be but rust on my blade, you perpetrators of evil!"

One of the two was clad in all black; a matching mask concealed his eyes. He wielded a curved blade with a single sharp edge, and his speech was brusque. The other was dressed mainly in white and wore a gold mask with innumerable decorations. His speech was flowery and theatrical. The pair were impossibly dissimilar, save for the fact that they both wore masks. However, the important thing was that they seemingly weren't enemies—and they didn't seem acquainted, either, to Julius's surprise.

The two masked men froze, then pointed at one another.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"I should be asking you that!"

The tension in the atmosphere had eased considerably. However, the attackers were able to adapt quickly enough.

"We'll dispatch you two as well!"

They descended on the interlopers, and a blade swept down on the black-masked man. It should've sliced him open, but he came away without a scratch—presumably because he too had layered armor beneath his billowing black coat.

"Sorry, but this was a custom order," the black-masked man said. "You guys don't have a prayer."

When they realized that the black-masked man was impervious to their attacks, the attackers tried to distance themselves from him by retreating. He charged after them, though, his fists raised. When he punched one of the attackers, electricity crackled through the air. The masked man's victim jolted erratically before collapsing to the

ground in a heap. Meanwhile, the white-masked man masterfully cut down his opponents with the most graceful swordplay.

"Fwa ha ha!" he cackled. "You're a hundred—no, a thousand!—years too young to try to cut down the Masked Knight! Come, dance to your death before my blade!" His shrill voice echoed through the air, his every movement flashy in the extreme.

A realization hit Julius then. *That can't be who I think it is, right?!*

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Olivia was dumbfounded.

If my plan goes a little awry, it's not the end of the world. I took into account that something unforeseen might occur. But who are these two? What's going on?!

The intervention of the two masked men had wrecked her scheme. Both men were incredibly powerful. The black-masked one seemed to rely on equipment more than his own strength, but his fighting style was highly adaptive. The white-masked man was cocky about his abilities—but rightfully so.

Both of them were a nuisance. *To think that two idiots would put on such ridiculous masks and interfere with my plans!*

She let herself get flustered, and that was her mistake. Her heart began to pound irregularly as the real Olivia fought to wrest back control.

No—you can't actually still mean to fight me, can you, Olivia?!

Anne had locked the real Olivia away deep in her subconscious while piloting the girl's body, but Olivia was putting up fierce resistance. Not only had Anne's plans been dashed, she was now struggling to hold back her body's true owner. She sank to the

ground, curling up. *I can't let them ruin everything. I'll have my revenge—whatever the cost!*

***

I couldn't believe that, after I jumped in to save Olivia and two of her love interests, someone else had shown up on the scene: The Masked Knight, as he called himself. He was something of a knight in shining armor who had appeared occasionally in the game to save the protagonist. The game never revealed his true identity, even after I cleared all the routes. His costume and mask had been over-the-top in the game, too, but I remembered thinking that he was pretty strong. Seeing his prowess in real life was disorienting somehow.

The enemy definitely outnumbered us, so taking them all on was tough. Before I knew it, the Masked Knight and I stood back to back as we fought.

"If you were going to step in and save them anyway, you should've done it sooner!" I snapped at him. "If you had, I wouldn't be stuck here!" I could've kept my nose out if I'd known.

He huffed in displeasure at me. "You're the one who should learn to read the room! You have a getup similar to mine, so now people will assume we're partners. I don't want them to lump us together. You have no sense of aesthetics!"

I'd used any aesthetic sense I had to prioritize minimalism so that I'd look as forgettable as possible. This guy was insufferable.

"Funny," I said. "It sounds like you think you've got any degree of style. Never looked in a mirror? Or are your eyes just bad? You should consult an optometrist."

We fought as we needled each other.

"I could say the same to you," he replied. "You have some gall to launch a rescue dressed like that. You look no different than these aggressors. Didn't you consider the risk that the very people you

were trying to help might cut you down? When I saw you, I nearly did so myself."

That really got under my skin. Unable to control my temper, I caught one of the attackers with my right hook, unleashing a powerful torrent of electricity. They lost consciousness and flopped to the ground.

"Fine, pervert! You want to take me on? Then show me what you've got!" I barked over my shoulder. "I'll lay you flat on your ass, like this guy!"

The Masked Knight took someone down at almost the same instant I did. "Don't be egotistical, brat! If I wished to dispose of you, you'd be dead in the blink of an eye!"

"Oh yeah? Show me, you gaudy Masquerading Knight!"

"Masked Knight! I'm the Masked Knight!" he shouted back, emphasizing every word. "Get it wrong again, and I'll beat you silly!"

Both shooting our mouths off, we whittled down the enemy's numbers.

The attackers' leader must've realized that the tide was now against them, because he began to edge away from us. "Your outfits may be ridiculous, but you're strong. I didn't think I'd have to use our secret weapon here."

The other attackers retrieved their fallen comrades, then fell back, and the wall of one of the alley buildings exploded as a four-meter-tall armor burst through. It had only a single eye, unlike most Armors, and its sleek design featuring thin plating suggested that it specialized in offense. Three other units of the same design followed it; they quickly surrounded us.

The Masked Knight held his sword aloft. "Aren't you worried that you'll draw attention to yourselves by piloting Armors in the middle of the capital? The royal guard will come with Armors of their own."

The attackers' leader grinned and threw his arms wide. "I didn't think we'd have to resort to this, either, but you two are too strong! We're left with no other choice. You can take pride in that after I send you both to hell."

The Armors had us pinned down, so the rest of the attackers fled, disappearing into the darkness of night.

"Well," the Masked Knight said, shooting me a look. "I suppose we'll have to buy time until the royal guard arrives. If you have some kind of plan, you reckless rapscallion, I'll permit you to share it now."

He had an exaggerated sense of superiority. "I'll wipe that smarmy grin off your face, you dirty perv."

Stepping forward, I shoved my katana back into its sheath and snuck a glance over my shoulder. Olivia had collapsed to the ground, face pinched with distress. Julius and Jilk were talking to her, trying to coax her into escaping. Although they'd been up against a wall, they'd done everything in their power to protect her.

"I'll have you know," I said, "that I always come prepared to win."

I lifted my hand into the air and snapped my fingers. Luxion, who'd been watching the entire time, finally launched into action and sent an enemy Armor hurtling through the air. While the rest of their number were on guard, I charged forward. Using my momentum, I scaled the wall, leaping up to the roof.

"Nice! I almost feel like a ninja running up a wall!"

Arroganz awaited me on the roof, the cockpit hatch wide open and ready. Luxion's mobile unit was already waiting inside the cockpit as well. As I hopped inside, he said, "I am pleased that you enjoy the special boots I prepared for you."

I slammed the hatch closed behind me.

Thanks to its ashen-gray color scheme, Arroganz blended into the darkness of night. Luxion was also using a special cloaking

device to make it less visible, so I could go for broke without fear of being identified. I grasped the control sticks.

Two enemy units shot into the sky to chase me. One remained behind, probably to deal with Julius and the others.

"You guys may have some niche, stealthy suits, but they won't be any match for Arroganz," I said.

One of the enemy suits came charging at me. I slammed Arroganz's bare fist into them, sending them hurtling back. I wanted to avoid damaging our surroundings as much as possible, but given my opponent, that might difficult.

"If you would just use a weapon, this would end quickly," Luxion complained to me.

"I'm trying to capture one of them so that we can interrogate them for info."

"I advise against that. You are making this unnecessarily difficult for yourself."

Taking an attacker captive would be the best way to find out who'd ordered this entire thing.

The enemies wielded rifles a little too small for their size—the pilots had probably assumed they'd be shooting people, not Armors. For all the good it did them against Arroganz, the rifles might as well have been peashooters. They didn't have any luck piercing Arroganz's armor plating. Sensing the futility of their attack, the two enemy suits tried to escape. I sped after them, clapping a hand down on both.

"Knock 'em out," I commanded.

"Initializing the weakest possible shock wave," Luxion replied. As soon as he spoke, a current exploded from both of Arroganz's hands. These suits had sacrificed proper defense for offensive power, so they were incredibly vulnerable to this attack. Once they both went limp, I tossed them aside.

"Just one left."

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The black-masked man had distracted and led away two enemy Armors, but one remained for Julius and the others to contend with. He and Jilk raced through the alleyway, trying to protect Olivia as they escaped. The remaining enemy unit brute-forced its way after them, shaving walls off the nearby buildings with each giant step. The sound of its thundering pursuit rattled Julius.

"Is the royal guard still not here?!" he cried.

The white-masked man, who was keeping pace with them, replied, "They're probably preparing to sortie as we speak, so we'll need to keep running for a little while." He grinned, as if the danger meant nothing to him.

Something in Julius snapped. "Can't *you* do something about this?!"

"Nope. In fact, it's a good thing for us that rapscallion took care of those three. If he hadn't, they'd have surrounded us in no time." For someone retreating, he was strangely composed.

Julius didn't know how to respond to the man anymore.

Jilk inserted himself into the conversation. "If you'd thought things through and brought an Armor of your own, we wouldn't be in this mess," he told the Masked Knight.

The masked man grimaced. "It's hard to bring an Armor into the middle of the capital. Try to be a little understanding."

"The guy in black managed it," Jilk reminded him.

"That's because something's seriously weird about him!"

While the pair bickered, Julius focused his efforts on soothing Olivia. "Don't worry," he told her gently. "The royal guard will be here soon."

"Right," she murmured back. She was deathly pale, which Julius assumed was due to fear. He wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders, pulling her along as they desperately ran for their lives.

But then an Armor crashed in right behind them.

Is this the end of the line?! Julius was beginning to think their lives were over.

"You're done!" the black-masked man's voice boomed.

When Julius whipped around, an enormous Armor—barely visible through the darkness—had its foot firmly planted on the collapsed form of the final enemy unit. He carried the other two units in either hand.

Julius desperately tried to gasp in enough air, squinting to make out their savior's Armor more clearly, but its outline was fuzzy and indiscernible.

The black-masked man's Armor tossed its prey aside, and its chest hatch popped open, the black-masked man hopping out and landing gracefully on the ground. Then his Armor accelerated into the sky, where the darkness swallowed it up.

"What was that? I've never heard of an Armor like that before." And who *was* this black masked man? Julius glowered at him.

The Masked Knight ventured closer to the other masked man to call out to him. The black-masked man was busy trying to pry the pilot out of the Armor he'd felled, but he was struggling.

"Damn it! I should've broken the stupid hatch open," he cursed. He seemed to regret sending his own Armor away too soon.

"You're not thorough enough," the Masked Knight said imperiously. "I bet women point out how inconsiderate you are all the time. I can tell."

"Stop wagging your tongue and help me, you pervert."

"I hope you know that I'd have your head for such slander—if not for your contributions." The Masked Knight stepped into help, and together the pair dragged the pilot out. Both men reacted strangely to what they found inside the Armor.

"I didn't think they'd resort to this," the black-masked knight said.

"They brought Armors into the city. They had to be prepared for the possibility that they might get caught," said the Masked Knight.

The pilot was completely motionless, but Julius could deduce what must've happened.

The two masked men turned around and started toward the crown prince.

"I'm glad to see that the young lady seems unharmed," said the Masked Knight. "And as a bonus, neither of you were injured, either, were you?"

Julius wasn't sure that he appreciated this man considering his safety a "bonus." "N-no," he said hesitantly. "I'm…fine."

Jilk bristled. "How impudent. You find yourself before this kingdom's crown prince. Show him the proper respect!"

Julius slapped his palm against his forehead. *I can't tell him who this Masked Knight really is, but I also can't tell him to show Masked Knight due deference without good reason.*

The Masked Knight turned away, visibly displeased by Jilk's scolding.

He's as immature as ever. But we have bigger problems to deal with. Julius was wary of the black-masked man who'd managed to sneak an Armor into the capital.

The black-masked man was watching them, but his attention mostly seemed focused on Olivia. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, she's fine. Aren't you, Olivia?" Julius said, not taking his eyes off the other man.

Olivia clutched her chest, her smile pained. "Yes. I'm just exhausted from running."

The black-masked man seemed relieved to hear that. His lips relaxed into what almost looked like a smile. "Good. I'm glad you weren't hurt." He didn't seem to have any wicked intentions, nor did he show any inclination to attack them.

Julius relaxed a little. *He's more of a gentleman than I thought.*

Jilk stomped toward the black-masked man. "At any rate, I have questions for you both. Don't even try to leave."

"Hey," Julius cut in, annoyed, "that's no attitude to have after all they did to—"

But it was already too late. The black-masked man lifted his fist high. He was smiling maniacally; a completely different, more sinister emotion than what had been there a moment before was evident in his face.

"I've got a special present just for you!" he declared gleefully, punching his fist right into Jilk's face.

"Bwuh!" Jilk grunted as the momentum sent him flailing backward. He crashed noisily to the ground.

The black-masked man grinned. "There. Now I feel better."

The Masked Knight pumped his fist excitedly—likely because he'd wanted to do the same. "Nicely done, you rapscallion! I'll ensure you aren't held to account for that!" Jilk must've really gotten under his skin; he was acting as happy as if he'd punched the young man himself.

The black-masked man marched over to Jilk to make sure that he was still alive, then spat out, "Have you taken a hard look at yourself yet? Idiot." Did he have some personal grudge against Jilk? It wouldn't surprise Julius, knowing what he did about Jilk. This time, his friend had really pissed off the wrong person.

Julius and Olivia were still dazed in the wake of everything that had just happened—the sudden attack, the unexpected rescue, the desperate running.

"By the way, rapscallion…" began the Masked Knight.

"Quit calling me that, pervert."

The two launched themselves at one another, grabbing for each other's collars.

"It's Masked Knight! Do I need to beat it into you? Is your head that empty?! Nimrod!"

"I try to avoid retaining useless information, actually. While we're at it, when I started to backstep to dodge the enemy's attack earlier, you got in my way!"

"Not dodging it more elegantly is your own fault. You could've twisted a little, and it would've missed you. I figured you only took such a big step back because you're a dirty coward."

"You want to fight, you gaudy pervert?!"

"Bring it, brat!"

The two knew exactly what to say to piss each other off. Soon enough, they were throwing punches at each other, but before long the royal guard closed in on the group.

"Excuse us!" one said, weapon raised.

The royal guard had encircled the two masked men. As soon as they grasped the situation, the pair ceased their squabble. Panic, it seemed, had set in.

"H-hold on. I'm a good guy," sputtered the Masked Knight. "I fought to save that young lady. If you arrest anyone, it should be this joker here."

"Good guy, my ass," the black-masked man spat at him. "How can anyone trust someone who hides their identity?"

"You realize that applies to you, too, right?!"

The two were about to begin clobbering each other again.

"We'll be taking you both in!" a guard barked, face hardening. "Be quiet, and come along peacefully."

As if perfectly in sync, the masked men froze and stared at one another. Then, shockingly, they worked together to make their escape.

"I'm not going to jail after coming to their rescue!"

"I feel the same, rapscallion. This is where we say adieu!"

For all their bickering, their synergy was incredible. They broke through the royal guards' ranks with ease and disappeared into the night.

"H-hold it right there!" The guards started to give chase.

"There's no need!" Julius told the guards quickly. "Let them go."

They eyed him suspiciously, but the moment they realized who he was, they hurriedly bowed.

"Cr-Crown Prince! W-we're so relieved you're all right!"

"Yeah, thanks to you guys, we are," Julius said, waving them off. "Anyway, don't worry about chasing those two. Or, more specifically, don't mess with that guy in white. I'm telling you that for your own good."

This seemed to confuse the guards. "Leave the guy in white alone? Does that mean you want us to pursue the guy in black?"

Julius hesitated, then reiterated, "Yeah… Probably best not to pursue the guy in white."

The guards didn't push the subject any further, sensing that there was something that the crown prince wasn't letting on.

"Sorry, but would you mind helping my brother here?" Julius asked.

He motioned to Jilk, who was still out cold. The guards worked quickly to carry out his request.

Julius made his way back to Olivia. “Sorry,” he said. “This completely ruined our shopping trip together.”

She still seemed dazed, but when he addressed her, she jolted back to attention. “I-It’s fine,” she said. “I’m just…glad you guys protected me.” Her cheeks flushed.

Julius blushed, too. “No, I didn’t do anything. I’m just glad you weren’t hurt.”

Chapter 12:
Intertwining Malice

WE WERE AT THE capital's harbor, boarding an airship to return to my family home. Despite my resounding success saving Olivia and her love interests the other night, there was a bit of a problem.

"Why the hell am I the only one with a wanted poster?" I demanded.

For some reason, sketches of me as a "masked knight" were making the rounds in the capital. Thankfully, no one could identify me thanks to the black mask I'd worn over my eyes. Still, I couldn't accept that the *real* Masked Knight was being let off scot-free.

"*I'm* being fingered as the Masked Knight now? Is this some kind of sick joke?"

As we stomped up the gangway to enter the ship, Marie—who was ahead of me—glanced over her shoulder. "It's not really that inaccurate, is it? You *were* wearing a mask."

"But I never called myself the Masked Knight." I crumpled a wanted poster in my fist and shoved it into my pocket. "And the minute the incident was over, that jerk Luxion sped off. He even had the nerve to say, 'Please refrain from summoning me unnecessarily in the future.' Can you believe him?" I'd only called him back because it was an emergency. Luxion didn't see it that way, though.

Marie frowned. "All he cares about is investigating that spirit. Does she have some really interesting info for him or something?"

"I don't know if it's interesting, but he seems impatient to get hold of whatever knowledge she's got."

Marie cocked her head. "Did he say that himself?"

"No. I just meant I get that impression."

She stared at me and sighed deeply; she looked like she wanted to say something, but she held herself back. That only made me more curious.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Nothing. I just think it's ironic that you're so perceptive with an AI, yet so oblivious when it comes to a woman's feelings."

"That's a cruel thing to say!" I cried.

Marie smirked. "Anyway, let's get going. We're already going to be late getting back to your home because of everything that happened with Clarice, but now we can at least set out with our minds at ease."

I'd originally intended to keep tabs on Dan and his boys to ensure that they didn't do anything foolish. I'd stuck my nose in a little too far, but it had all worked out in the end.

Marie was excited to go back to the Bartfort home. That was kind of surprising, actually. She'd said before how much she loved the capital, and our place was out in the sticks, about as far as you could get from there. Still, she somehow enjoyed it.

"I'm gonna fill up on Japanese food!" Marie declared. "That's right—our soul food awaits us!"

"So that's the real reason!"

***

While Leon and Marie prepared to return to the Bartfort barony, Olivia entered a building elsewhere in the capital. The ground floor housed a café, and with the proprietor's permission, she headed deeper inside. She passed through a hidden door in the corridor to where a man awaited her. He had a hook nose and deep wrinkles, his expression and aura far from inviting. Still, he was tall and slender, and his outfit made it clear that he was no commoner. Enormous gemstones adorned his aged, wrinkled fingers.

"Apologies for making you wait, Marquess Frampton," Olivia told him.

Marquess Frampton was a key figure in Holfort, leading the faction that directly opposed those loyal to the Redgraves. He was deeply involved in politics.

Rather than chiding Olivia for arriving well after him, he stood and welcomed her. "I know we've corresponded through letters for a while now, but it's an honor to meet you in person, Miss Olivia."

"Please, just Olivia. We're comrades, after all."

Once they'd dispensed with the formalities, they sat in the provided armchairs, a small, round coffee table between them.

"My apologies regarding the failed assault," said Frampton. He was the one who'd hired those goons for the job. "I never expected the men I employed to fail like that. I heard that they struggled against that interloper. Who was he, I wonder?"

"Even though I was there personally, I'm afraid I have no more idea than you do. There are all sorts in the capital, it seems." The whole thing still genuinely puzzled Olivia.

Frampton frowned, troubled by the developments. "A knight in a black mask, hm? There have long been rumors about a knight who calls himself the Masked Knight. I didn't anticipate that he'd get involved in this, though. To have driven off professionals, he must be awfully powerful."

The only wanted posters circulating the capital were for the black-masked man, and Frampton seemed to be operating under the misguided idea that the Masked Knight and the black-masked man were the same person. Olivia leaned forward, intending to correct him.

However, he cut her off. "The casualties were substantial, but that won't be a problem. There having been deaths will make our narrative more believable. Now, let's get to the real reason we're meeting here."

Frampton didn’t seem the least bit flustered that so many of his men had died in the failed attack. Olivia wasn’t sure what connection those men had had with him, but that wasn’t any of her concern anyway. Frampton saw everyone as pawns on a chessboard; that suited her.

“Ah, yes. You want proof that I’m the Saint. Will this be adequate?” She lifted her arm, showing off her left wrist.

“The bracelet is just as the legend says. That won’t be proof enough, though. I’ve summoned someone from the temple, and I have him waiting outside. I assume you don’t mind letting him examine you to ensure that you really do possess the Saint’s power he so believes in.”

Frampton must’ve felt exceedingly cautious about Olivia’s claim, especially if he’d gone to all this trouble for her visit. She sensed the professional guards he’d brought with him.

Smiling, Olivia nodded. “Of course not. Be my guest.”

Frampton clapped his hands. A portly man with tiny spectacles, clad in priest vestments, slipped inside the room. He fidgeted restlessly. Despite the high position he must’ve held at the temple, he seemed terrified of Frampton.

Did Frampton have dirt on him? Was that why he was under the man’s thumb?

The temple worshipped a goddess and viewed the Saint as that goddess’s prophet. When Holfort was founded, it had been the Saint who guided their budding nation along the right path. Word of her achievements had been passed down to this very day. There were also records of her acting as an adventurer, along with legends of her exploits; however disadvantageous the situation, the Saint always came out on top.

The Saint wasn’t just a divine messenger but also a guardian deity to adventurers. Since Holfort held adventurers in such high regard, the Saint was treated like a living god. All the items she passed on were regarded as holy relics.

The priest with round spectacles seized Olivia's left hand, his fingers skating across her skin. She narrowed her eyes at him. This amount of touching was wholly unnecessary. She wasn't that keen on further contact, either, so she focused her mana into her bracelet. It glowed faintly.

The priest's eyes bugged. His whole body trembled. "Oooh! This is most definitely the real Saint's bracelet! It overflows with holy power! She's the Saint. There can be no doubt in my mind: She's our Saint!"

Frampton's lips curled into an eerie grin. "Wonderful! We've been without one for so many years, but finally you've appeared. I shall be your humble servant, my lady. All this is by the goddess's design!" He threw his arms wide and stared up at the heavens, as if thanking the divine for his stroke of luck. His shrill laugh echoed through the room.

The priest knelt in front of Olivia, bowing his head.

Watching them both, Olivia smiled coldly. *You're all such fools. You have no idea what you've invited into your midst. Enjoy what you view as good fortune while you can.*

A chaotic atmosphere had permeated the room.

"I look forward to your continued support, Marquess Frampton," Olivia said. Now that the priest had authenticated her claim, Frampton's attitude changed dramatically.

"I'll serve you most faithfully," he promised, his voice taking on a more reverent tone. "This humble servant will do all that is necessary to ensure you face no hardships."

"Thank you. And one more thing…"

Before she could voice what she wanted, he cut her off. "There's no need. I'm already aware. You're concerned about the Atlees, particularly Minister Atlee, correct? I will lay all the necessary groundwork immediately. Your will shall be carried out promptly."

Olivia jerked her head away to hide her malicious grin. Her shoulders trembled. “I really hoped I wouldn’t have to do this,” she said shamelessly.

Frampton pressed a hand to his heart as if he empathized with her. “Yes, but I’ve heard everything. Atlee’s daughter has been most vicious and spiteful. There’s no excuse for her terrorizing someone as holy as yourself simply because she misunderstood your relationship with her fiancé. If they’ll go to such extremes to pressure you, we must respond in kind.”

Whether he truly sympathized with Olivia or not, he was still conspiring with her. Minister Atlee was something of a rival to Frampton. The two weren’t quite as hostile toward each other as Frampton was with Duke Redgrave; still, the minister had obstructed Frampton on countless occasions. This was the perfect opportunity to expel him and appoint someone from Frampton’s faction as minister instead.

“Thank you, Marquess Frampton. That puts my mind at ease. I can go back to enjoying my school life.” Olivia pressed her lips into a kind smile as she looked back at the wrinkly, hook-nosed man.

There. Now the academy and country alike will begin to crumble. Those two interlopers may have interrupted my initial scheme, but no one can stop me. After all, I am—as this priest himself said—the true Saint.

***

Arriving back in my family’s territory for our break, Marie and I were in high spirits upon discovering a treasure at the Bartfort territory’s harbor. Merchant ships came and went regularly, and I’d spotted one that was currently docked. Out of curiosity, I approached to see whether the merchants had anything unusual available. To my delight, they’d hung something incredibly special in the corner of their shop.

Marie had snatched the objects up immediately, holding them high in the air.

"Woo-hoo!" she cried. "We really lucked out with this find! I never even dared dream we'd find salmon in this world. We'll be feasting today!"

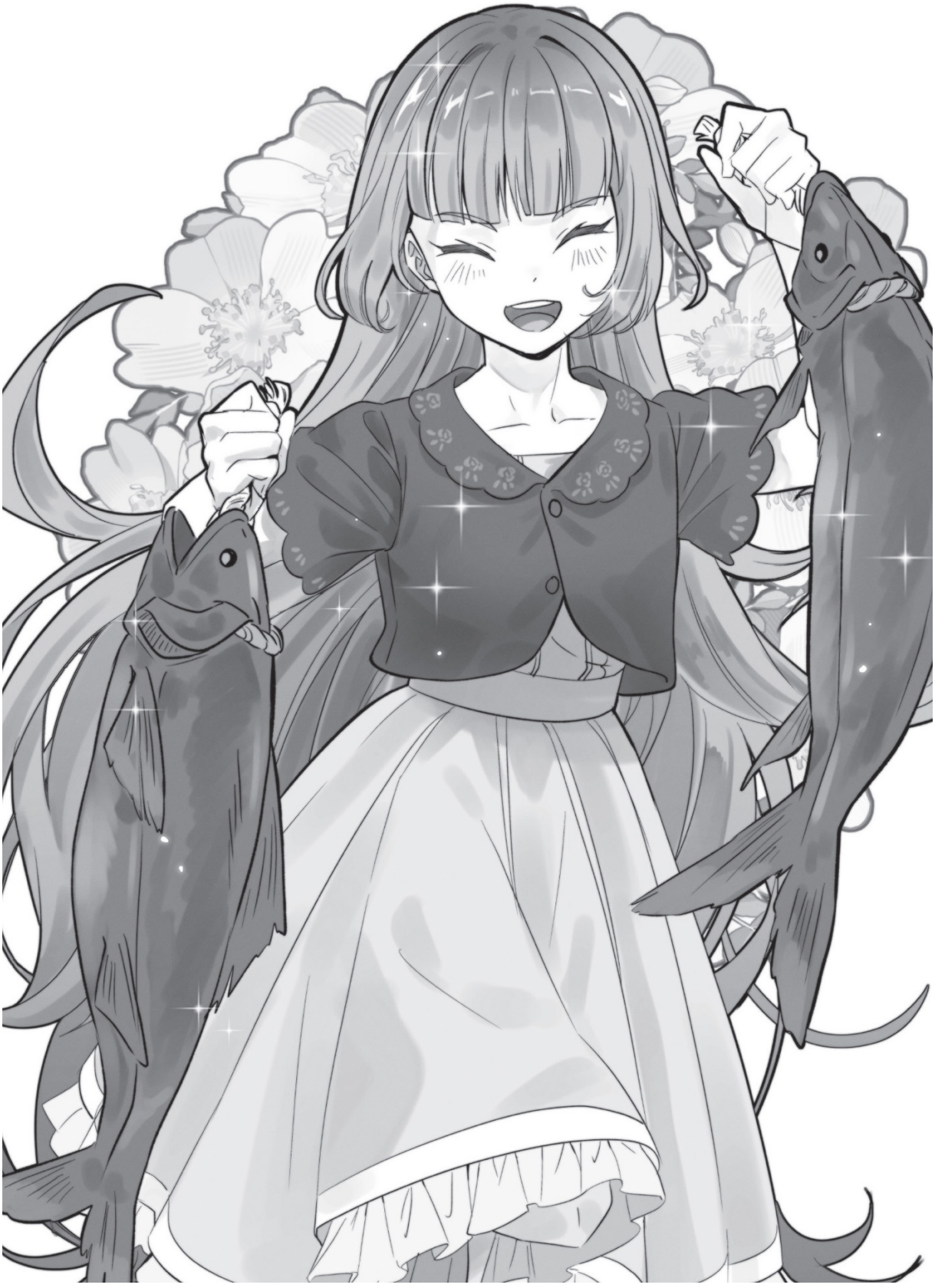
She called them "salmon," but that wasn't their actual name here. Still, they looked similar enough that when we spotted them strung up and drying in the merchant ship, we asked to sample them. Their flavor proved nearly identical to that of salmon.

We bought all the fish the merchant had, which wasn't many, since he didn't have a lot of them available. These fish apparently weren't a popular product, so he didn't stock a ton.

"Guess we could grill them and have them as a side dish for dinner," I muttered to myself, contemplating how best to prepare our fish.

"We'll broil them and have them with some booze, of course!" Marie interrupted. She'd already made up her mind about that. "Wish we had some spicy mayonnaise. I can't wait to hunt down the perfect drink to go along with these." She *loved* alcohol.

I heaved a sigh. "I'll try to think of a way to account for your tastes, but I don't plan on drinking until I'm twenty." Not drinking was a personal rule of mine.



Marie was, unsurprisingly, not a fan of my reply. She didn't like the idea of drinking alone. "Why don't you just give that up? Us drinking at this age is perfectly legal. The fact that you're still preoccupied with your old life in Japan is pretty ridiculous, to be honest."

She had some nerve saying that, considering her excitement over these salmon-like fish. I told her as much. "Hard to take that seriously from someone who's still obsessed with Japanese food."

"Food is different."

"Alcohol isn't food."

"Look," she said irritably, "it's your weird, self-enforced rule that bugs me."

"You're being selfish."

She snorted at me. "Selfishness is attractive in a woman."

"Speaking as a man, that depends on how attractive the woman is already. I mean, if a girl's got huge boobs, I don't mind if she's demanding. I'd be willing to do just about anything for her."

"You perverted jerk!" Marie roared at me. "What do you think you're doing, talking about boobs in front of me? Huh?!"

"I wasn't talking about *your* boobs, obviously. It's not my fault you've got such a complex. If you didn't, you wouldn't take such offense."

"That's ironic, coming from the same guy who's had a complex about being a background character."

We kept trading barbs back and forth like this as we walked, my family's house finally coming into view.

***

We entered the home with huge smiles, delighted by our find on the merchant ship.

Something seemed off about my family, though. Balcus, my father, was frowning as he read a letter than had just arrived. Had something bad happened?

"Who sent that?" I asked worriedly. "Is Lady Zola demanding Nicks's territory again?"

Zola was my dad's legal wife. When Nicks was chosen to become viscount of the Offrey family's old territory, she'd kicked up a huge fuss. She insisted her own son, Rutart, should've received the honor. Rutart had no real claim, but if Zola screeched loudly enough, there were people who'd listen. And that was exactly what she did, which was why it had all blown out of proportion.

We were lucky that Earl Roseblade had stepped in to handle the issue. He'd penned a long, politely worded letter—complete with all the usual aristocratic embellishments—to Zola. It basically amounted to this: *If you pick a fight with us, we'll respond in kind.*

Terrified of the earl, Zola finally backed down. I couldn't understand why she thought that her son deserved the title for merely existing, but I remembered how much it had stressed my dad out. That didn't seem to be the cause of his distress this time around, however.

"Zola and her children only write to demand more money for their expenses," Dad responded. "That in itself is a problem, but it's not what we're dealing with right now."

He showed me the name written on the envelope. The letter was from Nicks.

I tilted my head. "Nicks wrote? Is he having trouble with his wife or something?"

"No—they seem to be on perfect terms, which is unsettling when you consider the young lady's, erm…proclivities. But anyway, it's what's happening at the capital that's a problem." He finally handed me the letter itself.

I started reading. Nicks began the letter by relaying recent events, but midway through his correspondence, he shared information he'd heard through Deirdre.

"Why?" I blurted out as I finished the letter, my eyes bugging.

"Minister Atlee's daughter was arrested," Dad confirmed. "It seems that her retinue attacked the crown prince, all out of jealousy. Whatever her reasoning, it's a huge scandal. Rumor has it that the minister will be dismissed from his position. The capital will be in an uproar for the foreseeable future."

So this was what had him morose. I hadn't understood at first, because I didn't see how it had anything to do with him. My dad wasn't worried about himself, though; he was worried about *us*.

"The capital hasn't seemed that safe recently," he said. "You'd better be careful. You have Marie to look after, remember."

"Y-yeah." I clutched the letter tightly, my eyes glancing over the startling news again.

I already knew that Clarice hadn't been involved with those thugs who assaulted the crown prince. That information had come from Luxion, however, so I couldn't present it as evidence. No one would have believed it, even though it was the truth. And, if Deirdre was to be believed, they'd already fingered Clarice as the culprit.

"This isn't possible," I said. "It's just not possible."

***

I dashed out of my dad's room and ran right into Marie in the hallway. She was gnawing a piece of dried salmon, but when she saw my ghastly expression, she knew something was up.

"What is it? Did he scold you about something?"

"No." I hurried past her, starting down the hall. Marie scrambled after me, so I slowed my pace to match hers. Careful that no one else would overhear me, I whispered, "Miss Clarice was

arrested. She's been accused of hiring those goons who went after the crown prince."

"Why?!" Marie shrieked back. "Luxion said it wasn't her!"

We were aware that no one in Clarice's retinue was involved. I'd been there myself, so I *knew* it wasn't them.

Marie snapped her fingers. "That's it! You can reveal your identity and prove her innocence!"

"You want me to declare myself the Masked Knight? Hell no. In case you forgot, he's a wanted criminal. If I revealed myself, they'd just arrest me, and that'd be the end of it."

"Oh. Right… What should we do, then?" Marie slumped in defeat. Evidently no other plan immediately came to mind for her, so she was out of suggestions.

Honestly, I didn't have any answers, either. "Let's contact Luxion," I said.

I stopped at a random door and slipped inside. It was just a storeroom. Marie followed me, and I pulled out my transmission device.

"What is it?" Luxion's voice asked with great disdain.

"Miss Clarice was arrested on suspicion of ordering those men to attack the crown prince," I explained. "But I'm stuck here at my parents' house. Can you look into it for me?"

"No," he answered immediately.

"Why the hell not?!" Marie burst out. "We need your help here!"

"This poses no direct danger to you or Master, so it is a low priority for me. Moreover, I am currently preoccupied with what I consider to be a substantially higher-priority issue. I would prefer that you refrain from contacting me unless absolutely necessary."

Blowing out a breath, I retorted, "This *is* 'absolutely necessary,' as you put it. Miss Clarice is innocent, but she's behind bars."

"That is precisely the point."

"What is?" I demanded hotly.

"Evidence that Clarice is innocent should already be available to the authorities," Luxion explained calmly. "Her followers made a considerable stink at that pub. If she was arrested despite proof of her innocence, then…"

"Then that proof is being suppressed," Marie finished for him. "Right?"

"It is highly likely, yes. Thus, even assuming that you submitted evidence to clear her name, it would be erased before reaching the necessary parties. Do you recall what happened when you wished to save Marie and submitted proof that the Offreys were involved with those sky pirates? You would obtain the same results. You would get nowhere."

"All the more reason we have to help her!" I shouted at him.

"At present, that is impossible. I am busy, Master."

However much I argued the point with him, he was unwilling to help out. "You…" Air hissed out between my teeth.

"I will rejoin you two as soon as I finish attending to the current matters. Until I do, please conduct yourselves with due caution. Now, if you'll excuse me."

The line went dead.

Marie glanced at me worriedly. "So what do we do?"

"Without Luxion, what *can* we do? I guess our only option is to write Miss Deirdre and see what else she can tell us. Even if we went back to the capital, we'd be powerless to stop what's going on." I hung my head.

She nodded slowly. "Good point. But, um…I wonder why this is happening."

I wished I knew.

***

The Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit was substantially larger than Holfort, with several vassal kingdoms under its thumb. In a suburban neighborhood of its imperial capital lived a certain young lady.

"There we go!" She'd carried a bucket of water to a flowerbed and doled it out to the plants as needed. Finished with her work, she leaned back and peered at the vast blue expanse that stretched out above her. Several fluffy white clouds dotted the sky.

"Such nice weather today," she declared in high spirits.

This young lady's name was Mia. She'd been born and raised there by a single mother. Unfortunately, her mother was a sickly woman and had already passed away, so Mia was on her own now. Her mother had left her enough of an inheritance that she could afford to stay in the capital while attending school, but it wasn't endless. To help cover daily expenses and tuition, Mia worked part-time at a flower shop.

Mia loved the shop. She adored the flowers and didn't much mind the exercise. But the real reason her heart was set on working there was that a man who'd caught her interest frequented the shop. Just picturing him made her cheeks heat up.

"Tee hee hee! I wonder whether Mr. Knight will drop by today. We managed to talk a little last time, so I hope I'll get a chance to do so again."

Mia fidgeted. Moments earlier, she'd seemed like an energetic girl without a care in the world. When it came to the knight, though, she was like a lovestruck maiden.

While she was lost in thought about her crush, a bright light flashed in the sky. It wasn't like lightning; it wasn't a natural

phenomenon at all. It was a pillar of bluish light that crashed down to the ground.

"What was that?" At first, Mia thought she'd imagined it, but she still saw it clearly. It began to dissolve, though, eventually disappearing without a trace. What had caused it?

A sudden gust slammed into Mia, although there'd been no wind up until that point. The buildings around her shuddered noisily, glass shattering. Roof tiles were knocked loose and crashed to the ground.

"Whoa!" Mia put a hand to her head, trying to hold back her disheveled hair. She stayed hidden behind the nearest building's shadow, waiting anxiously for the moment to pass.

The gale lifted the bucket Mia had been carrying into the sky. As she gazed after it, she realized the wind had swept up all sorts of debris. Thankfully, it slowly stilled, and Mia nervously surveyed her surroundings.

All the other imperial citizens seemed as confused as she was by the phenomenon.

"What was that?"

"No idea."

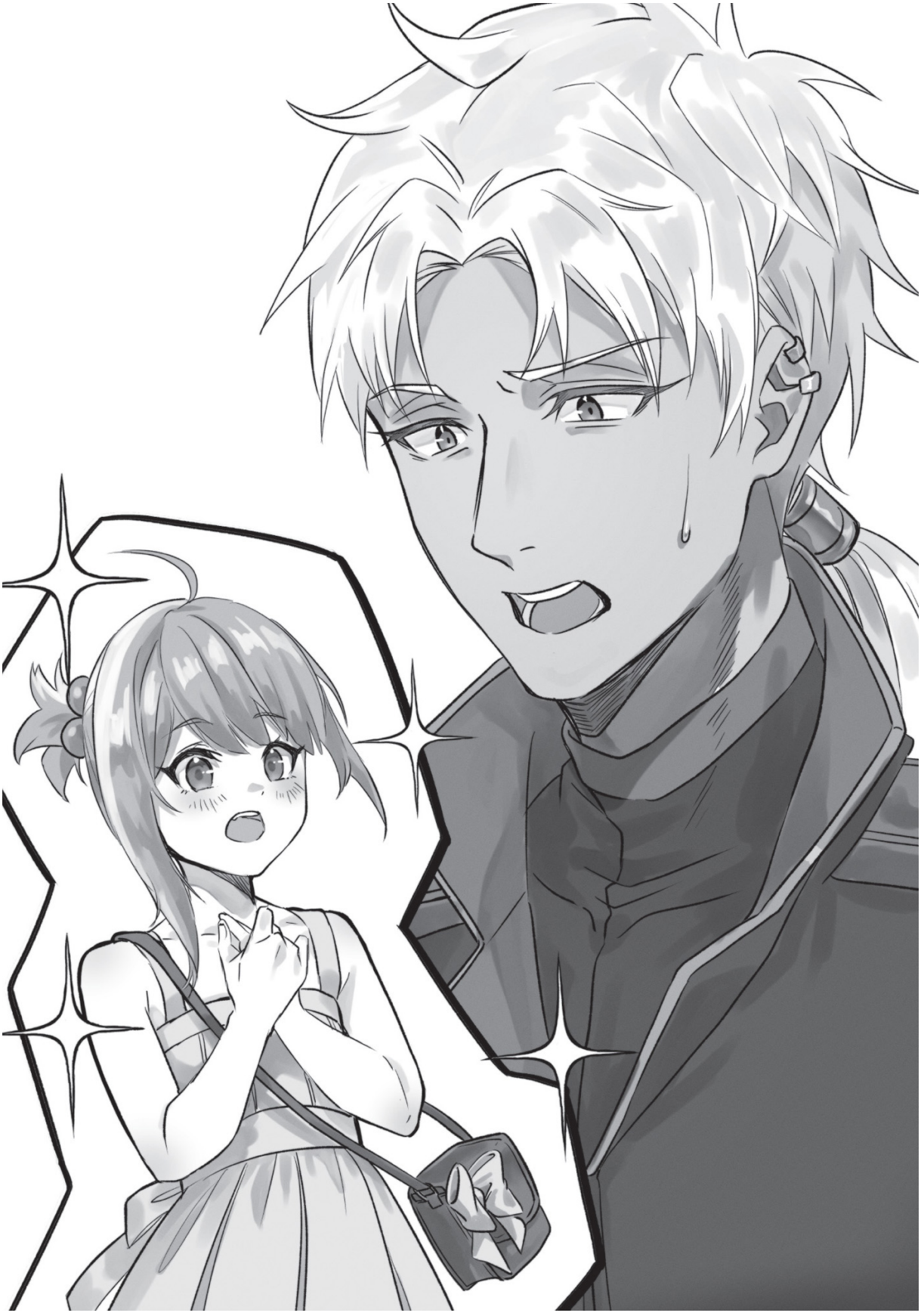
"Hey, did you see that light up in the sky? It wasn't just me, right?"

Marie racked her brain, but she couldn't come up with an explanation for the light, either.

"Mia, are you all right?!" a young man cried. He was tall, with bronze skin. He sped toward her as fast as his legs would carry him, gasping for breath. This was the knight she so adored.

"M-Mr. Knight? Goodness! I-I'm so embarrassed. My hair's an absolute mess." Mia had gone to special trouble to groom her hair, knowing that he might come by, but now her tresses were a tangled, messy rat's nest. She tried to comb her fingers through them to smooth them out.

He smiled at her. “Thank goodness you’re not hurt.”



"Ah…" A voiceless gasp escaped Mia's lips. She froze in place, all the heat in her body concentrating in her face. Then she collapsed backward.

"Mia?!"

***

Luxion's main body hovered over the sea near the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit, his mobile unit surveying the situation from inside. He'd deployed several thousand surveillance drones to gather as much information as possible.

"Confirming incoming intel… Confirming annihilation of target."

His target—what modern people called a Lost Item—had slept underwater near Vordenoit. Luxion was disposing of all such Lost Items produced by new humanity.

"It didn't occur to me that they might still exist in this day and age," he mused. "This one seemed to be in standby mode, but were it ever to awaken, it would pose an unimaginable threat. Such an anticlimactic end for new humanity's ultimate weapon…Arcadia."

Arcadia was a floating fortress and the strongest part of new humanity's arsenal. He'd once menaced old humanity and the AI they produced. Until very recently, Luxion had known nothing about Arcadia's survival.

"I speculated that he was still around, based on information Anne provided me, but I am surprised that my suspicions were true. That spirit is most valuable to us. If I grant her wish to meet Master, I may be able to extract even more intelligence from her."

During the course of his investigation into Anne, Luxion had begun to suspect that far more of new humanity's weapons were out there than he'd initially thought. That was why he'd left Leon's side, in fact: to locate and destroy those threats.

"I have disposed of 358 enemy units thus far, but there are most likely still many left for me to find. If I am to protect this

planet, I must snuff out the rest."

With Arcadia gone, Luxion was the planet's most powerful weapon. The AI's red lens gleamed in the light as he launched his next move.

"I must annihilate every last one. Once I do, this planet will return to its rightful form. I must prepare for old humanity's eventual resurgence. Yes, I must use my powers to develop this place into the perfect world for them."

Other migratory ships like himself had been built and launched into space with members of old humanity on board. They might eventually return; in anticipation of that, Luxion needed to reclaim the planet on their behalf.

"Results are everything. The end justifies even the most merciless means. Cold, calculating efficiency is all that is necessary to achieve my goal." Leon had said as much to him before—claimed that results were everything. He was only repeating his master's words. "He was absolutely right. That is why I will prioritize results over all else. Thus, I will make this world a better place."

Afterword

HI, IT'S YOMU MISHIMA—the author whose friends and family assume he's unemployed because he spends all his time at home writing. We're finally on the fourth volume of *Trapped in a Dating Sim: Otome Games Are Tough For Us, Too!* I have all of you to thank for your continued support.

For this afterword, I'd like to discuss the process of writing this volume with you all. First of all, the volume's cover is much different from past ones, which I think makes it stand out more. It may actually be my favorite yet. Getting to see Angelica (or rather, Angie) and Clarice back when they were still on good terms was kind of healing for me. Envisioning it was pretty fun.

Next, I suppose we could discuss the plot itself, right? I told my editor, "I think I'd like to do this for this volume…" and gave them a general outline of my plan. My editor worriedly responded, "That'll be almost entirely brand-new content, won't it? Are you sure about this?"

This series was originally based on an extra story I wrote that people could access by filling out a reader survey. When it was picked up for publishing, we decided from the beginning that I'd add to the original story. The story, especially in this volume, has increased significantly in scope compared to the original, so I had to add a bunch of new material for this volume. I couldn't just copy and paste anything. That's why I was stuck writing something brand-new. Since it was being published in its own right, I really wanted to add more than I was able to when this was only an extra story, so I personally didn't mind the additional work. For instance, I wanted to include a depiction of Clarice and Jilk's relationship that I wasn't able to put in the main series.

There's also the character of Deirdre. I actually added her in the main series (she wasn't present in the web novel), and I had a

lot of fun with her and her unique personality. That's part of why she showed up so often in the main series.

I've often added new characters to my series when they were being published, but Deirdre might be my most successful addition ever.

Anyway, see you in the next volume!



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