
NOVEL
02
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MOB
TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

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The door finally slid open, and I barged in to find Angie and Livia asleep on my bed. They were facing one another and holding hands, their chests slowly rising and falling.
A blanket was spread over them, but they definitely weren't in their uniforms anymore.


The whole place erupted into chaos. I lifted myself off the step, rested the shotgun on my shoulder, and waited.
"You sleazeballs yap like a bunch of cowardly dogs!"
The crowd fell silent at the sight of my gun—the only weapon in the room—and they stared at me with equal parts fear and loathing.

Trapped in a Dating Sim

The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs

NOVEL

02

WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

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MONDA



Seven Seas Entertainment

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 2

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BONUS CHAPTER Luxion's Report 2

Prologue

FEMALE FRIENDSHIP is fleeting, isn't it?

Or so I thought.

If you're wondering who I am, the name is Leon Fou Bartfort. I'm a guy who died and reincarnated into an otome game world. Specifically, a stupid otome game I was playing right before I kicked the bucket.

Why *stupid*, you ask? Because this world was incomprehensibly unfair toward men while favoring women. In fact, in this world, men only existed to serve women. Me, I'd have preferred a fantasy world with magic and swords, especially if it gave men a fair shake.

When I reincarnated, I wasn't given a special role in the world either. I was simply one of the masses—a mob, a background character. Even my appearance was average. With black hair and black eyes, I didn't stand out at all. Basically, I was a late-blooming but decent high school student.

Okay, so this world didn't actually have a high school, but it did have an academy where you could earn an education appropriate for a fantasy world. It was perhaps understandably based on a Japanese high school, so my second term here consisted of a series of school events I remembered from my previous world—for example, the school festival.

"Hey, guys, move that desk a little more to the right."

Three of us worked in this empty classroom: my two best friends, Daniel Fou Durland and Raymond Fou Arkin, and myself. We carried tables and chairs in preparation for the festival. Professionals had already done the real remodeling work, and now it had all the necessary elements for us to turn it into a café.

The café we were putting together was on a completely different level than the ones you'd see in Japanese school festivals, namely because nobility attended this place. I didn't mind the thought of using cheap tables, but the academy would've frowned on such a thing. Naturally, our furniture had to match our clientele.

With no other choice, I'd used my own money to outfit our café, and I'd taken my time meticulously designing our interior, as well as what tea sets, leaves, and hors d'oeuvres we would provide.

"Hey, Daniel! Be careful with that tea set. It's expensive!"

"If it's that expensive, you shouldn't be using it for the school festival!" Daniel fussed at me. "You made me nervous, and now my hands are shaking."

Raymond adjusted his glasses as he surveyed the classroom. "Haven't you splurged a bit too much on this? I don't think most students are being this lavish. You'll be in the red."

I merely shook my head at them as if to say, *You two really don't get it, do you?*

They both frowned, annoyed with my attitude.

"In the red? So what?" I said. "I'm rich. Some nitwits from a certain academy lined my pockets with their stupidity. Why not invest some of it back into the school?"

"Your personality is as terrible as ever, I see," Raymond said, exasperated. "Unsurprisingly, that's exactly why most of the student body hates you now."

"Yeah, you better not forget that a lot of people resent you for what you did," Daniel jumped in. "Everyone who thought you were going to lose to Prince Julius and the others in that duel took a big hit when you won."

Sadly, they were right. I was the most hated person in school. The reason? I'd kicked the crap out of Prince Julius—one of the game's love interests—in a duel.

Whatever. He pissed me off, so I beat him up.

The students had decided to gamble on the match themselves. I'd been certain I would win, so I'd bet a fortune on myself. My two friends here had also bet on me, so they'd earned some coin for themselves as well. However, a good portion of the idiots had bet on Prince Julius's victory and even gone into debt for it. Some of those fools had even gambled their entire fortune away on our duel. But he'd lost, and now they all had grudges *against me.*

How depressing. I didn't even do anything wrong!

Ordinarily, my actions could have resulted in my execution. But thanks to an ample donation and good connections, I'd managed to dodge that bullet. In fact, in a confusing turn of events, I had even been praised and awarded higher status for my actions.

The world sure is strange.

I'd gone from being an ordinary student to being a knighted baron with an upper-sixth court ranking. However, considering I wanted neither success nor prestige in this lousy world, it was a tragic turn of events for old Leon.

"Don't praise me like that," I huffed.

Daniel's shoulders slumped. "I *wasn't* praising you."

Suddenly, two girls entered the room. One of them, Livia (short for Olivia), wore a chic maid outfit—something you'd never normally see her in. Her hands gripped the fabric of her long skirt, hiking it up as she struggled to walk in it. Her flaxen hair curved in a bob around her face, and the gentleness in her blue eyes was only outmatched by the kind, inviting air she carried. Her outfit tightened around her waist and stomach, emphasizing her voluptuous breasts (which I very much appreciated).

"It doesn't look weird, does it?" Livia glanced nervously at me for approval, fanning my desire to reassure and protect her. She didn't seem conscious of her ability to bewitch people, but even if she'd been doing it purposefully, I wouldn't mind.

Is this the power of an otome game's protagonist? She's so unbearably cute.

"It looks great on you, and the size is perfect, too."

Daniel and Raymond blushed as they glanced at her.

Right as I was about to tell them to knock off the ogling, Angie stepped out from behind Livia, her hands perched on her hips. "Are you sure these outfits are all right? They emphasize the chest a bit too much. I think something more modest might work better."

Angie (short for Angelica Rapha Redgrave) also sported a maid outfit. It might

seem odd for a duke's daughter to wear such a thing, but apparently, life as a noble lady was harder than I'd thought.

"You don't look at all uncomfortable," Livia remarked in confusion.

Angie smiled. "I've worn a maid outfit before, though it differed a bit from this one."

"You have?"

"I spent two years in the palace as a lady-in-waiting."

Sounds rough.

Angie had sharp, defined features that complemented her willful personality. Inner strength burned in her crimson eyes, but her face softened whenever she looked at Livia.

The two were polar opposites. In fact, in that stupid otome game, they'd been rivals. No, perhaps *rivals* didn't describe it. If Livia was the protagonist, Angie was the villainess. Under normal circumstances, they fought over the same love interest, and not as competitors, but as straight-up adversaries.

Despite being a commoner, Livia had been allowed to enroll in the nobles' academy via a scholarship. In comparison, high-class Angie was a duke's daughter. Now, thanks to a certain someone's intervention in the game's story line, they were the best of friends.

And no, that someone was not me—although the source of this deviation had also been reincarnated into this world.

"But, Angie," said Livia, "you're a noble lady, aren't you? Why would you do such a thing?"

"Noble ladies have their obligations, and that goes double for someone of my status. But enough about that. You look great in that outfit, Livia. Very innocent. I approve." Angie threw her arms around Livia.

"I think I may actually kind of like it," Livia mumbled, her cheeks red.

As I watched the two, I found myself mumbling, "What an amazing sight."

These two lovely girls were a breath of fresh air for a heart hardened by the

unending hell of searching for a marriage partner.

Light glinted off of Raymond's glasses. "Very nice."

Daniel nodded, too. "You said it. Are these girls really from this academy? Are you sure we're not dreaming?"

His skepticism didn't surprise me; it couldn't. Most of the girls in this school—particularly those in the higher class—were deplorable. Fortunately, the only girls helping at our café for the festival were Livia and Angie.

While the academy mirrored a Japanese high school, we had no homerooms, and classes more resembled those at a university. As a result, students didn't participate in the festival in groups determined by homeroom but rather by individual choice. Just as the five of us had come together to set up a café, other groups were doing their own thing as well.

Angie turned her gaze toward us. "Were there no outfits for boys?"

"We could've bought some, but no one's going to get excited about seeing dudes in uniforms." I shrugged. "We're fine in cheap clothes."

Livia had a guilty look. "Does that mean our outfits took up all the budget? Y-you really didn't have to go out of your way to buy expensive uniforms for us."

Daniel laughed. "Nah, we just aren't interested in wearing them. Besides, Leon splurged on everything else, too."

"You can tell this is his hobby. He spent way too much," Raymond agreed. "He's going to make anyone else doing a café look third-rate."

Angie sighed in exasperation. "Leon is a tea freak, after all. He isn't the only boy fond of tea, but I've never seen it get quite this bad."

I'm not a tea freak! I just fell for Master's expertise.

Master was one of the professors at the academy, a perfect gentleman who oversaw the men's etiquette classes. I hoped to someday live up to his dapper, refined example.

"I still have so long to go…" I said wistfully.

"I'm not talking about your skills. I'm talking about the ludicrous amount of

time and money you pour into it." Angie regarded me coolly. "Did you or did you not abandon us to go with the professor to buy tea leaves the other day?"

Daniel and Raymond both shook their heads in disbelief.

"You blew the girls off for tea? Come on, man."

"You've got me so jealous I almost want to clobber you in the dead of night to take your place."

No, see, I was procuring tea leaves that day specifically for *Livia and Angie.*

Also, sad as it was for me to say it, I had no chance with either of these girls.

Livia looked a bit dejected. "We did have tea that day. It tasted amazing, but the real problem was the hors d'oeuvres. Lately I've been putting on some… um…"

Angie pulled the other girl close. "I think you look just lovely with those curves, Livia. Frankly, I think you could do with a little more meat on those bones."

Tears welled in Livia's eyes. "I want to be skinny and petite like you, Angie."

"I'm flattered to hear you say that, but I think you look absolutely breathtaking as you are. Your legs are just gorgeous."

"R-really?"

As the two of them fawned and fussed over each other, Daniel and Raymond shot me envious looks.

No, seriously guys, there's nothing between us.

Out of the entire school's population, those two girls were off-limits. I couldn't even do anything about it. Our roles—social, narrative, you name it—were just too far apart.

***

Students scrambled to make preparations for the festival. Girls gave orders while boys struggled to do all of the grunt work. Seeing that made me want to cry. It underlined the fundamental rule of this world: the social superiority and favoritism women enjoyed rode on the backs of hardworking men.

Nonetheless, I enjoyed the atmosphere. There was something novel, even entertaining, about seeing everyone come together for the event. Only one thing could possibly ruin the festivities…and unfortunately, that thing had to go and swan into my café.

This harbinger of misery, also known as my older sister, Jenna, reliably obsessed over the capital and its latest trends. Now, she flopped in a chair and slumped over the table in front of her. Her lover—a tall, demi-human slave with cat ears dressed in an expensive suit—hovered close behind.

Most of the girls in the higher class had a lover who waited on them hand and foot, and no one blinked at girls waltzing around with their servant-slaves in tow. A tragic sight to behold, let me assure you.

When Jenna first strode in and plopped herself down, Livia and I had our hands full cleaning the café. I could scarcely hide my disgust. “What do you want? Hurry up and leave, you nuisance.”

“Leon, you can’t talk to your sister like that!” Livia scolded.

Jenna looked triumphant with an ally to back her up. “That’s right! You should be consoling me. Isn’t there at least some tea around here?”

What a crappy attitude.

Sadly, this being a matriarchal world and all, she held more authority than I did. And this barely scratched the surface of how truly awful it could get.

“Then hurry up and tell me what you need,” I snapped. “I’ve got things to do.”

Jenna sulked but finally explained, “You see…my best friend and I had a fight.”

Color me shocked that she even had a best friend. Of course, if I’d said as much, we’d start sniping at each other and the conversation wouldn’t go anywhere, so I held my tongue.

“A fight? Then that’s easy. The two of you just have to make up,” Livia said with a smile.

Jenna snorted. “As if. We’re fighting over a man.”

“A…a man? Uh, um…” Livia looked to me for help, not having any experience with romantic relationships herself.

“You’re competing for a guy?” I asked.

“I can’t help it. He’s a viscount’s son, and he suddenly gained a fortune.”

“What do you mean ‘suddenly’?”

Jenna explained that the man in question was heir to a viscounty. His family had been so impoverished that none of the girls had ever looked his way. However, the family had just discovered a new mine within their territory—located on Holfort Kingdom’s mainland. Now they would receive financial support from the kingdom to assist with the mine’s development. In other words, the guy’s family had hit the metaphorical jackpot. Suddenly, all the girls who’d snubbed him saw new prey to sink their teeth into.

“He’s definitely going to be rich when he inherits his father’s title. No girl could pass up chasing a catch like that,” Jenna continued.

“But what about love?” Livia asked. “Do you have feelings for him, or…?”

“Nobles don’t need *love* to marry. All that matters is whether or not your partner can earn a living. If a girl wants love or romance, she finds herself a lover, like Miauler here. But in order to enjoy her time with her lover, she needs a wealthy husband. Get it now?”

No, and I don’t want to “get it.” What I wanted was to whop her upside the head. Yeah, yeah, it’s wrong to hit girls, but Jenna wasn’t a *girl*—she was my *sister*. Surely no jury in the world…

“You’re as rotten as ever,” I mumbled.

More importantly, I’d never even heard her say her cat-eared servant’s name. Not that I really cared to know it in the first place, so honestly, whatever.

“At any rate,” I continued, “what you’re saying is she tried to swipe a guy you were gunning for, right? You were absolutely right to cut her off. Only a scumbag goes after the person their friend likes.”

Cheating, infidelity, stealing someone else’s lover—whatever you wanted to call it—that, you can’t forgive.

“No, that’s not it,” she said.

“Huh?”

“She went after him first. I only started after I realized he was sitting on that payday.”

What the hell? So you’re the one trying to swipe somebody’s man?!

My sister really was a dirtbag.

“Okay, so you’re the garbage friend. Problem solved. You can leave now.”

Jenna protested. “Why won’t you help me?! You could fix all of this—you just have to step in and convince her for me. The only thing you have going for you is your strength. Make yourself useful and help out your precious sister!”

“‘Precious’? Go look that word up in a dictionary and then get back to me.”

What was Jenna thinking? Did she really expect me to solve her problems? How was I supposed to get her friend to stop pursuing the guy anyway?

“Come on, you’re powerful, aren’t you? All you have to do is talk to those two and tell them this engagement is what you want for me. Simple, isn’t it?”

She really wants to use my power to threaten these guys into submission? What a lowlife!

“He can’t do that,” Livia said firmly.

“Why not?” Jenna glared at her. Miauler crossed his arms over his chest and glowered.

Surprised, Livia retreated a few steps back. “Uh, um…”

I stepped in front of her. “You want my answer? Absolutely not. I refuse to help you. And don’t you dare bully Livia. I like her way more than I like you, and if anything happens to her, Angie won’t take it lying down either.”

Jenna recoiled. “Fine, my mistake. Offending a duke’s daughter is no laughing matter. But *you’re* still a worthless louse. Come on, Miauler, let’s get out of here.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Everything about your entire situation is no laughing matter! Except for where it’s ridiculous.

Jenna flounced out the door and was gone.

Livia slumped in relief. “That was a bit scary.”

That cat-eared jerkwad Miauler was slender but muscular, and that intimidating glare of his could certainly terrify. I couldn’t blame Livia for getting freaked out.

“Don’t worry about it,” I reassured her. “If they try anything, let me know. I’ll pound her into the ground.”

“I’m not sure I want you to go that far, but I appreciate you worrying about me.” Livia smiled at me, and I averted my eyes.

Suddenly, panicked footsteps echoed as Daniel and Raymond rushed into the room.

“Big trouble, Leon!”

“You have to see the classroom next door!”

***

The four of us ventured outside our classroom to find none other than Prince Julius standing in the hallway, passing out flyers to a flock of girls. They had come to peek in at our neighbor’s preparations.

“If you have some free time during the festival, we would welcome your patronage.” Julius smiled, and the girls’ cheeks flushed.

“Oh, of course!”

“We’ll come! On the third day, I will absolutely be here!”

“Me, too! I promise I’ll spend a lot of money!”

Have they all been brainwashed or what?

Prince Julius kept that refreshing smile plastered on his face as he advertised for his group. “We look forward to seeing you here at Café Princess!”

Café What Now?!

“No way.” Daniel’s shoulders slumped. “They’re doing a café, too? Right beside us?”

Raymond glanced around. “Is the festival committee spiting Leon? I’m sure

some of their members lost money on his duel, but this is way too unfair."

When Prince Julius spotted us, he glided over with a meaningful grin.

What, does this jerk hate me, too? What a coincidence. The feeling was mutual.

An excessively gorgeous young man, Prince Julius practically glowed—and literally glowed, where his soft, navy-blue hair glimmered under the light. The embodiment of the prince archetype, the perfect love interest, Prince Julius had once been the former crown prince and Angie's fiancé.

But Prince Julius was also a moron who'd thrown Angie aside in favor of another woman. In truth, the game had written him for neither Angie nor the partner he'd chosen. By now, he should have been well on his way to courting the game's protagonist, Livia. However, thanks to the meddling of that rotten girl, Marie, everything had gone weird.

"Bartfort, I hear you're doing a café," said Prince Julius. "We're planning on doing the same. You're welcome to visit. We'd be happy to serve you."

Was I welcome to wipe that smug look off his face?

Livia accepted one of the flyers from him, and her jaw dropped. "What…? A tea and snack combo is a hundred dia?!"

Suddenly light-headed, she nearly collapsed, but I moved in to support her just in time. I plucked the leaflet from her hands and scanned the page.

Talk about exorbitant prices. No, perhaps *exploitative* better described it. Who demanded ten thousand dia for some cheap tea and a snack? To make matters worse, a dozen add-ons further inflated the cost of every visit. In the span of about twenty minutes, a single person could rack up a bill of twenty to thirty thousand dia. I'd seen hostess clubs less shady than this.

Daniel and Raymond were equally flabbergasted.

Personally, I'd thought we'd be well in the black with ten or twenty dia per single customer, but it seemed I'd forgotten: this school overflowed with pampered nobles. A hefty portion of them were swimming in hereditary wealth, which naturally skewed prices.

Prince Julius regarded Livia with confusion, tilting his head. “Is it too cheap? Marie called these prices adequate, though. Personally, I’d like to earn a bit more if we could.”

This casually wild definition of “cheap” left Livia crushed. “These nobles certainly are incredible, Leon. I would never have the courage to enter a pricey café like this.”

“You’re absolutely correct—you should never go to a café like *theirs*,” I assured her with a nod. “Ignore him. Ignore all of them.”

Livia had grown up in such a different environment than any of us had. It was no easy feat to bridge such a gap. I couldn’t blame her for thinking it insurmountable.

Prince Julius turned sullen. “You’re certainly acting laid-back about all of this. But, Bartfort, I won’t be losing to you this time.”

With that, he spun on his heel to leave.

I followed after him, intent on collecting information on our opponents. Also, what was he talking about, saying he wouldn’t “lose” to me at the festival? Amusing. Maybe he had some comedic potential, after all.

When we slipped into the classroom behind him, the prince jumped in shock. “H-hey! Why are you following me?”

“You know,” I said, “reconnaissance. That kind of thing.”

“How shameless!”

“I’m just being honest. I wanna know what you guys are doing, so I’m taking a look. Now let me have a peek, hmm?”

I pushed him aside, only to be met with an unbelievable sight. The first thing to cross my mind was: *The hell?* Followed by: *This is no café.*

Originally, this had been an unused classroom, just like ours, but Prince Julius and his gang had really glammed it up. Coffee tables surrounded by luxurious sofas lined the dimly lit room. Toward the back, Chris Fia Arclight and Brad Fou Field wore matching suits—black, with the top buttons left open, revealing colored shirts beneath.

I couldn't help shrieking. "This is a freakin' host club!"

Chris, a solemn youth with blue hair and glasses, turned toward us. He fixed me with a piercing glare. "Bartfort."

Brad swept his hand through his long, purple hair. "Trying to spy on the enemy team? You're as underhanded as ever, I see."

Who are you calling underhanded?! What kind of cheater calls this *setup a café?*

"Pot meets kettle again, you mean," I snapped. "This isn't fair."

Chris seemed pleased by my frustration. "Fair, hm? I never thought I'd hear those words coming out of your mouth. I guess we had the right idea agreeing to Marie's proposal. Seeing that vexed look on your face brings me great pleasure."

So it was that wench again?! She really is a piece of work!

Prince Julius stepped forward, looking doubly smug. "As I said, we'll be winning the festival. Don't run away just because you feel a little intimidated, Bartfort."

What kind of idiot are you? We're not even doing the same thing anymore—you can't call that a competition!

Livia tilted her head back and forth. "Um, is this really a café? It seems more like a bar to me, given the atmosphere."

Brad strode over and lowered his face close to Livia's. "You got a complaint, too, scholarship student? You better not bad talk Marie's proposal. Our menu is entirely tea and hors d'oeuvres, not a hint of alcohol in sight—though we'll be entertaining the customers, of course. You just don't understand the brilliance of Marie's plan."

"Um, okay…but I still feel like this isn't quite right."

I inserted myself between them, making a shooing motion. "Don't touch her. You'll infect her with your cooties. Off!"

Brad's brow wrinkled. "I really do hate to look at you."

Like two months ago you guys were the heirs of esteemed noble families. Don't you feel even a little embarrassed? I mean, doing a host club at a school festival? Really? Do you need your heads checked?

Meanwhile, coming in behind us, Daniel peered around the room with genuine interest. When he glanced at the menu, his expression dropped. "A hundred dia for ten minutes of service?"

Raymond shared his shock. "This is one insanely expensive café…"

Just then, I spotted the woman responsible for said insanity behind a curtain on the other side of the room. She wore a dress that matched the boys' suits. Kyle, her servant, stood beside her.

Is she planning to work as a hostess, too?

Marie Fou Lafan, youngest daughter of Viscount Lafan, had managed to seduce multiple heirs to the kingdom's most prominent houses—including Prince Julius. Like me, this profoundly wicked woman had reincarnated into the game world, i.e., she wasn't part of the original cast. With a slender, petite frame, blonde hair that extended in a flood of waves and curls all the way down her back, and blue eyes, she was, at a glance, delicate and devilishly cute…I guess? If you like them flat as a board.

Ugh. The mere sight of her just pissed me off. *I think she reminds me of my past life's little sister…*

"Of course it's expensive," she said with exasperation as she came toward us. "In case you hadn't noticed, our members are all heirs of highly distinguished houses. Well, former heirs. But doesn't it make sense that you would be required to pay an adequate fee to monopolize their attention?"

I clicked my tongue after getting a good look at the dress she was wearing. "What are you, Café Princess's knock-off royalty? You're just a viscount's youngest daughter, right? You're no—"

Marie's cheeks flamed. "I'm a princess at heart!"

Brad jumped in. "You will always be our princess, Marie!"

"Thank you, Brad," she said, then turned back to me. "You know, for a useless

background character, you certainly are rude.”

“I’m just so pure I can’t tell a lie.” For example: I wanted to kick her legs out from under her.

Marie flipped her long mane over her shoulder. “I’m looking forward to the festival. I doubt you’ll find many customers, so we may take pity and visit during our breaks. Don’t worry, we’ll be sure to pay. We expect some decent tea in exchange, though.”

Ha! As if I would ever dream of serving subpar tea. I wouldn’t be able to face my master if I did.

That aside, I hadn’t expected such a powerful adversary to go and make their nest right beside us.

Chapter 1:
The Queen

THE DAY BEFORE the festival, many of the students walked academy grounds with signboards, advertising the activities put on by their respective groups.

"Okay! I have to give this my all, too!" Livia toted her own handmade sign around the school, trying to advertise Leon's café.

Leon had preparations to attend to, Daniel and Raymond were off buying necessities, and Angie was entirely consumed with her work as a class representative for the first-year students. That left Livia with the responsibility of spreading word about their café.

As she reached the courtyard, she noticed a number of boys with signboards of their own. When they spotted her, they called out. "Hey, you're the scholarship student, right?"

Flustered, she responded, "Y-yes! Um, I'm trying to advertise our café."

Livia steeled herself for a confrontation, but the boys merely smiled and chattered on in a friendly way.

"Ah, so you're doing a café? We've got a food stand. Come by and try something if you have the time. We'll give you a freebie."

"We're doing crepes. We don't have a lot of competition in that field this year, but we've still got to put good effort in and earn what we can."

"I heard a ton of other people are doing cafés this time around, so good luck!"

After the three boys turned to leave, Livia sighed with relief. *Thank goodness. I wasn't sure what I'd do if they ganged up on me…*

Although Livia had been allowed to enroll at the academy, she was no noble. To the other students, that made her an anomaly, and in the past, some had been quite cruel to her.

As she continued, she stumbled across a trio of girls. "Um, excuse me!"

The three girls sat on a bench, their servants standing behind them. Obviously higher class. Unlike the boys, however, the girls shot Livia ice-cold looks.

"What do *you* want, scholarship? We're busy."

Livia plucked up her courage. "Um, I'm trying to advertise our café."

One of the girls laughed mockingly. "Are you talking about Bartfort's café? Like we'd ever go there. I know he's taken a liking to you, but don't let it go to your head. Having a guy fawning over you doesn't mean you can go about getting *ideas*, commoner."

Commoner. A stinging reminder of the wall separating Livia from the other students.

But then the other two girls stepped in. "Knock it off. That duke's daughter favors her, you know."

"It's better to keep your distance. If you piss off Bartfort, your house might suffer the consequences."

With the first girl pacified, all three took their servants and left.

Livia, on the verge of tears, quickly shook her head. "It's okay, you've got this! On to the next place!"

This kind of encounter made her sad, sure, but she had Angie and Leon now. Compared to how lonely she had been when she first enrolled, this was nothing. *That's right, I'm fine. I have those two at my side.*

Though Livia remained keenly aware she *only* had those two to rely on.

As Livia continued to advertise their café, she found boys were consistently rather nice to her. She almost wanted to pinch herself—it was so different from the treatment she'd received in the past. Unfortunately, the girls were as cold as ever. Most of them gave her a wide berth the moment they spotted her. Although she felt dejected each time, she always recovered her motivation.

"You're doing a café?" someone said suddenly. "Oh, I see you're handing out free tickets, too. Do you have any left?"

Livia glanced back to see a girl smiling at her. "Oh, yes!"

The tickets offered one free tea and snack combo. Livia promptly handed one over.

The girl had long, beautiful navy-blue hair and the slender body type Livia envied. On top of that, she had a confident, assertive air.

“You’re the scholarship student, right?” the girl asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’m Carla. Carla Fou Wayne, the second daughter of a baronet. I’m part of the general class.”

The lessons for the general class differed from those for the higher class. Although both classes participated in school events together, they normally operated in separate circles. While the two girls might have passed each other in the halls, this was basically Livia’s first meeting with Carla.

Happy that Carla had been kind enough to introduce herself, Livia eagerly explained the directions to the café. “Oh, and my name’s Olivia,” she added. “I hope you’ll come visit!”

“That’s right next to Prince Julius’s café, isn’t it?”

Livia’s shoulders slumped. Julius’s café couldn’t help being Leon’s biggest contender. “Yes, Leon’s been a bit anxious about that.”

“Oh, I see,” the girl said. “So you’re close to Baron Bartfort.”

Hearing someone call Leon by his title caught Livia off guard. *Oh no, was I acting too familiar by using his first name?*

Leon didn’t seem to mind, but the fact of his noble stature remained. As a commoner, Livia knew all too well how many among the nobility frowned on their closeness.

Carla, however, smiled pleasantly. “I’ve heard so many rumors about him, but he seems like a kind person.”

“Huh?”

“There’s no advantage for him in befriending a scholarship student, but he has. Oh, I’m not trying to say anything bad about you,” she clarified. “Just that

he must be nicer than the rumors make him seem."

It warmed Livia to hear someone describe Leon in a positive light. "Y-yes! He's a very nice person. You can really rely on him. He does go overboard a bit at times, but I think people misunderstand him."

In truth, people didn't much misunderstand him at all, but through Livia's rose-colored point of view, Leon had all the admirable qualities of the ideal knight: he was kind, strong, and had the power to protect those he cared for.

"Oh, uh, really? That's great." Livia's gushing seemed to make Carla a bit uncomfortable, but Livia only smiled blithely.

"I'm glad I came here to the academy. And I owe that all to Leon—and Angie, too," Livia said.

"'Angie'? Do you mean the duke's daughter, Lady Angelica?" Carla's interest was newly piqued. "Say, do you think I might be able to talk to the baron during the festival?"

"Sure, I don't see why not."

"Wonderful," Carla enthused. "Would you be so kind as to introduce me to him? I'd appreciate it if you would mediate for me."

"Introduce you? I don't think you really need me to introduce you, but I would be happy to, if you like." Livia smiled and nodded, although she found Carla's use of the word "mediate" a tad odd.

"Thank you. I promise to drop by. I look forward to seeing you then." With that, Carla left.

Livia waved farewell, and she gave the encounter no further thought.

***

On opening day, fireworks exploded in the sky to signal the commencement of festivities. The wind swiftly cleared away any lingering wisps of white smoke.

Most of the attendees were relatives of the students, often women who felt nostalgic about their school days. They brought their husband and kids, and their lovers, as well. A bizarre sight to more foreign eyes.

One woman watched as guests filtered in through the front gate. At a glance, she looked to be in her twenties, with long, platinum-blonde hair, gentle blue eyes, and kind, inviting facial features. She wore a dress that pulled in tight at the waist, flattering her curvaceous figure. Despite her alluring appearance, her demeanor was soft and unassuming.

She joined the crowds and eagerly peered around at the stalls. “Oh, this looks fun! There are so many stands.”

The woman wasn’t talking to anyone in particular, but one of her bodyguards, disguised as a female attendee, responded. “Your Majesty, you’re getting carried away. If you wanted to enjoy the festivities, shouldn’t we have announced a formal visit?”

The two were so discreet that, to the unobservant, it would have seemed like they weren’t talking to each other at all.

Mylene Rapha Holfort’s gentle demeanor suddenly morphed as a clever, bewitching smile spread across her lips. She was the reigning queen of Holfort Kingdom—and Julius’s mother.

“That would be far too boring,” said Mylene. “I need to deliver a warning to the baron who made a fool out of my sweet Julius.”

Several more disguised bodyguards followed her through the crowd. The one closest to her sighed. “If you would give us the order, we would—”

Mylene smiled sweetly. “I’ll judge his character with my own two eyes. I wonder what kind of person he is? I’m looking forward to finding out.” The queen giggled before turning to one of her bodyguards. “Also, I need someone to escort me while I’m here. Angie would be perfect. Yes, fetch Angelica for me.”

One of the bodyguards bowed slightly before disappearing into the undulating swarm of attendees.

Mylene continued to smile as she accepted a pamphlet from one of the students near the front entrance. She spread it out in front of her. “Yes, I am very much looking forward to this, Baron Bartfort.”

She hid her mischevious grin behind her brochure and perused the stalls by

the front entrance as she waited for Angie to arrive.

***

For some strange reason, I felt a chill run down my spine. *Must be my imagination*. *My intuition is almost always off.*

I clapped my hands together, composing myself as I doled out orders to our staff. Today was opening day, and the preparations for our café were complete.

“All right, it’s day one. Put some pep in your step and work hard, my peons! As for the ladies, you two be sure to work in moderation and take plenty of breaks. Don’t forget to enjoy the festivities yourselves, too!”

Daniel and Raymond’s reception to my speech left much to be desired. I had them in charge of the kitchen, hidden away from the rest of the room by a curtain.

“So you mean to overwork us from the start, huh?”

“We expect you to pay up for our honest labor.”

By contrast, the girls wore tight smiles, anxious with anticipation.

“Angie, I’m nervous,” said Livia.

“I don’t have any experience working in a café either. But I do think it’ll be fun—”

As the two shared their apprehension, the door flew open, its chime ringing noisily.

I spun, wearing my best smile. “Welcome to—”

“Miss Angelica? The executive committee requests your presence.”

I had assumed we’d just gotten our first customer, but alas, one of the female professors stood before us.

Angie tilted her head. “They need me for something?”

“That’s what I was told. Please head to the committee room immediately.” The professor disappeared out the door.

Angie looked troubled. “Sorry, everyone. I’ll deal with whatever it is and

return quickly.”

Right as we were getting revved up to do our best, someone had to come and pull Angelica away. But I felt more sorry for her than us.

Livia clenched her fists. “Don’t worry! I’ll work hard enough for the both of us!”

She looked so noble, getting fired up over our café, both arms raised in the air as she swore to put her everything into it. I wanted to take a picture.

I’ll ask Luxion to get one for me later.

Angie giggled and turned to leave with a smile. “Well, then I’ll work hard to make sure I can return as soon as possible. Leon, try not to overdo things.”

By “overdo,” I suspected she meant not to treat any of the customers poorly. “You really don’t trust me?”

She laughed. “You always take things too far. Anyway, I’ll be back soon.”

And with that, she was gone.

Livia peeked out the door and gasped. “Oh my. Leon, there’s a huge line.”

I could see it, too—an enormous line that snaked around the hallway… starting in front of the neighboring classroom.

***

“Your Majesty, it puts me in an awkward position when you make such unreasonable demands,” Angie said, still clad in her maid outfit.

The person who had requested her was none other than Queen Mylene, who to all appearances was innocently enjoying the festivities outside the school building.

Her Majesty gave a quick apology and added, “But I still want you to indulge me in your company today. I went through a great deal of trouble to honor your request before, you know. The one regarding that baron you’ve taken a liking to.”

Angie could hardly keep protesting when the queen brought that up.

The queen drew her into a quick embrace before pausing to bask in the

atmosphere at the festival. “It’s my first time coming to one of these! And it’s been a long time since I saw you in a maid outfit like that, Angie. Although the novelty has worn off, I suppose.”

“Um, yes, I appreciated how you looked after me back then.”

Angie had worn a similar outfit in her time as a lady-in-waiting in the palace, where she had gone to learn proper etiquette. In essence, she’d spent the duration of her stay attending the queen. Being young, she’d made a lot of mistakes, especially in her less mature days. Angie’s personality had been fiercer and more unforgiving, her behavior more extreme.

I feel embarrassed, thinking back.

She had been so ignorant of the world, mistaking people’s outward kindness for sincerity. In the process, she’d caused no small amount of trouble for the queen. Angie looked down as the humiliating memories came flooding back.

The queen looked amused at Angie’s reaction. Apparently, she was only teasing.

I’m no match for her, and I probably won’t be for the rest of my life, Angie thought.

She returned her attention to their surroundings. A number of Mylene’s guards had melted into the background to avoid notice as they kept watch in disguise.

“At any rate,” Mylene changed the subject, “this academy’s festival is incredible. We had no such thing in my motherland.” Evidently, the whole thing tickled her.

“Is that so?”

As a foreign princess, Mylene had married into Holfort Kingdom’s royal family. Normally, that status would have put her on the back foot, but the queen proved so resourceful that the palace had never been able to ignore her growing influence. If not for Her Majesty’s approval, Angie would never have been recognized as Julius’s betrothed.

The queen peered into Angie’s face. “It’s a relief to see your complexion so

improved since the knighthood ceremony. You must be enjoying yourself more these days."

Despite how naive she appears, Queen Mylene is incredibly observant. It's a bit unnerving. Angie again mentally reaffirmed that she stood no chance against the queen. "Yes, I'm treasuring my time at the academy."

After a pause, Mylene asked, "Are you planning to sneak off and see Leon after this?"

Angie's cheeks heated up. "No, not at all. Do you really intend to sneak in and meet with him?"

Mylene held her head up proudly. "Of course I do. Julius is responsible for the actions that led to his disinheritance, but I *am* his mother. I must give that baron a piece of my mind. I admit, Julius was foolish to so frivolously accept that duel, but I don't care for the way in which it transpired. Frankly, I was horrified when I heard. Speechless, even."

"I apologize on Leon's behalf. He was my proxy." The queen was right. The duel had been despicable, and Angie constantly felt obligated to express her remorse for the whole affair.

Leon had used his overwhelming might to metaphorically twist his opponents' arms, and then, despite the difference in their statuses, lectured and taunted each one of them. Julius had still been a crown prince at the time. Such a thing would have been unthinkable under normal circumstances. A harsh punishment should have awaited Leon, but instead, he'd been rewarded for his achievements.

And yet…

The queen must hold a grudge.

Mylene had forgiven Leon publicly, but personally, she couldn't let what he'd done go unpunished. Angie understood, of course. After all, Julius was Mylene's son, and Leon had humiliated him.

Even after all of that, she still manages to contain her feelings.

Despite her private upset, at the knighthood ceremony, Her Majesty had

absolved Leon with the greatest poise.

“Now that he has been knighted, the kingdom is responsible for whatever actions he takes,” said Mylene sweetly. “I mean to make that clear to him.”

Angie awkwardly averted her gaze. “I hope you won’t be too harsh with him. I’d…feel sorry for him otherwise.”

“You’re kinder now than you once were. Before, you would have said, ‘Leave this to me, I’ll tell him off for you!’ Or are you still a bit hung up on how things ended with Julius?”

“I would be lying if I said I wasn’t.”

Mylene softened. “As his mother, I must apologize for what he put you through. How ever has he been so thoroughly taken in by that girl anyway? He never seemed so gullible in all the years I raised him.”

Angie agreed. In fact, in the past, Julius had always been on guard when women approached him. “According to His Highness, he enjoys the ‘normalcy’ of his life as a student here, and he feels like this Marie girl understands him.”

Mylene shook her head. “I’m afraid my inexperience with this academy means I haven’t the slightest what ‘normalcy’ entails. But based on what I’ve heard, this seems like a dreadful place.”

The queen no doubt referred to the attitudes of the noblewomen in attendance. Angie followed the queen’s gaze to a girl quibbling in front of a nearby food stall.

“You must be joking. You expect me to pay for this? Just give it to me.”

“I can’t do that.”

The female customer huffed and left without paying the male staff for the goods she’d received, her demi-human servant on her heels.

Being foreign-born, Mylene had to find this sight a strange one. “It truly is dreadful…”

Angie hung her head. “I’m embarrassed you have to see this.”

The two wandered the school festival together, slowly making their way

toward Leon's café. The moment they spotted it, Mylene's face hardened. "So this is it. Seems the neighboring store is thriving."

A long line had formed in front of the other classroom. Meanwhile, not a single customer waited outside Leon's.

Angie hesitated. *I should probably save showing her the prince's café until after she finishes her business with Leon. Or perhaps it would be better to avoid it entirely, since she's supposed to be visiting in secret. And…His Highness might feel uneasy seeing the two of us together.*

Mylene reached out and took Angie's hand. "Come, it's time to wreak havoc. You'll help me, won't you?"

"No, um, I couldn't. I'm a waitress, you see, and—"

"Details, details. I merely intend to complain that the tea is too cold—something of that nature. At worst, I'll have him remake it a few times. That will satisfy me for now."

Angie thought this pretty extreme in and of itself, but as the two of them stepped inside…

"The tea's gone cold! I want it fresh!" A shrieking customer threw the entire cup at Leon.

Judging by his disheveled appearance, now drenched in tea, this wasn't the first abuse he'd faced in Angie's absence. He looked absolutely horrible. His chin pressed toward his chest, making it difficult to see his expression.

Livia, on the other hand, looked as though she might burst into tears any second where she hovered beside him. "Leon, we'd better treat your wounds—"

Leon held out a hand to cut her off, motioning for her to stay back. Then he turned his attention to the irate, gaudily dressed customer and her band of followers.

"My apologies. I'll get you a fresh cup right away." Leon crouched to recover the broken shards of the teacup.

The customer rose to her feet with a smirk and pressed her booted heel to

the back of his head.

Daniel and Raymond peeked out of the kitchen. Their faces twisted in frustration, but they quickly looked away. Their unwillingness to step in and help might have seemed heartless, but a woman's ire held absolute sway in the academy. Also, Angie spied the hard look Leon shot his friends, warning them not to interfere.

"Forget it," the customer said. "I doubt you have anything decent here anyway. I'll be taking my leave. I assume you won't need any payment, since you offered me that lukewarm bilge. In fact, maybe we should be demanding compensation for the offense."

The customer ground her leather bootheel into the back of Leon's skull. Her friends and their slaves all snickered.

Leon practically kowtowed as he took the abuse. "No. You *will* pay."

"*Excuse* me? Do you even realize how much money you've leeched from us already? Some girls are so saddled with debt they've had to sell their slaves because of you! How can you be so ignorant?!"

Angie's entire body vibrated in anger. As if it were Leon's fault that these girls had borrowed money to bet on his duel—everything, from the bet, to the borrowing, to the selling of slaves, had been their choice, not his.

Mylene, struck speechless, stared at the mortifying scene. She looked to Angie and Leon, as if searching for an explanation as to what was happening.

Angie could take no more. She charged forward and shoved the customer off of Leon. "What do you think you're doing?!"

The customer stumbled back a few steps, and her servant stepped forward to keep her upright. Once steadied, the customer glared at Angie.

Leon lifted his head, but before he could stop her, Angie snarled, "Your attitude is *inexcusable*. I assume you possess the mental capacity to find the exit."

Upon Angie's appearance, the customer's followers erupted into whispers, but their leader only grinned. She didn't look the least bit intimidated by Angie,

even with her ducal status.

“Well, if it isn’t Prince Julius’s *ex*-fiancée. I wondered who could have the audacity. What’s with that get-up? As a noble, don’t you feel the least bit of shame wearing something so slovenly?”

Angie held back the urge to click her tongue. *The daughter of an earl’s house, hmm? And from an enemy faction, no less. What a nuisance.*

“What’s with that look?” the customer sneered. “Don’t tell me you thought I’d be intimidated? Fat chance! These days, you’re nothing more than a—”

Livia cut in front of Angie. “Please, stop this! You’ve already tormented Leon. Leave Angie alone—or just leave, please!”

Angie’s eyes widened at her friend. “Livia, you—”

An angry vein protruded on the customer’s forehead. “Don’t push your luck, commoner scum.”

“Wha…?” Livia shrank back.

“You think some insignificant mite like you has any right to speak to me like an equal? You must be drunk off the favoritism of these two disgraces. Do you fancy yourself a noble now, too? Do you really think Angie treating you like a cute little pet means you’re on even footing with *me*?”

“Pet?” Livia’s jaw dropped.

Incensed, Angie cut in. “That’s enough. If you keep this up, you’ll understand what it really means to draw my ire.”

But the customer wouldn’t let up. “So now that you’ve lost all of your friends, you’ve turned to the commoner? How pathetic for a duke’s daughter to be reduced to these scraps. What was that you told me once? ‘Commoners are chattel.’ You never cared about them *before*, did you?”

Livia slowly turned her gaze toward Angie. “That can’t be true,” she murmured.

“No, it’s not like that,” Angie protested. “I—”

The customer’s lip curled. “Commoners aren’t even human, scholarship scum!

Do you really not understand? The only reason no one's said anything to you yet is because you hide behind this disappointment of a duke's daughter and that upstart wannabe-knight. But a wretch like you—"

A low voice suddenly cut through the air. "Shut your filthy sewer mouth."

To Angie's shock, it was Leon.

The customer sneered at him. "Now you're getting carried away, too. I'm the daughter of an earl. Can you even begin to comprehend the consequences of making an enemy of me?"

She jerked her chin at her servant, who promptly stomped over and slammed his foot down on Leon's head.

"Hmph, this one sure is cocky," the servant huffed. "My lady, I think he requires some strict reeducation."

The other servants snickered.

Suddenly, Mylene's voice thundered out. "Enough! I can't stand by a minute longer."

Everyone's eyes abruptly turned to her.

The customer, who'd been glaring at Angie, scowled at Mylene. "What's your problem, old lady?"

"Old…old lady?!" Angie cradled her head in her hands. *This idiot doesn't even know the face of our queen?! I—I almost can't blame her. Who would imagine a queen showing up at a place like this?*

Although the customer was the daughter of an earl, she held no particularly respectable social position. She was one of the nouveau riche, though not in the same vein as Leon, who'd acquired his wealth with his own abilities. Given her standing, she had never set foot in the palace. She had some room to be ignorant on this matter.

So, as a courtesy, Angie tried to step in and warn her, but she paused at Mylene's strained expression. "I will pretend I didn't hear that. You ladies, pay your bill and leave. Immediately. Can you truly call yourselves students of this renowned academy with such vile behavior? No, you ought to feel embarrassed

to even consider yourselves nobility!”

Some of the girls snorted with derision. And the main culprit wasn’t the least bit dissuaded.

“Pardon? Don’t get mouthy with me. Who do you think I am? My father is Earl Offrey. Learn your place! Remove that old bag from my sight.” The moment she gave the order, the other girls’ servants surrounded Mylene.

Angie careened past pity into panic. “You unbelievable fools, do you even know who you’re—”

She broke off. Leon was looking her way. His eyes flitted between her and Mylene. Gradually, his lips twisted into a grin. At first, he’d gaped in disbelief at the interruption of this older woman, but now, he seemed to have surmised the truth of the situation, and he was…amused. His eyes closed as his smile stretched from ear to ear.

Angie could almost hear him: *Yes! Just cause! Sweet, sweet just cause!*

Oh no, this is bad, she realized. *If I don’t intercede—*

Too late.

Leon slammed his foot into one of the servants. Demi-humans had sturdy bodies, but Leon sent his victim flying. He must have imbued his body with magic and attacked with all the might he could muster,

“How you like them apples, moron?!”

Everyone in the room—even Daniel and Raymond, peeking in from the kitchen—stared in abject shock. Livia looked entirely confounded.

Daniel screeched in dismay. “You idiot! You can’t put your hands on a servant—”

“Sure I can! Time for some fun, guys. It’s going to be the party of a lifetime now!”

Normally, boys couldn’t touch servants—they didn’t want to risk angering the girls. However, Leon now had the perfect excuse. Unlike the other nobility in the room, he’d recognized the queen. Of course he had—he’d met Mylene at his knighthood ceremony. And seeing Angie by her side had been all he needed

to allay any lingering doubts.

“Eat this!”

Leon swung his arms through the air and onto another servant, hands locked together as if bringing down a hammer. The servant promptly slammed into the floor. Leon showed them no ounce of mercy.

One of the servants tried to leap at him from behind, but Leon turned his fists on the other man and sent him tumbling to the ground. In an instant, he’d taken out three opponents. Now he stood in front of Mylene as if to shield her.

“Fall back, lowly worms! Allow me to enlighten you. You stand in the presence of Holfort Kingdom’s Queen Mylene! You shame yourselves and your families. On your knees!” Leon grinned like a maniac at the customer and her minions.

The queen was at a loss. “What? Um? Why…?”

Angie hid her face in her hands. “Leon, you’re incorrigible.”

Her Majesty’s undercover ruse had all been for naught, now that Leon had used her as an excuse to batter some servants and bring a gaggle of noble ladies to heel.

“I hope you’re all prepared to suffer the consequences of turning on Her Majesty! You better not think you can get away with this simply because you’re the daughter of an earl!” Leon brandished the queen’s authority as though it were his own, cackling all the while.

Frozen in place, the noble ladies stood with their mouths hanging wide open, their faces ghostly white.

Mylene clung to Leon’s arm. “Leon, wait. I’m here incognito. We can’t afford to create a fuss! So please, calm yourself. You’re a good boy, aren’t you?”

It was strange to see the queen trying to pacify the very man she’d come to heckle.

But Leon wasn’t listening. His eyes burned with malice, already too carried away. “Leave everything to me, Your Majesty. As your humble servant, when it comes time to mete out the necessary punishment, I will be the first to volunteer. Just give me the order! If you desire, I will destroy their families.

Should you prefer it, I'll exterminate every last trace of their bloodline. I, Leon Fou Bartfort, will wipe out any foe who dare stands before you. I'll obliterate them all!"

"No, that's what I'm saying—you mustn't!" Mylene cried, tears in her eyes.

Angie sighed. *Well, now he's just riled. Not that I can entirely blame him. It's all too easy to picture what hell he must have endured before we returned.*

The dozen ladies in the café had clearly all come with a mind to torment Leon. Every one of them now stared at their feet, trembling.

Leon's clothes were a mess. The floor was scuffed with evidence of thrown silverware, and filth littered the tabletops. A glance at the garbage revealed a mountain of broken porcelain.

An army of girls had charged in here hoping for revenge. Mylene had planned to do the same, but her horror was apparent—these students had gone far past the line she had drawn for herself.

Leon roared with laughter, euphoric with the spirit of payback. "You dared to threaten the queen! Just you wait—Arroganz and I are going to trample your families' territories!"

"Please stop! This is my fault. I'm the one who should be asking for forgiveness." Livia had tears in her eyes, distraught at how out of control everything had spun.

At that moment, emboldened, Daniel and Raymond leaped forth from the kitchen to assist Leon by tying up the felled servants.

"This is your fault, you know," said Daniel. "To think you'd go and threaten the queen of all people."

"The nerve," said Raymond. "Really, this is the least you deserve."

The two grinned at one another.

This has gotten entirely out of hand, Angie thought. *I'd better call for* him.

Unable to think of any other resolution, she found herself glancing at Livia's face only to look away again.

I don’t even know what to say. Not after I said such horrid things.

Chapter 2:
A Confession of Love

"MISTER LEON! This is unacceptable. If you wish to master the art of tea, then you must be aware of how abhorrent it is to trouble a lady! This is not the behavior of a gentleman."

"I'm sorry, Master. But I…I…!"

All the customers had long since left the café. Now, as Angie had sought out my Master, the only sound was him lecturing me. I could pretend to listen and brush off anyone except him. My Master's words cut deep. I couldn't defy him.

After all, he was more than a simple professor at some whatever school. He was my master in the artful way of tea.

Master placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I know this must have been trying for you. A true trial. Still, you

must not give up. The path of a true gentleman lies ahead of you. And your quest to master tea will continue as well."

"Yes, you're exactly right, Master!"

The path to becoming a gentleman was steep and treacherous, but I—

I heard a sigh. I glanced back to see the queen collapsed at one of the round tables, looking exhausted. Angie sat beside her.

I'd already changed into a clean set of clothes, and Daniel and Raymond had stepped out to invite some people over so we could party later. As for those loathsome "customers," they had fled after receiving the queen's pardon, but I still remembered their terrified faces. I wouldn't let myself forget those.

"It looks like the two of you are done," said the queen. "Would you mind if I had a word with you next?"

Master straightened his posture, smoothing his suit. "I'll prepare a spot of tea for you, then. Mister Leon, I hope you don't mind if I borrow your set?"

“Of course not. Please, go right ahead.” My tea set and tea leaves would be overjoyed to be graced by my Master’s use.

Right now, I was more concerned with the queen’s irate face.

“Leon,” she said, “I do believe I’m angry.”

I sank to my knees and slapped both hands against the floor, kowtowing. “I knew you would be. I completely understand. Please, just spare my family! I don’t care what happens to me, but please let them be!”

My theatrics clearly flustered her.

“What? N-no, you misunderstand me. That’s not what I meant. Angie, help!” She turned in her seat to look at Angie for assistance, which made clear that she wasn’t truly that cross with me. If the queen were genuinely ticked, she’d have me driven out of the kingdom.

But I still wanted to tease her a bit.

Unfortunately, Angie *did* realize I was putting on a show. “Your Majesty, he’s toying with you. He can tell you’re not that serious.”

“Eh?” Mylene glanced back at me.

I stuck my tongue out. “Tee hee!”

She leveled an ice-cold glare at me. I was making it harder to clean my slate in her eyes. “To think I expected better from you. I should have known.”

“I’m terribly sorry!” This time, my apology was sincere.

Despite the circumstances, I felt blessed to have an opportunity to drink Master’s tea again. The powerful fragrance crashed over me from behind like a violent wave. He was using the same tea leaves I had, and yet the difference between our brews was night and day. Even the scent was more potent.

Master’s expertise is unmatched.

“Your Majesty,” my master began, “might I ask why—”

“Enough,” she interrupted. “If I’m not careful, *someone* will find cause to tease me again, so I’ll be frank. Leon, I came here to address my grievances with you. This isn’t some official punishment. These are my personal feelings.”

I figured as much.

Whatever my reasoning, I'd still beaten her son to a pulp. A mother couldn't easily forgive that kind of thing.

In the game, Queen Mylene functioned as an antagonist. Not surprisingly, she aligned herself against the protagonist, given her close relationship with Angie. It only made sense. Although, I *did* think it a tired cliche for female-oriented games—having the mother-in-law be spiteful toward her daughter-in-law. Not that Queen Mylene could help it; she could hardly accept her son falling in love with a commoner. Her opposition made perfect sense, and yet the demands of the genre painted her as the villain trying to rip the main characters apart.

I found it absurd. This perfectly logical queen had to be the bad guy? Come on.

Granted, in the end, Queen Mylene did always come to accept the protagonist after the latter was recognized as the Saint. In this world, the Saint was an extremely important spiritual figure. Although, the game got pretty loose with the hard details. Still, the protagonist's power impressed all the more when she wielded it as the Saint.

Whoops, got a little offtrack there.

Anyway, what grievances had the queen come to air?

"Please go ahead, I'm listening," I said.

"Very well. First, allow me to apologize on Julius's behalf. You shouldn't have had to oblige his selfishness."

I'd never dreamed she'd start with a sorry. Awfully polite for a supposed head honcho of the villain parade.

"As his mother, I struggle to understand how things could have come to this. It might sound terrible for me to say, but we could have handled this matter if he were to simply take a viscount's daughter as his lover. But at the palace, he was always so curt with the girls, it never occurred to me he could become this obsessed with one." Her Majesty glanced over at me.

Her clear blue eyes threatened to swallow me up.

Now wait a minute. This woman is gorgeous.

Her flustered innocence a moment ago made it all the more difficult to believe she was in her thirties. In fact…she was downright *adorable*.

"However, I still cannot condone your behavior in that arena. Your fighting style mocks honor. As a noble, you should have found a more amicable approach, no?"

Yeah, sure, but the main reason I did any of it was to release all my pent-up stress. I didn't really care to be "amicable."

I pursed my lips and meekly glanced over at Livia and Angie, hoping one of them might come to my aid. Alas, neither paid attention to me. I feared they were still mulling over what that earl's daughter had said earlier. They didn't even notice me trying to make eye contact.

I turned to Luxion for help instead—praying desperately in my head that he would answer me. Thankfully, his electronic voice came trickling into my ear a second later.

"She expects *you* to find a more amicable approach? How foolish. Does she not realize what kind of person you are?"

Alas, my partner was a jerk.

You sad, useless excuse for an AI! You should be nicer to me.

Mylene saw me glancing over at Angie and Livia and seemed to mistake my silence for something else. She grinned teasingly. "Oh, is *that* what this is all about? Ah, to be young."

I had no idea what she was talking about. *Well, whatever it is, it benefits me. Best to keep my mouth shut.*

"Leon, I'm sure you're already aware of this, but you have a number of enemies at the palace," she said. "People had great expectations for Julius. Not to mention the other high lords' sons. Have you thought carefully about your future?"

Screw the palace, had she seen how many people hated me at this school? *Honestly, why must such terrible things happen to such a moral and upstanding*

person as myself?

"Of course I have," I lied, pretending I had any clue what was going on politically. In truth, I was counting on Angie's daddy to keep me safe. I had no plans to show my face at the palace and no interest in moving up in the world. I definitely didn't want to get involved with any of the people in that world. They could demote me for all I cared.

And those people who'd nursed those great expectations for Julius? Crappy judges of character, to the last. I mean, seriously. The guy proved his uselessness the second he gave up Angie for Marie. He had no business being crown prince.

"You're quite powerful," the queen went on. "If only Julius could have had someone like you by his side, perhaps he wouldn't have wandered so far down the wrong path."

I wondered about that. At the very least, I would have been able to push Marie away from him. Then maybe I could have found some other in-game reason to nudge him toward Livia. Of course, by doing that, I would have made Angie my enemy. Ugh. No matter what strategy I chased—whether it was the "right" choice in-game or the right choice in reality—it all came down to a big headache.

Unfortunately, cozying up to the prince seemed like even more of a pain than the position I was now mired in. Not that there was any point in entertaining hypotheticals.

"I don't think the result would have changed even if I had been," I said finally.

"Oh? Well, regardless, I had another motive for coming here today. Something I would like you to help me with."

"What's that?"

She sat up straighter. "Since I married into the Holfort royal family from abroad, I never had the opportunity to attend this academy. I hope to make some memories of my own. Would you help me, Leon? I've always been so curious about this place. All the women I know always speak so fondly of it. I admit, I've been envious."

This thirty-year-old married woman with a mischievous grin wanted me to help her make memories at the academy?

In my previous life, I might've said, *Learn some self-respect, you old bat,* but this was different.

I stood up and took her hands in mine.

Ah, and what beautiful hands they are.

"Huh?" She gawked at me in surprise.

"Miss Mylene, I would be happy to honor your request… Please marry me!"

Her cheeks went crimson.

Livia and Angie both leaped from their chairs.

"Leon, what in the world are you doing?!"

"Y-you…! You're speaking to the *queen*!"

Even Master seemed shocked by the sudden proposal. I had to pat myself on the back for managing to crack through that gentlemanly exterior.

I'm king of the world!

"Mister Leon," my master said, "if that's a joke, it isn't very funny."

Yeah, yeah, but just think for a minute: Why did any of us go to this school? To study? No! This academy existed within an otome game. We students had only one objective, and that was to get hitched! In other words, if Queen Mylene wanted to make memories, this had to be what she was referring to.

She wanted someone to confess their feelings to her.

My deduction skills are first-rate. Behold my brilliance!

Besides, in all seriousness, Queen Mylene would make for a perfect marriage partner. "She's already had kids," you say? Hey, proof she's fertile! Nobles needed a woman who could produce an heir, so that made her perfect for me. "She's not a virgin," you say? Most of the girls in the school weren't either. Virgins were a mere figment of culture anyway—they had no meaningful currency. "What about her age?" you say? Who cares. I would take an adorable, poised thirty-some-year-old over an untrained teenage beast any day! I'd rather

marry a human than a monster.

Thanks to partner hunting, I understood all too well now how pointless it was to nurse fantasies about women. If I had to choose between the girls at the academy and Miss Mylene, I wouldn't hesitate to pick the latter!

Wait, hold up. I proposed as a joke, but the more I thought about it, she *was* perfect for me—you know, other than the difference in our status.

"I like you! No, I love you!" My mouth moved before I could consider my words.

"I-I don't know what to say. I have children—and a husband. Besides, I'm so much older than you." Her cheeks heated, and her eyes teared up with embarrassment.

"That doesn't matter to me. You're radiant. Even if you already have a family, I still love—guh?!" Something big and flat slammed into the back of my head.

Who did it?! I'll send them flying!

I spun around to find Prince Julius, his face drawn in anger. His suit was disheveled, the buttons open to reveal his chest. Even his hair was in disarray. He looked worn out, and he clutched a tray in trembling hands.

"Oh, uh, Your Highness," I blurted.

He lifted the tray up again. "You have some nerve, trying to seduce my mother. It's only a shame I can't cut you down right here!"

Oh, he's actually *mad. I guess I am hitting on his mom right in front of him.*

Miss Mylene looked bewildered. "H-hold on a moment, Julius. This isn't what you—"

"Mother, enough! Let go of his hand this instant! Bartfort, release her now!"

"Yeah, as if," I huffed.

Julius's patience snapped, and his fist flew, collided, and sent me reeling through the air.

"Leon!" Her Majesty cried in dismay. She scrambled out of her chair to chase after me, but Prince Julius grabbed her wrist and dragged her out of our café.

“Please, Mother, get ahold of yourself,” he said. “My setup is right next door. I’ll listen to what you have to say there. Honestly, why are you even here at the academy?”

As I watched them leave from the floor, I wondered whether the queen was leaving with the good memories she’d hoped for.

***

It was break time over at Café Princess as well, so the guests had cleared out. Marie was in good spirits, counting their newly earned rolls of cash, when Julius suddenly stormed in with an unexpected guest.

What’s the Villain-in-Chief doing here?! Marie ducked behind a curtain in the back of the room.

The queen wasn’t the *main* villain in the game; she just sided with the villainess. However, that made her Marie’s natural enemy. Unfortunately, Marie lacked the power to defy her just yet.

Kyle tugged at Marie’s skirt. “Master, I’m sick of this. The customers claim paying the service fee gives them every right to feel me up. I’m not taking another shift.”

Marie’s annoyance flared. *Don’t be silly! You have no idea how hard I work to earn enough to cover everyone’s daily expenses. The least you can do is grin and bear it when I ask for your help.*

In truth, necessity drove her present preoccupation with money. Ever since that awful duel, Julius’s family had reduced his monthly allowance out of frustration with his conduct. Meanwhile, the other four boys were, in short, destitute. Marie was working to feed five—plus herself—so milking the café for all it was worth only made sense.

“Just three days,” she promised Kyle. “We’ll be able to relax after that.”

“You mean it?”

He certainly is fussy for a servant, she thought as she once more peered through the curtain.

Outside, the queen perched on a sofa with Julius seated across from her, a

coffee table sandwiched between them.

“Mother, I don’t care to see you keep company with Bartfort. You mustn’t let your guard down around him.”

Mylene remained quiet, her gaze piercing.

“I fear you may not be aware of this,” Julius went on, “but that man will deploy any manner of underhanded trick in the name of profit. What’s more, he’s a conniving coward. His confession to you, in full knowledge of your status, is nothing short of absurd.”

But Mylene seemed more interested in surveying their setup, her scowl growing fierce.

Marie blanched. *Oh boy, she’s super mad.*

Marie could guess why, too—the queen now sat in a parlor clearly designed for her son, the prince, to entertain and serve female guests. Marie trembled with fear, newly cognizant of the danger she might be in.

“Julius,” said the queen lightly, “I thought you said you and your friends were running a café?”

“Oh yes, we are. Marie contrived a few alterations for us. What do you think of my uniform? Doesn’t it flatter me?” Julius gestured to his suit.

Jilk, standing behind the prince, wore similar attire, although the hours spent entertaining paying customers had left them both a touch, er, mussed.

“Bring that girl out here this instant,” Mylene said, her voice virulently cold. “I very much desire to hear *her* explanation for all this.”

Julius deflated. “Oh, Mother. You’re no different from the others. If that’s the attitude you’re going to take, I can’t possibly let you meet Marie.”

Thank you, Julius! I knew you would protect me, my prince!

The queen slammed her hands on the table. The noise echoed through the room as Mylene glared at her son. He cowered before her, as did Jilk. “I said: Bring. Her. Here.”

“N-no!” Julius protested. “Although, I will consider it *if* you agree to recognize

our relationship.”

“Do you imagine you have the least right to say such a thing after the scandal of your duel?” Mylene demanded, aghast. “Jilk, *you’re* supposed to ensure these things don’t happen in the first place! And Julius, please, open your eyes. Only a moment ago you condemned Leon for lowbrow profiteering. Now please, in that light, explain this ‘café’ to me again!”

The queen pointed forcefully at a menu. “Do you see this? One hundred dia for subpar tea and a paltry snack? And a service fee besides? Barely a season ago, you were the heirs of the most prominent houses in the kingdom, and now look at you. What do you even think you’re wearing?!”

All right, Marie had always known Café Princess was less a café than a front for the academy’s girls to pay money for high-class male attention—but it was so popular!

Mylene wasn’t finished. “A conniving coward… Was that what you called Leon?”

“W-well, yes, I—”

“Julius. The conditions of your loss included breaking ties with Marie. And yet, here you are. Now imagine how difficult it might be to discern which of you is truly the conniving coward whose word cannot be trusted.”

“Your Majesty,” Jilk protested, “Julius is only lending us aid. He has broken no promise—”

“Excuses! Shameful excuses. And you have the gall to call Leon ‘absurd’? Julius, tell me this. Would you ever consider a man who abandoned his betrothed for another woman and lost his position as crown prince anything other than *absurd*? Do you truly think yourself in any position to judge another?”

“N-no, um, I… But I—” Julius stuttered incoherently.

“Well? Answer me!”

The mood in the room grew heavy and darkened as Mylene continued to lecture her son. Soon, Greg surreptitiously fled out the back. Chris and Brad, the

lucky jerks, missed the whole thing, having left earlier to do some shopping.

Marie, meanwhile, remained huddled in the back of the room, praying for time to pass more quickly.

What's wrong with that old bat? Why's she taking that stupid background character's side?!

***

I sat listlessly in a chair with my knees drawn to my chest, my cheek red and swollen from Prince Julius's whopper of a punch. "She's exactly my type, too," I mumbled in frustration.

An exasperated Angie rounded on me. "You idiot! What knight tries to seduce the queen of the kingdom they serve?!"

Exactly. If only she weren't the queen, she'd be perfect! That's why I'm so torn up about this.

Master had left to return to his work, leaving only Angie, Livia, and myself in the classroom. Livia's eyes had been glued to her lap for a while now, and she made no move to respond to my lament or Angie's scolding.

A knock suddenly fell on the door, and a girl peeked her head in. I didn't recognize her.

"Um, do you mind if I step in for a moment?" she asked.

"Got a bad case of heartbreak, I'm afraid—we're closed today," I said.

"Oh, um, that really puts me in a bind. Miss Olivia, can I ask for your help?" The girl turned to Livia, pleading.

"Ah, this is Miss Carla," Livia told me, speaking up for the first time since Mylene had left. "She asked me to introduce you two."

"Yes, I asked her to mediate for me."

Angie's eyes narrowed, but when she noticed Livia tense up, her gaze softened. Even so, when she returned her attention to Miss Carla, her face was stiff.

Are these two going to be okay? It seems like things suddenly got super

awkward between them.

Miss Carla slipped into the room despite Angie's scrutiny. "My name is Carla Fou Wayne. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Baron."

Carla? Wayne? Kinda familiar… Oh boy, where was this going?

"Uh, yeah," I said. "What's up?"

Beside me, Angie continued to glare at the girl, saying nothing.

"Uh, um, she's from the general class," Livia explained, flustered. "When I was advertising for the café, she asked me to introduce her to you, Leon."

Was this also fate?

I released my knees, setting my feet on the floor, and, with a more serious expression, instructed Miss Carla to take a seat as well. "Might I inquire as to why you asked Livia to introduce us? Or more accurately, why you asked her to *mediate*?"

Livia looked bewildered by the change in my demeanor, but if Miss Carla's objective had been a simple meeting, she wouldn't have gone through Livia. She had to know a guy like me was obligated to talk to any girl who approached him.

Thing was, I thought I remembered this exact type of event happening in the game. The protagonist, oblivious to the intricate rules of nobility, didn't always notice when others used her to their own advantage.

"Oh, so you understand what this is about?" Miss Carla sounded surprised. "I should have known, given all your accomplishments. You're not like the other boys here."

"I'm flattered."

Livia shot a pleading look at Angie, hoping for some clarity. Angie absolutely had something to say, but for some reason, she kept her gaze at her feet, lips pressed firmly shut.

At a loss, Livia turned to me. "Leon, what's going on? Everyone is acting so grim all of a sudden."

“Silence, please.” Miss Carla’s true colors were showing. She no longer had any interest in Livia. “We have an important matter to discuss.”

Livia, for her part, gaped in confusion.

Tch. Do you realize how ugly you look when you treat Livia like that—and right in front of me? I wondered. *Nah, I’m the idiot for expecting anything better from a female student at this rotten school.*

Regardless, this was gonna be a pain.

“Baron, I beg of you, save my family,” said Miss Carla. “No, please…save us all.”

Angie lifted her head to pin Miss Carla with an unholy glare. She obviously knew the girl had come here to request this from the start, which made me realize the same.

After all, there was a reason Carla’s name sounded so familiar.

Well, this sure brings back memories.

***

As the first day of the school festival drew to a close, I flopped down on my bed. Angie and Livia had gone home before the afterparty, so Raymond, Daniel, and I had been forced to entertain ourselves.

While I mulled over the day’s events, Luxion drifted in front of me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Only scum commit adultery.”

“What the hell are you on about?”

“Those were your words, actually. Don’t you remember what you did today? You tried to seduce the queen. Now then, allow me to confirm—did you not say that cheating was an unforgivable offense?”

I waved him off. “You don’t get it. I couldn’t contain my feelings.”

“Everything you say is so superlatively hypocritical that I’m actually impressed. Perhaps you should consider carrying a mirror at all times so you can remind yourself of your own true colors?”

“No, I mean, come on… If I had to say yes or no to Miss Mylene, obviously I’d say yes!”

“She is the queen. If you had to say yes or no, it should obviously be a resounding no.”

Yeah, okay, but he had no way to understand my heart—he was an inorganic AI, bound by “reason” and “logic”!

“You realize, when she spoke of wanting memories of the academy, she likely intended for you to escort her to the other students’ stalls?” he continued. “The fact that you instantly took that as invitation to court her drives me to question your sanity. Oh, pardon me. I suppose that wasn’t much of a question to begin with, was it?”

“*You’re* the idiot here. This academy exists for one reason and one reason only—finding a marriage partner. She obviously meant she wanted someone to propose to her.” I froze. “Wait, no, hold on. Maybe she *did* mean she wanted to go around the school together. Like, for a date? Was that it? Augh, I never considered that possibility. But the point of this school *is* getting hitched, right?”

Although his voice remained as inflectionless as always, Luxion somehow seemed exasperated. “That is a primary objective for the boys, yes, but the academy *is* a place of learning.”

“Seriously?! First I’ve heard of that.”

“Wonderful. At last, you may begin to devote yourself to your studies.”

“Sorry, but I still have a bride to find.”

“You haven’t yet given up on that? You don’t know when to quit.”

I shrugged. “I’m the kinda guy who keeps going even when everyone around me hates my guts.”

What a relief it would be to simply forfeit, but I couldn’t escape society’s rules, no matter how much I might relish every chance to fight them. The worst part? Even if I *did* try to run away, others would suffer the consequences. The other nobles would point fingers at and whisper about my family. I couldn’t let

that happen, not to my parents, not to my brothers.

Huh? What about my sisters, you ask? Pfft, who gives a flying fart about them?

“I suppose it’s all a matter of perspective,” Luxion said. “Regardless. Master, are you really going to help that girl?”

I frowned up at the ceiling. “We have a holiday after the festival. I’ll help her then.”

“This will not benefit you.”

I couldn’t argue with that, but by asking Livia to introduce us and mediate, Carla had gone and made the request official. Of course, she’d deceived Livia to get her way, but in the eyes of the other nobles, it looked like Livia had accepted her request and entrusted it to me. It didn’t matter that Livia hadn’t known what Carla wanted beforehand. If I turned Carla down now, it would reflect poorly on Livia, as she technically held the responsibility to complete the task. Also, if I bowed out now, people would regard me as a lousy ally. Basically, Carla had lured the both of us into a trap.

I could’ve refused her for that lack of transparency, sure. I wasn’t absolutely obligated to help the underhanded. I honestly didn’t want to help her, either, but I had another reason to do so, and a pressing one.

Carla wanted us to eliminate some air pirates. Pretty standard stuff for nobility. The problem ran deeper than that.

“If her region is suffering at the hands of the unlawful, should she not request aid from the crown instead?” Luxion asked.

“She should, yeah. The palace is way more ready to take pity on her sob story. But, you see, *these* pirates have an essential item for the protagonist.”

“Ah, then you have to undertake this request for game-related reasons?”

“In order for the protagonist—Livia—to wield the power of the Saint, she needs three specific items,” I explained. “Two of them, she must acquire on her own. The pirates have the third. You can’t get it until you wipe them off the map.”

The first item, the Holy Bracelet, was hidden within the dungeon underneath our very feet. The pirates had the second item, the Holy Necklace. The last in the trinity was the largest, and it currently hung out in the capital's main temple—the Saint's Staff. Livia needed the first two to become the Saint. Once the temple recognized her Sainthood, they automatically bestowed the staff upon her. After she had all of these, her power would be greatly amplified.

"But I thought the air pirate event wasn't supposed to happen until our second year," I muttered.

Wasn't it scripted to be the turning point in the middle of the story? We should have had about another year to prepare. In the game, the protagonist borrowed her love interests' help to defeat the pirates menacing a certain earl's domain.

Incidentally, this was where the routes split and the protagonist got locked into one specific route.

"Can't *you* request the kingdom's assistance instead?" Luxion asked. "Wayne House is only a baronetcy. As a vassal house, they serve an earl, don't they?"

"Yeah…but they're kind of in a bind right now. Brad's former fiancée is from that earl's house—Offrey House. Carla's one of her minions—*she's* pulling the strings."

"Is this other woman like Angelica?"

"Nah, this one's hot garbage."

The Offrey girl was, in fact, my problem customer—the earl's daughter who'd ground my face into the floor of the café earlier today. She'd been awful enough in the game, but meeting her today had proven she was far worse in person. I'd hoped for a pleasant surprise, like Angie, but too bad for me.

I should've guessed. In the game, the Offrey girl also lured those pirates into her territory to begin with, all so she and her family could make them henchmen. That in turn laid some of the groundwork that led to war in the game's final act.

When I shared this with Luxion, he said, "Master, you seem to be prioritizing your actions based on the benefits they paid in the game, but I see little merit in

involving yourself here in reality. Do you not agree?”

“If Prince Julius and his gang are going to be so useless, I have no choice. I can’t stand by and watch the situation devolve into war.”

That would be even more of a pain.

Frankly, if Livia didn’t become the Saint, I’d have to take Luxion and flee the continent wholesale. Basically, if I let this problem escalate, none of this would ever be as simple as “meet opponent, beat opponent.”

“But why is Carla—no, you said the one pulling her strings was the ex-fiancée, Offrey—why are they pushing this request on *you*?”

“Trap, duh. I told you, even I was turned off by her personality. In the game, she’s so despicable it’s almost funny.”

In the event, the Offrey girl got so irritated with the protagonist for being a mere commoner at the vaunted academy that she lured the protagonist into the pirate fight. Who knew I’d get wrapped up in it as well?

See, in the game, the Offrey girl had an issue with being called “new money” and “upstart” all the time, so seeing the love interests fawn over the protagonist pushed all her rage buttons. But since the idiot brigade barely even noticed Livia in our reality, I couldn’t really track her motives this time.

“Master, if you keep this up, then won’t *you* end up as Olivia’s partner?”

“Me?” I scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. I’m a background character.”

“If you say so.” He paused. “Are you certain this is all right? From what you describe, it seems Olivia should be at the forefront of this resolution. If this involves the Saint’s equipment, should she not, as the Saint, retrieve it herself?”

“You and I are better suited for the grunt work. Besides, Livia couldn’t handle this all by herself, not in her current state. I have to take over for now—and anyway, it’s more efficient this way.”

“You’re being overprotective.” With that final warning, he went silent altogether.

Chapter 3:
Airbike Race

ON DAY TWO of the school festival, our café enjoyed a modicum of peace, thanks to those idiot customers reaping the consequences of their foolish behavior the day before.

If I had to name one problem, though…

“Livia, please take care of that table over there.”

“Um, okay!”

Our two waitresses had descended into some seriously awkward vibes around one another.

“Are those two really okay?” Raymond asked.

“Probably feeling the effects from yesterday,” I guessed. “I wish they could shrug it off—that customer was talking straight nonsense.”

Even though Angie and Livia kept looking like they each had something to say to the other, neither could find the courage to speak first.

“Let’s keep an eye on them for now,” I suggested. “I’m sure they’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Raymond. “They come from completely different walks of life. That was inevitably going to impact their friendship.”

Given Raymond had the emotional sophistication of a brick, those words weren’t entirely convincing coming from him, but I did get it, kind of. The wealthy and impoverished had vastly different opinions on just about everything, rooted in vastly divergent values. Likewise, Angie and Livia often viewed things from opposite ends of the spectrum.

I glanced at the clock. “Maybe they need a break.”

Raymond adjusted his glasses. “That might be a good idea. We don’t have many customers right now.”

Honestly, after the disaster of yesterday, I was fine with fewer guests.

However, Raymond seemed genuinely concerned. “You know, we really are going to end up in the red at this rate.”

“It’s fine. I can reel in cash on the last day thanks to you-know-what.” I grinned at him.

“Oh, you must be talking about… Hey, wait! More gambling?!”

On the last day of the festival, we had a few exhibitions, or specifically, contests. These events allowed students to display skills they’d honed during their time at the academy and were the real centerpieces of the festival. Each one promised a cash prize. Naturally, everyone placed bets on who would win.

While I did question the ethics of running a gambling ring at a school festival, I couldn’t help but see it as a prime opportunity to rake in the dough. After all, I had Luxion at my side. His ability to gather information and analyze the lineup exponentially increased my odds of winning. Already, I could pick out the winners with reasonable confidence.

Raymond shook his head. “You sure do love a wager.”

Excuse me!

“Just the opposite, I *hate* gambling.”

But on the other hand, I absolutely *loved* winning.

***

Livia and Angie walked around the school together, surrounded by the enthusiasm of the festival. Normally, the two walked arm in arm, but today, they maintained a brittle distance.

Livia had no idea what Angie was thinking or feeling, and it seemed as if Angie couldn’t figure out how best to approach Livia either. Livia guessed that neither of them had ever given much thought to the disparity in their upbringings before. However, as of yesterday, a gap had formed between them.

Finally, Angie said, “This crepe tastes really good.”

“Y-yeah, it does.”

And that was the end of their conversation.

Minutes passed in silence as Livia struggled to determine how best to speak, but the more she thought, the more awkward it became.

In the midst of this, her eyes landed on a display board: a list of the participants in the airbike race. Participants were chosen from each grade, and those who won their respective races moved on to face other top contenders in a bracket-style tournament. Competitors continued to move up until the final race determined the victor. A few other events were also slated to take place, but the spectators seemed especially excited for the airbike race.

Livia glanced through the other events on the board. “There sure are a lot more matches for the airbike tournament than any other event.”

Angie lifted her chin, emboldened by the opportunity to impart knowledge. “The airbike race is the most popular of all the events and is highly anticipated every year. The format is simple, and the tournament element increases the fun of betting. The other events are relatively straightforward, or one-round competitions—you merely put your money on who you think likely to win in the end—whereas for the airbike race, you can also predict the order in which the competitors will cross the finish line. There’s also a rather large payout for the victor.”

(In modern terms, you’d liken it to horse or boat racing. Money shifted hands in enormous sums throughout the duration of the tournament as well.) Livia’s eyes widened, impressed. “You sure know a lot about this.”

Angie grinned tentatively. “I’ve attended the festival several times, even before I enrolled at the academy. A rather promising candidate is expected to take the championship this year, but Jilk is representing the first-years, and he’s a more than proficient rider. I think a number of spectators are eager to see who will come out on top.”

“I didn’t realize Jilk was so skilled. Oh, there’s his name.” It brought Livia a bit of delight to see him on the list of other competitors, but something weighed on her mind. “Leon isn’t participating?”

“Leon? His grades are terrible, and he barely has the qualifications to compete. Besides, the first-years have Jilk. We needn’t consider anyone else.”

In Livia's estimation, Leon was capable of doing just about anything, so she was sure he *could* ride. Although, all things given, it was likely Jilk was simply better at it.

"That's unfortunate," she murmured. "I think I would have enjoyed cheering for Leon."

"Yes, I agree, but he's not particularly motivated. He was gushing earlier about how he was going to 'make bank.'"

Livia shook her head. "I wish he wasn't so hooked on gambling."

"I couldn't agree more."

***

Marie and Kyle had left the café to do some shopping, and now they returned, both cradling bags in their arms. On the way, Marie paused to check the tournament roster for the airbike race and briefly scanned over the other events as well. The names of one of her five love interests appeared in each of the different competitions.

"If everyone wins, we'll have enough money to reach our target. Then we won't have to worry about our budget anymore."

Kyle's face drooped with exhaustion. "Why not use all the money we've earned already to bet on their victory? They're the anticipated winners anyway, right? And if they *do* win, the payouts will be enormous."

To Kyle's evident surprise, Marie firmly shook her head. "Absolutely not. I detest gambling."

She hated it with every fiber of her being.

I felt the same way in my previous life. My boyfriend lost money that way all the freaking time, and all it did was push us further into debt. I want to earn as much as possible, but we have to do it slow and steady.

"Steady" was a bit questionable at this point, but regardless, Marie had only bitter memories when it came to gambling.

Things are no different in this world. My parents here have nothing to their name because of their gambling debt. Hmph. Makes me miss my old family.

Everything was better *back then. I had so much fun when I was a kid.*

By contrast, calling her current family—a viscount house—even remotely decent would be flattery of the highest order.

Marie shifted the bags in her arms and started back toward their café. “Well, time to get to it and start earning more cash. I expect your help, Kyle.”

“I suppose I have no other choice. I’ll do my best to earn my keep.”

The two of them left the tournament roster, returning to a troubling situation at the café: Julius and the others, swarmed by a stampede of women.

***

The third day of the festival was finally upon us—the day of the main events.

I sat pretty on a cushy sofa in a premium lounge overlooking the oversized arena. The coffee table before me creaked under mountains of gold and silver coins as well as stacks of cash. I couldn’t stop grinning as I counted them.



“Master, about the next race… It seems several of the competitors are coordinating to help one specific member win. We should change our predictions to numbers twelve and four,” said Luxion through my surreptitious earpiece. He’d sneaked into the waiting room for the athletes to secretly gather intel, i.e., this was how I’d amassed my new fortune.

I called a waiter over. “I’d like to change my bets to numbers twelve and four for the next race. Here you are.”

I handed the waiter a wad of cash, and he retreated for a moment before returning with the ticket proof of my bet.

I threw my arms over the back of the couch and scanned the room, where the other waiters rushed about to register everyone else’s bets. “Winning is so much fun!”

Across from me, Angie and Livia fixed me with icy glares. The two of them sat beside one another, sipping juice as they watched the festivities.

“You really do enjoy being an instigator.” Angie shook her head.

“Leon, if you get addicted to gambling, it will come back to haunt you later,” Livia warned.

All around us sat students who’d bet enormous sums of money only to lose it all. I had no doubt they resented me for my winning streak.

“It’s fine. I’m not going to lose. At this rate, even if I did lose once or twice, I’m winning so much it wouldn’t even matter.”

The towers of gold and silver coins gleamed beneath the light. Soon enough, just as Luxion predicted, number twelve won first place and number four took second. I had again earned another heap of cash.

“Ah, I can’t stop grinning!”

I had raked in so much money at this point that it made the little bit I’d lost on my café seem laughable. Plus, in the next race, Jilk was making his debut.

Jilk—that is, Jilk Fia Marmoria—hailed from a court viscounty and was Prince Julius’s best friend and foster brother. His long green hair and gentle smile hid the personality of a malicious schemer. However, he was also a talented airbike

rider. Despite being a first-year, he was considered one of the most promising contenders.

You better make me rich, Jilk.

"Master, there's a slight problem."

The moment Luxion spoke in my hidden earpiece, I had a sudden premonition—a bad one. I hunched forward and massaged my temples, indicating I was ready to listen.

"Jilk is the representative for the first-years, just as planned, but it seems he's being targeted."

Targeted?

My expression turned grim as I glanced down at the arena.

Concerned, Livia said, "Oh, I guess you really did want to participate, didn't you, Leon?"

"Huh?" I tilted my head at her in confusion.

Angie wore a guilty look. "I'm sorry. Jilk was the majority vote on the executive committee. My opinion alone wouldn't have swayed them."

"Hmm?"

Huh—did the two of them think I wanted to race? True, I had volunteered to take part, but only because boys were required to put their names up for at least one event. I didn't particularly *want* to race, though. I'd planned to spend my time earning dough, and I'd gotten what I wanted.

From the perspective of a more normal male student, however, these events provided a prime opportunity to appeal to girls. With an outstanding performance here, you could change the way the ladies viewed you. In other words, winning could give a guy an enormous leg-up in the struggle to secure a partner. Thus, some boys grew so obsessed with winning that they got sneaky to secure victory.

I didn't think that was the only thing going on in Jilk's case, however. Something was off from the moment he left the starting line.

Angie noticed immediately. “They’ve marked Jilk.”

Although only a first-year, his talent stood out. He could’ve been targeted for that alone, but something about this seemed personal. The other competitors surrounded him and smashed against his bike. This was an attack, pure and simple.

Tears welled in Livia’s eyes. “H-how can they do such a thing?! I feel so awful for Mister Jilk!”

Yeah, me too! I’d bet on Jilk, after all, and it’d suck for me personally if he lost.

Livia’s concern, on the other hand, was probably more instinct than anything else. Maybe somewhere deep down, she knew they could have fallen in love if things had played out just a little differently.

Not that this had anything to do with me.

“So that’s what’s going on,” Angie mumbled. “Those competitors are Clarice’s followers. She’s from an earl family.”

Livia tilted her head. “Clarice? Um, is she…?”

As the competitors moved into the final leg of the race, Jilk broke through the upperclassmen’s ranks to take the lead. He had to deploy some insane acrobatic moves to slip out of their blockade.

“The way he’s accelerating, it’s almost as if he’s tampered with his bike to make it faster than everyone else’s,” Luxion observed.

It did look like his bike performed on a different level than the rest—that was how magnificently he managed to overtake them, and all at the last second. Naturally, the crowd went wild.

I was happy, too, of course. You know, for betting reasons.

“However, even if he manages to win this one, he won’t be able to go into the finals,” said Luxion.

“Think he’s done for the day then?” I muttered quietly so the girls wouldn’t hear me.

“He’s broken a rib,” Luxion reported. “It cracked in the first attack, but after

he pushed himself at the end, it snapped. No matter how convenient your people's healing magic may be, they won't have him ready for the next race."

Jilk had barely managed to squeeze through the goal ahead of everyone else. As soon as he got back to the airship at the finish line, he collapsed, and the medical personnel had to carry him away on a stretcher.

Angie jumped to her feet and started toward the door.

"Hey!" I called after her. "Where are you going?"

"I *am* the head representative for the first-years at the festival. I must confirm the extent of Jilk's injuries and, if needed, call on a substitute. I'm going to speak with the other executive committee members."

Livia started after her.

I grabbed a bag and shoveled all the money on the table into it before hurrying along behind them.

***

"Jiiilk!" Marie's voice reverberated off the walls of the medical office. She clung to him as he lay in bed, bawling her eyes out.

He smiled, trying to reassure her. The white of the bandages wrapped around his head stood out starkly against the green of his long hair. "I'll be all right, Miss Marie. As you can see, I'm still alive."

Prince Julius and Kyle were in the room as well. The rest of Team Love Interest were all wrapped up in their own individual events.

Meanwhile, Angie spoke with the other first-year executive committee members. "I suppose we'll have to find a replacement."

They all looked troubled by her statement.

"B-but the problem is, who could we pick?"

"All the other talented boys are participating in different events. It won't be easy to find someone worthy."

Meanwhile, Livia grasped my arm and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Do, um, do you think Mister Jilk will be all right?"

“He’ll be good as new in three days. Pretty incredible they can heal a broken bone that quickly.”

Magic sure was amazing. With that speed, it was almost like this world was trying to show up the medical science of my previous one.

“Depending on the conditions of the injury, I could have him healed up in a day,” Luxion dutifully noted in my earpiece. “No, I wouldn’t even need a full twenty-four hours.”

Livia looked puzzled. “Three days? That seems long. I could have him healed up much faster than that.”

Few people in the world could use healing magic. The protagonist had particular skill in that arena; it certainly made her special enough to be named the Saint. But Livia had no clue she was so precious. From her perspective, everyone’s failure to accomplish the things she could do so effortlessly was a total mystery.

“Livia, your idea of normal is actually pretty abnormal,” I said, hoping to convince her to keep her skills on the down low for now. “It’s best you keep that commentary to yourself or you might annoy the doctor.”

“R-really? Well, if you say so…”

Although she didn’t seem to fully grasp my implication, I found it endearing that she took my advice so easily.

Please, stop, or I’ll actually fall for you.

More importantly, while I knew Livia was more proficient at healing than the specialists at the school, the revelation of her power would inevitably cause problems. It would hurt the doctor’s pride, sure, but worse, the rumors of the event would attract all kinds of undesirable outcomes. We had to be discreet about when and where Livia made her power apparent.

“But the prize for the airbike race was so huge! My moooooney!” Marie wailed, at last revealing the true (and frankly, deplorable) reason for her distress.

Prince Julius softly laid his hand on her back in an attempt to assuage her grief. “It’ll be all right, Marie. The others and I will win our events, I promise.”

Unsurprisingly for a noble's academy, they allotted a tremendous amount of money for the festival event prizes. In terms of my previous world, it was equivalent to several million yen. The prize pool for each event differed, though, and the airbike race clocked in the highest at about thirty mill. That discrepancy clearly indicated the popularity of the event.

"But I was really counting on this one," Marie moaned. "All the others combined still only add up to half the prize money for the airbike race!"

Jilk looked guilty. "I-I apologize. I never thought they would go so far."

Marie wiped away her tears. "Seriously, aren't the upperclassmen being horribly cruel? We should demand compensation for your injuries."

Both Jilk and Prince Julius blushed, as if she were showing concern for them, not her profit.

They do say love is blind.

"She's been on about money this entire time. Does that really not bother them?" I grumbled quietly.

Livia furrowed her brows. "I'm, um, sure she's worried about Mister Jilk, too. They did all abandon their positions to be together, after all."

Yeah, yeah, they'd thrown away their titles for her. Prince Julius and the others had all been heirs, born with silver spoons, the world their oyster, all that jazz—but in their devotion to Marie, they'd broken off their engagements and, subsequently, been disowned.

Honestly? It was a bit disturbing how readily they'd sacrificed everything.

"Yeah, I'm not so sure about that," I told Livia. "She seems to love money more than them. That's all she's talked about since we got here."

Just then, the door flew open and some upperclassmen barged in. At the head was a second-year, the daughter of an earl house—Clarice Fia Atlee. She had voluminous orange hair pulled in a low ponytail over her right shoulder. Last I'd seen her, she'd dressed like a real aristocrat, but she'd come out of summer break looking more like a gyaru—full-on Japanese proto-punk. Despite the style change, she was still tall, slender, and beautiful enough to model.

Her new look probably shocked everyone who'd known her as Jilk's prim and proper fiancée—ahem, ex-fiancée. Nonetheless, she was the daughter of court nobility, and she had sway. A squadron of male followers trailed after her, as well as five demi-human servants. They fanned out behind her, as if she had instructed them to show themselves off.

"Oh my, you look *bedraggled*," she said, surveying the man to whom she'd once been betrothed. "Tell me, Jilk, how do you feel?"

Between her cleavage showing through a partially unbuttoned shirt and her untidy uniform, I couldn't figure out whether she was going for a fashion statement or just being a delinquent.

Wait. I guess they're basically the same thing at this academy, aren't they?

Her followers sneered at the rest of us, but the moment they recognized Angie, they hurriedly corrected their behavior.

Jilk, meanwhile, closed his eyes. Perhaps he couldn't stand looking at the evidence of what his betrayal had done to Clarice. I thought she was rocking her new style, personally. Although as long as a girl was cute, I didn't care what she wore.

"So you really were the one behind this, Clarice," Jilk said.

"That's right! After you threw me aside like that, I decided to make you suffer worse than I ever did. I will *never* forgive you!"

When someone that beautiful snapped, it was, in a word, terrifying. Her intimidating aura made her seem like a new, far more threatening person.

"Woof, the fury of a pretty girl is rough," I muttered.

"Leon, how can you say something like that?" Livia whispered. "Please, be serious about this!"

I honored Livia's plea by shutting my trap.

Angie stepped between the feuding ex-couple. She glared, staring down the other girl. "Please, Clarice, this is a medical facility. I may understand how you feel, but openly defying the rules of the race? Are you out of your mind?"

Clarice took a step back but smiled. Her unkempt hair just served to make her

look even wilder. “Don’t you preach at me. None of this would have happened if you’d reined in the prince. You have some nerve, acting all fine and dandy after your betrothed threw you away just like mine did. I can’t believe you. You should be screaming at him the way you used to screech at everyone else!”

Angie’s brows knit. She did have that short fuse. You just had to nudge her a little and she’d explode. Although, she *had* mellowed out a bit lately. Probably Livia’s influence.

“Pardon me, you think I’m ‘fine’?” Angie scoffed. “Do you imagine yourself the heroine of some tragedy? It certainly seems like it, the way you parade around that trail of servants. I suppose your ladylike behavior before was nothing more than a facade.”

“Grr…! What would you know?!”

They looked as if they were about to start throwing fists, so Clarice’s followers intervened. Angie was a duke’s daughter, after all. They didn’t want to make a real enemy out of her.

I guess even followers have their struggles. I can sympathize a little.

Clarice turned her ire back toward Jilk, who was still lying there with his eyes closed. He wouldn’t even look at her.

Have you realized yet how much you screwed up? I wondered. *This is entirely your fault, you dip. Do something about it.*

“You better be out there for the next race,” Clarice said to him. “I’m going to have you beaten within an inch of your life—in front of everyone. And I’ll do it over and over again. You’ll cry, and cry, and beg me for forgiveness. Not that you’ll ever receive it!”

Huh, you guys, I think she might be pissed.

“If that will quell your anger, then do as you will,” said Jilk, cool as a banged-up cucumber. “Simply know that if you ever move against Marie or my friends, I will be the one bearing a grudge.”

By this point, Marie had faded into the background, forgotten. She only snapped back to reality once Jilk mentioned her name, and flinched when she

finally faced Clarice. And then, as if a flip had been switched, Marie was back to her cutesy act—ugh. Hated seeing that.

This chick really is the pitch-perfect successor to my little sister. Always pretending to be good when faced with other people. Hate it, hate it, hate it.

"Revenge won't get you anywhere," said Marie. "You should worry more about—"

"Don't speak as if you know what I've been through! It 'won't get me anywhere'? So what? You think I care?!"

"I-I'm sorry! You're absolutely right!"

That paper-thin acquiescence only fueled Clarice's anger. Little surprise there. Being spoken to like that by the homewrecker who stole your man would infuriate any girl.

More importantly, Angie's eyes also filled with hatred as she glowered at Marie.

At that, Prince Julius pushed his way between them. "That's enough. Angelica, don't look at Marie that way."

Angie deflated. "My apologies, Your Highness."

Ugh, I'm so envious. He's really got that royal vibe down pat.

Prince Julius turned his attention back toward Clarice. "I understand why you have difficulty forgiving Jilk, but I implore you to cease this vile behavior at once."

Clarice dropped her gaze, a dark smile on her face. She looked almost maniacal. "*You're* really going to say that to me? Do you not understand how many people's lives were derailed by that one girl? It's not just Angie. It's me and all the other girls you threw over—people talk constantly, behind our backs, to our faces. Did you know that? No, you didn't. There's no way any of you could know."

Marie's quest to achieve a reverse harem had created a nightmare for other people.

I knew it. This otome game world is downright wretched.

Prince Julius sounded genuinely sorrowful when he said, “I know we have no right to defend ourselves to you who we spurned, but still, I can’t let you keep lashing out like this. It won’t benefit you either.”

I snorted, and before I could help myself, I spoke. “Wow, look at Mr. Perfect over here, he’s really got it all—right face, right words, the whole shebang. I mean, you *also* dumped your fiancée after being seduced, but somehow you make it sound reasonable. I guess a pretty face really is all that matters.”

“Leon, that’s a no-no!” Livia shook her finger at me. “You can’t say things like that. No-no!”



Goddamnit. She was absolutely adorable. I really did understand how she'd been the nexus of the intended reverse harem. Her fundamental charm made the whole thought seem less offensive to me than, say, when I had to look at Marie and her bevy of dumb idiot boy toys. The protagonist's appeal was fearsome indeed.

Prince Julius shot a glare at me, so I turned my gaze ceilingward and clamped my mouth shut.

Clarice spun on her heel. "If you *do* come out, Jilk, I'll make sure they crush you. If you don't, then whoever takes your place will face my wrath in your stead. I'm going to make sure the message is loud and clear—no matter what happens, you are not forgiven."

She smirked as she stalked out. The atmosphere she left behind was tense and uneasy.

I breathed a sigh. "Well, no substitutes for you, I guess. No one's going to want to volunteer with that threat hanging over their heads."

Jilk struggled to lift his injured body out of bed. "Ugh!"

"Jilk, stop!" Prince Julius held his friend down, but Jilk seemed determined.

"Please release me, Your Highness. No one else will get hurt as long as I go out there. That's the best way to handle this."

The best way to handle this would have been to not break off your engagements to begin with, birdbrain.

It was a bit late to say as much now, but I yearned to drive the point home. With things as they were—the future Saint abandoned, the five noble bozos disowned, all these spiraling consequences—I was starting to doubt my ability to anticipate the future. I didn't like that, not one bit.

Suddenly, I realized the other executive committee members were sneaking glances at me.

"Um, hey, what do you think about using Bartfort?"

"You do realize his grades were barely good enough to permit him to compete, right?"

“If anyone’s going to get the crap beaten out of them, better him than Jilk.”

With that, all of them had their gazes fixed on me.

Angie came down on them with the wrath of, well, Angie. “I have *no* intention of sending Leon out there. How could we let *anyone* participate after hearing that tirade? I’m sorry, but the first-years will simply have to withdraw.”

The moment Marie heard that, she shrieked, panicking. “Wait a minute! What will happen to the prize money?!”

If looks could kill, Marie would have dropped dead from the murder on Angie’s face. “What does that matter? What amount of money could be worth even more injuries like Jilk’s?”

The voice of reason, at last! Took a weight off my chest, let me tell you. I had no intention of participating anyway, but I knew if I did, the crowd would definitely be over the moon to see the crap kicked outta me.

No way in hell I’m going out there.

Although… Huh.

“B-but if we don’t find a substitute, your reputation could be at stake, Lady Angelica!” one of the other representatives protested.

“That’s right. You’re the representative for the first-years. It will reflect poorly if you can’t find someone,” said another.

“If only we could find a person willing to race…” said the third.

I tilted my head, contemplating.

Meanwhile, Marie latched onto the representatives’ remarks, desperate to fling me to the wolves. “They’re absolutely right! If we don’t find someone out there, Lady Angelica will be in trouble! Right, Julius?”

God, this twit makes me see red. Every time I heard her voice, I heard my sister—*all* of my sisters, actually, both the ones in my current world and the one from my previous. What a godawful chorus.

“Uh, yes, I suppose so,” the prince stammered. “Angelica *is* our head representative, after all. It would very likely reflect poorly on her if she weren’t

able to offer a standin. People might question her capabilities."

I glanced at Angie, who gave me a troubled smile in return.

"I'm not worried about it," she insisted. "It's not worth someone getting hurt for my sake. I don't want to cause you any more trouble than I already have."

Whoa, okay, wait a minute—what now?!

First of all, what was this talk of Angie taking the fall? And if anyone was going to be the scapegoat, why couldn't it be a spoiled brat like, say, Prince Julius?! I could give a crap about his reputation.

But Angie… I couldn't let Angie's image take a hit. She was basically only in this predicament because she'd protected me. I owed her—and her daddy, if we're being excruciatingly honest. He'd stuck by me all through the fallout of that duel, and if I abandoned Angie here, her dad would definitely consider that my fault.

All right, so what was I going to do?

Get pissed off, of course. I was ever the indignant whiner.

"*Fine*, I'll go."

"What?" Livia blurted in surprise.

Angie gawked. "Leon, I pray you don't pity me—"

"It's not pity! Just get the paperwork done and get me a bike."

One of the executive committee members practically ran out the door. "Awesome! I'll go let everyone know."

Yeah, he means he's going to go tell the whole school I'm about to get my butt handed to me. Delightful.

"Leon, you're not pushing yourself, are you?" Livia asked, her face so bright with concern it blinded me.

"Pushing myself? Nah. I'm being a stubborn jerk!" Really, I had no choice.

Angie's face remained clouded. "No, you can't do this. Clarice's cronies are experienced riders. One of them was last year's champion. If they get rough, there's no limit to what they might do."

“Doesn’t matter. This is one of those times when a guy’s gotta do what a guy’s gotta do!”

At this, the girls seemed to realize they were no match for my determination.

“Leon,” Angie said, “if…if you’re going to go that far, I won’t try to dissuade you again. But I’ll be praying for your victory.”

“I-I’ll be supporting you as well,” Livia stammered. “I promise I will!”

Thank you both, seriously.

In any case, this was now more than me swanning into someone else’s grudge-match—I was in real political danger if I lost the regard of Angie’s dad by failing to give it my all.

Marie was, of course, pleased as punch. “Well, that settles that! This works for me even if you lose. But if you *do* win, that prize money is mine. Yes, this is perfect!”

Would anyone have blamed me if I slammed my fist into that smug mug of hers? I didn’t think so. Welp. Just made me even less willing to part with all the prize money I now intended to win for myself.

Jilk glanced at my face. Disappointment colored his expression as he turned away.

What, you hate me that much, huh?! Well, the feeling’s mutual! I hate your guts, too!

After a pause, he finally said, “I suppose I have no choice but to rely on you.”

“Cry me a river of gratitude, you treacherous green snake,” I replied with a grin. “Because you *will* owe me for this.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure I’ll owe you quite a bit.”

“And you better be ready, because I’m going to have you pay up immediately.”

With that, I left and began my preparations to enter the airbike race.

“Luxion,” I called, “it’s showtime.”

“Of course, Master.”

Chapter 4:
Weakness

I MADE MY WAY to the aircraft hangar to ready myself for the race. I held my helmet in my hands, conversing with Luxion, who had linked up with my bike.

"Are you absolutely certain your duke patron expects such extreme action from you?" he asked. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were one of Angelica's followers. I suppose the role suits an ordinary background character like yourself, doesn't it?"

Thanks, you passive-aggressive little robo-jerk. The nerve, using my own words against me.

In truth, I'd be better likened to a background *prop*. For one, I lacked the outstanding good looks of Prince Julius and the other love interests. By comparison, I had ordinary black hair, ordinary black eyes, and was an ordinary boy. I didn't hate that about myself, though. Ordinary? Sounds perfect to me. Being ordinary ruled.

"Frankly, I'd love to fade into the scenery a bit more. So, alas, villainess minion is too big a role for me, and I must graciously decline. Anyway, how's it look? Think you can do it?"

A long cord extended from Luxion's spherical body to the airbike, which allowed him to reengineer my ride. Someone had clearly already messed with it.

"Ten more minutes and it should be fine. Someone intended sabotage. They tampered with the engine."

I sighed. "These guys really do hate me, don't they?"

Not that I could blame them; I'd earned the enmity of a healthy portion of the student body with that one duel alone.

"Oh, yes, absolutely, the entire school despises you. You should treasure those two girls who tolerate you so well. If you won't see them as potential

marriage partners, at least consider them friends."

"Friends, hm?"

"Outside of Daniel and Raymond, the only ones you have. You ought to take better care of them."

I paused to reflect. Originally, the protagonist and the villainess should never have bonded at all. For a number of basic, obvious reasons, I'd figured true friendship impossible for them to reach, yet they'd grown strangely close.

"I just have to make sure none of us start catching feelings," I said. "Smooth sailing, no waves, no wind, just drifting—that's what I want. Especially when it comes to those two."

"Neither of them interests you? Not in the slightest?"

"I mean, you know, those two are—"

A third-year student interrupted our whispered conversation when he made his way over to me—a tall guy, his hair cropped short, and top it all off, completely ripped. Like, this guy definitely worked out. Thick, corded neck muscles bulged when he looked me up and down. I recognized him as one of the top contenders, i.e., the number one bet for the ultimate victor, in fact.

"So you're replacing Jilk, huh?" he asked. I didn't sense much hostility.

"Well, if it isn't the number one pick," I said. "Need something? I'm a bit busy, so maybe we could talk later? Got some troubles with the engine."

I stepped in front of my bike, keeping Luxion hidden behind me. This guy was a follower of Clarice, so I couldn't be too careful.

The guy seemed surprisingly relaxed. "You already know about me, then? That saves me the trouble of having to warn you. Although, I never dreamed the shovel dude would take Jilk's place. Kinda makes this whole thing more difficult."

Shovel dude? I suppose I had, in fact, used a shovel in that duel with the prince and the other high lords.

"Fancy nickname, thanks."

He let out a self-deprecating laugh and turned serious. “I wanted to apologize ahead of time. I’ve got nothing against you, but I’m going to crush you during the next race. I mean it.”

What a refreshingly straightforward declaration of war! Although if he was bothering to apologize, maybe he could just refrain from beating on me in the first place? I didn’t love pain.

“What, are you really feeling like a heel?” I asked. “Miss Clarice blackmailing you or something?”

“No!” His indignation caught me off guard, and he quickly apologized. “My bad, sorry, don’t mean to yell…”

He cleared his throat, glanced both ways, and got close to explain himself. “My family is court nobility, but we’re at the low end of the table, so to speak. I have no court ranking and I’m not the heir either.”

In other words, this follower was part of the general class.

“Despite my position, the miss is kind to me. When she realized my talent for airbike riding, she financed my training. Thanks to her, after I graduate, I’ll be able to ride for a living.” He placed a hand on one of the nearby bikes, smiling, but with a tinge of sadness. “She really is kind. We all looked up to her. So many of the other girls are just awful. Hearing their followers complain about them, we always felt lucky.”

I kept quiet and listened as he continued.

“The miss has an airbike track at her house. I’ve never lacked for practice because I could go there whenever I wanted. She even hired a coach and sent airbikes to that ex of hers. She always smiled and cheered for him. Kind of hard to watch, but I was happy for her. Then that bastard had the nerve to break off their engagement. She tried to meet with him, persuade him to see sense, but he refused to even see her.”

Well, I couldn’t blame either this guy or Clarice for taking issue with that. Jilk deserved to have the crap kicked out of him. I wouldn’t get in their way.

Have at it, even! Just leave me out of it.

“Then can’t you let me go?” I asked.

“Sorry. I feel for you, but the miss’s orders are absolute. And this one we swore to carry out by whatever means necessary. Even if it cost us our lives.”

Talk about insane determination. Clarice had inspired a profound level of devotion.

“I heard what happened in the medical office,” he said. “I’m sure it’s asking too much, but I hope you won’t think too badly of her. She changed so much over the summer. Started dragging around slaves and partying all night. She wasn’t like that before.”

Slaves and partying? Enh. Tons of academy girls got deep into both of those, my older sister chief among them. I was maybe too desensitized to be fazed.

Crap, it’s terminal now. This cancerous otome game world has taken root in my brain.

I got frustrated for a moment there, but my knee-jerk reaction to this man’s lament was still: *Who cares? That’s normal!*

“So what, are you telling me this because you hope I’ll go easy on you?” I teased.

He laughed. “No such luck, huh? Well, I figured you wouldn’t care much for my circumstances. That’s fine. Think of it as me talking to myself. You can forget I said anything.”

I watched as he left, then plopped myself down on the airbike seat. Slipping the helmet over my head, I snapped the chinstrap in place.

“Modifications complete,” Luxion announced.

“Great.”

“Master, do you really intend to pursue the championship even after hearing him out?”

“Of course. Sucks for them, but I bet a lot of money on my victory.”

As for the fuss I’d kicked up by taking Jilk’s place…? Well, suffice to say that the moment the student body knew I’d been bequeathed an airbike by the

school, they were confident in my inevitable loss. What's more, compared to the rest of the lineup, I underwhelmed as an athlete. In other words, I was, once again, the underdog.

"Are you trying to tell me you need the money?" asked Luxion. "You don't, of course, with me at your side. With me, you won't want for anything for the rest of your life."

You idiot. You can't get me a fiancée, now, can you?! You really are a worthless robot.

Also, honestly, I just wanted to win. I *loved* winning.

And one more thing…

"What can I say—I want to see their horrified faces when I cross the finish line first. *That* is what I'm looking forward to. The bet is icing on the cake; it's not my primary motive."

"Once again you prove yourself a superior specimen of the human species, Master. Granted, it's unconscionably pathetic that you have to rely on my power to win, but you have such thick skin that your helplessness doesn't bother you in the least. Truly, I aspire to be more like you."

You little jerk. Do you have to be so hateful?

***

The moment before the race started, the bikes charged out to line up. Hovering through the air on one of these machines felt—well, assuming you didn't look down—refreshing. Pleasant, even.

The audience broke out into cheers as they watched from the stands. Their excitement felt out of place to me, given that all the participants surrounding me practically vibrated with open hostility.

"Heya, I was waiting for you to show up," one of them said. "I'm gonna pay you back for what you did to me."

Sorry, who are you again?

The guy looked like a second-year, but I didn't remember his face at all. When I ignored his challenge, he slammed his bike into mine.

“Don’t you ignore me! You first-year half-pint!”

I snorted. “Like I bother keeping tabs on every single one of you numbnuts. Go on, remind me who you are. I’ll relay that info straight to the duke. Well? Don’t be a coward, say your name!”

Bringing up my cozy relationship with Duke Redgrave forced them to back down. So if that made me a rabbit cowering behind a lion, who cared?! I enjoyed it.

The guy clicked his tongue and swerved away from me.

All the participants lined up their bikes behind a ribbon of fabric stretched across the starting line. Obstacles peppered the course spanning out in front of us.

“The same smart mouth as ever, I see,” Luxion said into my ear.

“I am *such* a serious and upstanding student. Why does trouble always have to fall into my lap? Gimme a break.”

“It’s your own fault. Really, it’s enough to make me suspect you secretly enjoy the limelight. At any rate, pay attention. The race is about to begin.”

As I peered ahead, the referee stepped out with a rifle in hand, aiming it at the sky. He pulled the trigger. All the bikes shot forward.

To my chagrin, I failed to join the people at the front of the pack.

“They have you perfectly surrounded,” Luxion observed.

“Scheisse!”

“Really? German? I thought you said you were Japanese in your previous life. Why this?”

“For the hell of it!”

From the moment the race began, the other racers boxed me in to attack. They slammed their bikes into mine and kicked me at every opportunity.

You rotten jerks!

“Eat this, lowlife!”

“It’s your fault I’m in debt!”

“I’m gonna knock you off!”

Their resentment just fueled me. “Don’t blame me for your mistakes, you morons! I’m gonna knock *you* off!”

I kicked back at them, and Luxion sighed in exasperation.

“This is rather pathetic, isn’t it? The feeble-minded fighting amongst themselves…”

Attacks rained down on me from all sides, and I was forced to endure as my assailants continued to block the path ahead.

“Ouch! Who threw that?! I hope you’re prepared for payback!”

***

Students gathered in one of the luxury lounges overlooking the arena, watching the race.

“Get him!”

“Yeah, that’s it! Beat ’im until he’s unrecognizable!”

“Come on, you guys are going too easy on the jerk!”

They all radiated glee as they cheered on the racers harassing Leon.

Angie massaged her temples, a headache coming on. “I understand we feared stopping him would only stoke the other students’ resentment. And I know we agreed it would be best to let them vent some of their anger… But they’re piling on even worse than I expected.”

Tears welled in Livia’s eyes. “My heart hurts for him. He’s not nearly as bad as they…um, I mean…”

Trying to defend Leon inevitably left one coming up short, so Angie tried to comfort her. “It’s all right. We know he has his faults. Even if we’re his only supporters, let’s keep cheering for him. Although it is a bit ironic that Clarice’s people can’t even reach him…”

One might have thought Clarice’s group had targeted Leon first, but numerous other participants had seen the race as an opportunity to exercise

their own grudges and beaten them to the punch. They had Leon surrounded and now attacked him relentlessly. Clarice's followers hovered nearby in confusion, hesitant to throw themselves into the fray.

Thus far, Leon had managed to avoid any life-threatening injuries, but watching the tussle strained Angie's nerves. She clenched her fingers in frustration when the daughter of Earl Offrey—Leon's problem customer from a few days prior—showed her face beside her and Livia. Although dark circles showed under the Offrey girl's eyes, a smile graced her lips as she gazed through the glass.

"Goodness, your little minion has so *many* enemies."

"He isn't my minion," said Angie stiffly.

"Like I care. He's one of your companions, is he not? Do you have any idea how much trouble my house gave me for that stunt you pulled?"

A rebuke the Offrey girl had more than earned, given she'd directed her servants to move on the queen. Angie noted that neither the girl nor her followers seemed to have any servants on hand at all. Well, then.

Angie snorted. "If you want something to resent, consider your own ignorance."

The girl's eyes narrowed, and she grabbed for Angie.

Livia cut between them. "Please keep your hands to yourself!"

"Livia…" Angie murmured, relieved by her friend's support.

The Offrey girl was less impressed, her eyes now fine slits. "How dare you intervene, you dreadful little commoner."

Livia flinched. "Uh, but, I…"

Now it was Angie's turn to step protectively in front of Livia.

The Offrey girl smiled darkly. "You really have changed, Angelica. Have you grown so weak since your followers turned on you? In the past, you never would have glanced twice at a mealworm like her. Don't tell me your pride has fallen so far you'd cling to this…creature now? What an odd one you've proven—you never would have dreamed of speaking to such trash before. Or maybe

your house has fallen into such disfavor that no one but the peasants pays you any mind, hm?"

"No!" Angie scowled at the Offrey girl but tore her eyes away. Livia mattered more than *her*. And Angie needed to tell Livia that this vitriol, these claims—they were all just a misunderstanding. But when she opened her mouth to say as much, the words seemed to stick to her tongue. "Livia, this isn't… I…"

Angie couldn't get out what she wanted to say. The problem was that everything the Offrey girl said about Angie's former self was frightfully true—and it shamed her terribly. In the end, all she could do was avert her gaze from the trembling Livia.

Livia, stiff and teary-eyed, turned on her heel and fled.

Angie stretched a hand out to stop her, but too late. She watched, frozen, as Livia disappeared out the door.

"Ah…!" At first, Angie moved as if to chase Livia, but her feet wouldn't move. She dropped her hand. *Do I even have the right to go after her?*

The daily life of a duke's daughter differed from the lives of even other nobles like Leon. Angie had never set foot in a field, not until this summer. She had never interacted with commoners, and never would have, had she not met Livia and been invited to Leon's home. The Angie of the past had thought so little of people she had not known.

"Aw, too bad, she ran off," the Offrey girl simpered mockingly. "Looks like the only friend you had left abandoned you, too."

Angie glared daggers at the girl. "What would you know?"

"Excuse me?" the girl asked with a blithe smile.

Angie whipped her hand across the girl's face. The dry slap echoed through the lounge.

The Offrey girl clutched her cheek. "Now…now you've done it!"

"Done what? I haven't the time to notice what comes of a nobody like you," Angie said.

The girl lunged, but Angie shoved her back. The sounds of panic rose in the

lounge, other students yelping and shrieking.

Angie didn't hear. The Offrey girl wouldn't back down. So Angie grabbed her opponent's collar and slammed a fist into the girl's cheek.

"What do you know about *me*?!" Angie snarled. "I'll crush you. I'll pound you into dust with these two fists!"

The Offrey girl clawed at Angie's hair. "You're finished, you wench! You think you can win? Your house will lose this war! You're *done*!"

The lounge soon devolved into uproar.

***

As we entered the last leg of the race, the other participants finally started darting away from me so they could land themselves a decent spot at the finish line.

"That's good enough, I guess, right?" one called.

"After taking that beating, I'd like to see him finish, let alone put up a fight," said another.

"Yeah, see ya, loser!"

I watched the douchecanoes ride off, then gripped my handlebars tighter and threw my throttle wide open. The vibration of my accelerating engine thrilled me. I had a busted bike and a cracked helmet, but my heart was whole.

Too bad for you, jerknuggets! Shoulda finished me off if you wanted to win.

"We can do this, right, Luxion?"

"Ready when you are. However, I do find it odd that the referee ignored such transparent foul play. Was that not what you humans consider assault?"

I shrugged. "My bad. I should've paid the referee to help me out."

"You really do come up with the most loathsome ideas. Although, I suppose he was already bribed to ignore your plight, so he no doubt would have demanded an even larger sum before agreeing to aid you."

"Like that would've been a problem. I have more money than I know what to do with! At least now I won't feel bad about cheating."

As I increased my speed, I spotted the group that had boxed me in earlier. Despite how well they'd coordinated against me, they were battling it out with one another now.

My airbike drove smoothly thanks to Luxion's autopilot assistance. Even with my meager skills, I had no trouble pulling ahead, and I slipped right past them.

"You bastard!" they shouted after me, dismayed.

I waved back at them. "Thanks for tripping each other up. Last place suits you. Keep butting heads and eat my dust!"

I raced toward the leaders of the pack—Clarice's cronies. Unlike everyone else, they had a strong sense of camaraderie, and they were willing to split the win with each other, so no one prioritized himself over the rest.

"You're moving fast, as I anticipated," said Luxion.

"Can we catch them?"

"Don't make me laugh. It won't take more than a minute for us to pass them completely."

The engine pushed itself to its limit, and the whole machine rattled as it careened forward. I clung to the handlebars, able to do nothing but hang on for dear life as I trusted Luxion to handle the actual driving.

"Master, the load transfer is causing mild drag. Allow me to be frank—you're deadweight."

"You're the one who screwed with the system, and now it's shaking like crazy! And don't call me deadweight! You'll make me cry." I shifted my body in the effort to help the weight distribution, striving to match the bike's movements.

Soon enough, we had passed several of the top competitors.

The crowd broke into an uproar. Even the announcer's voice raised in octaves of shock. "Unbelievable! Bartfort's battling it out at the front for the championship. How is something like this even possible? Could he have illegally enhanced his bike?!"

Did the thought of me winning bother them that much?

“I see how it is. In that case, now I have to win no matter what it takes,” I said through gritted teeth. *I can’t wait to see the tears in all your eyes.*

As I passed the person in third place, the person in second blocked the way. “I won’t let you pass!”

I cackled. “Aw, buddy, I’m passing whether you like it or not!”

I moved with the bike as I spun past him into second place.

Now only one guy raced ahead of me—the third-year I’d spoken to in the garage.

I shifted to the outside lane to try to pass him, and as I did so, he showed no sign of engaging in any kind of dirty trick to slip me up. Instead, he seemed content to duke it out fairly on the final stretch. I hadn’t thought he looked like the type to go sneaky, and apparently I was right.

“Sorry about this,” I muttered.

At Luxion’s command, flames spewed from my airbike’s muffler. Even I was terrified by the intensity of the speed that suddenly propelled us forward. In that nightmarish moment, I swore I would never ride an airbike ever again.

Fortunately, we pulled out just far enough in front of our opponent to snag the win.

I’m the victor! I thought gleefully as we sailed across the finish line.

I eased my bike to a stop before yanking off my helmet so I could grin and wave at the stands. “I won, you guys! Sorry not sorry!”

The audience roared back at me.

“You again?!”

“Give me back my money!”

“You disaster! You harbinger!”

Urged on by their “support,” I continued waving. The bitterness on their faces was the greatest reward I could have asked for.

“Master?” Luxion cut in.

“Pipe down, I’m living the dream.”

“As much as I would love to ‘pipe down,’ the engine is at its limit.”

“Huh?” I glanced back to find white smoke billowing out of the bike.

“Nooo!” I shrieked, and I snatched up Luxion as I leaped off the bike. *Well, that explains why my back felt so hot.*

Fortunately, the third-year who’d come in second caught me in his arms before I fell through the sky to a deadly end.

I was so grateful I almost wanted to cry. “You saved me!”

He gave a strained smile. “It’s nothing. Honestly…I can’t say I regret how your duel ended. Think of this as my thanks. Also, to tell you the truth, you made a good bet.”

Huh, guess he hated Jilk enough to bet on my win back then.

***

After that surprising show of gratitude from Clarice’s follower, I made my way—prize money in hand—back to the medical office where Jilk was laid up.

I was in the rarest of unbelievably good moods. Normally I only felt this invigorated when I beat my sister in some way, usually an argument, so I had to savor it.

“See? I won,” I said, waving my winnings about with a grin. “I hope you haven’t forgotten your promise, Jilk, old buddy, old pal.”

He sighed softly. “Yes, a promise is a promise. Order me as you like. As long as it’s within my capabilities, I will fulfill whatever task you ask of me.”

The fact that he qualified his statement was proof of his fundamentally conniving mind. *Not going to promise me something that can’t physically be done? Come on, you slimeball! Show a little backbone, you garbage excuse for romantic fantasy dude.*

“Well? What do you want from him? Naked handstand?” Kyle asked, arms folded behind his head—a little too familiar for my liking.

You know I’m a baron, right? Where’s my due courtesy?!

“Are you a moron?” I scoffed. “What’s a handstand going to do for me? Hold on, wait a minute. Having him strip naked for girls might not be so bad. I could cash in on that.”

Marie thrust her finger toward me. “Are you that desperate for coin? You money-grubber!”

“Look in the mirror! You’re way worse than I am!”

“Whatever. Give me the prize money!”

She really is annoying as hell.

Sure, maybe it was thanks to Jilk that I’d had the opportunity to participate in the final race in the first place, but it would have been far more fair to split the prize. But, you know, a deal’s a deal. “Fine. Take it.”

She eyed me warily. “Y-you’re being awfully accommodating.”

“Accommodating is my middle name.”

The moment I held out the bag of three hundred thousand dia, Marie flew forward and snatched it up. But her eyes were soon drawn away from the bag and to the platinum coin I danced between my fingers, like I was purposefully showing it off.

“A platinum coin? Y-you’re just carrying that around?” she asked.

“Why not? Earned enough of ’em gambling today. I bet a ton on myself, and since I was the underdog, I raked in the cash.”

As it dawned on her that I had no doubt won an amount that far exceeded the measly three hundred thousand dia I’d just handed over, her entire body trembled. Queen Money-Grubber over here was overcome with envy.

“Ch-cheater! That’s totally unfair! I can’t believe you bet on yourself!”

I shrugged. “Tell that to my new fortune. Ah, well, you lot can enjoy this pittance.”

For a few moments, we just glared at each other, Marie grinding her teeth in frustration, stewing in rage as I leered. This girl really was too easy to read.

Suddenly, Jilk lurched out of bed.

Hey, wait, should he really be on his feet in his state?

"Very well," he croaked. "If a naked handstand is what it will take to satisfy you, then I—"

"You nitwit," I snapped, tearing my gaze away from the useless brat in front of me. "If I made you do something like that, Livia and Angie would never let me hear the end of it. *Obviously* I'm going to give you an order that's more, you know, whatever! Real! Wait, actually, I need a favor."

Jilk eyed me cautiously. "What 'favor'?"

What, you don't trust me?

***

An air of melancholy hung over the academy in the wake of the festival. People disassembled the stalls in the courtyard and carried various tools and instruments back to their homes. As the three-day event came to a close, it felt like a better chapter in my life was finally drawing to an end.

In our café, I put away the chairs and tables we'd borrowed for the festival. Jilk stood there as well, along with Clarice and her followers. Jilk still wore a patient's gown, and bandages wound around his head and arms. He looked rather pathetic as he stood in front of Clarice.

As for the favor…

"I am sorry for everything that happened."

I'd asked him to apologize to Clarice.

Incidentally, I also had him do the same to my older sister, Jenna, on our way here, but I only did that because we happened to pass her. This was my true objective.

Tears welled in Clarice's eyes. "After all this time, after all of that…you're a little late! I waited for you! Did you really think you could undo everything we had with one measly letter?"

She was livid, and understandably so. Jilk had a lot more reflecting to do.

"It would have been…inconsiderate of me to marry you when I was in love

with another woman," he said. "I don't like lying…or rather, I couldn't stand the thought of lying to *you*. Clarice, I have feelings for someone else."

She took a step toward him and whipped her hand across his face. The slap echoed pleasantly.

Again! Do it again, Miss Clarice!

Jilk did nothing to defend himself. He intended to accept whatever she threw at him. I admired that resolution a bit, but I wished he'd put that quality to better use.

"Lie? What are you even talking about?" Clarice snapped. "You let her seduce you! You want her so bad you're willing to throw me away? Why her?! Just explain why…why it couldn't be me."

"I'm not even sure myself. All I know is I fell for her, completely. That's why I was hesitant to see you after."

It was a terrible excuse, yet his handsome looks made the words sound more compelling and beautiful than they really were. From where I stood, it looked like he hadn't wanted to meet her because he'd known he was in trouble.

With my face, if I tried the same excuse, people would sneer and say, *What the hell is wrong with you?*

What kind of excuse *would* I use if I were in his place? Well, I wouldn't cheat, to start. In this world, men who committed adultery were flayed alive—verbally and mentally.

If a woman did the same thing, people's response was more like *That's a no-no!* (To put it in Olivia terms.) And that would be it.

This world really was ludicrous.

Clarice balled her hands. "You think you can play this off? Jilk, you're always like this! You never tell me how you really feel. Never! Are you going to fake your way through an apology this time, too? Just so you can run away?"

"This is honestly how I feel. I have no right to even look at you, and I knew I would only hurt you when we met. I wanted you to get to keep your good memories of me intact and let things go."

Jilk being a love interest didn't make him flawless. In the game, his biggest problem was his inability to discuss his real thoughts and feelings. He always smiled, never articulating his likes or dislikes—and when he faced something he didn't like, he ran away from it. Real pain in the ass, let me tell you. He always justified his behavior by saying he just did what he had to "for the prince." I wondered if that came into play here, too.

Regardless, Clarice was your fiancée. You could at least apologize like you mean it!

Clarice's followers looked ready to whip out their fists and pummel an invalid. I worried I'd have to step in, but…

Clarice scoffed. "Whatever. Fine, then."

"My lady?" That one third-year guy glanced at her worriedly.

She brushed her tears away. "It's not worth getting my hands dirty anymore. Not for you. I refuse to stay involved with a man like you. We're strangers now. Don't come near me ever again."

Whoa, there. Pretty impressive ultimatum, considering she started this mess.

Jilk bowed his head low. "Again, I apologize. And also…thank you, Clarice."

Clarice grit her teeth. "Don't act like we're friends! I don't even want to see your face anymore!"

Jilk obeyed her wishes and slunk out of the room.

Uhhh… Wha? Did I just get left behind with the angry chick?

Tension hung thick in the air.

"Sorry for the trouble," the third-year from before suddenly said to me.

"No, it's, uh, fine…"

Clarice settled into a chair her followers had brought for her and sobbed.

Get me outta here! I shifted toward the door. "You know what, I think I'm going home. I can read the room."

"No. Wait a minute."

I was very suddenly surrounded by Clarice's male followers, their heads looming over me. For a second there, I was sure they were going to beat the crap out of me, but I'll take that fact with me to the grave.

"Wh-what's up, fellas?!" I stuttered.

"No matter how many times we asked Jilk to meet with her, he refused us. You have our thanks, Baron Bartfort. And we apologize for the impertinence we showed you before!"

"We're sorry!"

It was just like being back in Japan, surrounded by a gang of upperclassmen from a sports club as they bowed their head in apology to me.

This was…mildly terrifying. Yep, I had no idea what was going on, and I was definitely scared!

As I puzzled over this display, I noticed a group of demi-human servants standing a short distance away, staring at me. They had no such loyalty to their mistress—they were only bound to her by a contract.

"If you're still upset with us, I don't mind if you take your pound of flesh. Hit me, or anything. I'll do whatever you need me to do if you just leave the miss out of it," said the third-year.

"You really think that'd satisfy me?" I smirked.

He chuckled. "If not, I'd have to take umbrage. I'll put my life on the line one way or another, if I must."

This man was willing to forfeit his life for Clarice? It seemed like he'd really do it, too, which was what unnerved me the most. I might have been a bit envious of the loyalty she inspired.

However, the moment Clarice heard the third-year say that, she sprang to her feet. "Wait a moment! You think I'd let you do that? The fault for this incident lies with me. You all only followed my orders. That's all there was to it."

"But my lady—"

While they quibbled over who should take responsibility for the mess, I sighed. "Your little act does inspire sympathy, but can you cut the theatrics? I'm

not interested in blaming anyone. That sounds like too much of a hassle. I *hate* hassle."

"Y-you… That's…" the third-year stammered. "Well, all right, then. So you'll forgive us?"

Why would I chase a grudge with Clarice? Jilk was the real culprit here as far as I was concerned. If he'd shown a little consideration for Clarice to begin with, none of this would have happened. He really was a problem child.

"Miss Clarice," I said, "enough moping. There're way more fish in the sea."

Clarice dropped her gaze and smiled weakly. "There's a kind person beneath that twisted personality."

Luxion evidently felt the need to interject in my earpiece. "She's completely misunderstood you. You're not twisted…you're warped beyond recognition."

I ignored his drivel; the only secondary concern I had room for was those demi-human servants staring coldly at me from the other side of the room.

"I can't claim to understand how you feel," I said to Clarice, "but you're causing other people trouble, so I'd appreciate it if you stopped."

"I will. Although it's a bit late to regain my reputation. I've already dallied a bit far." There was a sadness to her smile, and behind her, one of the slaves grinned meaningfully—like he had to rub it in. What a creep.

"Don't worry. You're a good woman. No one worth it is going to care about this summer fling." I glared at her servants. "Although, I think you should do something about these guys."

Said guys immediately lost their composure. No doubt Clarice had been a great mistress for them—convenient, one might even say. Bet they all hated the thought of losing her.

"You certainly have a way with words," Clarice mused. "Is that how you won over Angelica?"

"I'm just honest. I call it like I see it."

The third-year snorted. "Sure you do."

Clarice gave a small nod. “Yes, I’ll give it my best. I’m tired of living like this. It was like…I knew nothing I did would draw Jilk’s attention the way I wanted, but I did it anyway. How silly of me.”

Damn, Jilk, really? You had this girl who obviously cared for you so much she went this far and you threw her over for Marie? Jeez. Numbskull.

That chick was nothing but trouble. As if she didn’t already infuriate me, her reverse harem lust had turned a kind, upstanding student like Clarice to the dark side of slave-owning hedonism. And all that for a man who’d abandoned her. Augh—why couldn’t I win over a woman like that?!

To make matters worse, here I was, cleaning up Jilk’s mess for him. Ugh, I couldn’t stand those losers. Honestly, I’d have nothing to do with Jilk if I could help it, but he was one of the love interests. If I left his mess as it was, it would likely cause further problems down the line, and that was the last thing I needed. I had to keep getting involved for my own sake.

Plus, it was as the prince had said. Clarice would only have suffered if she’d kept on like she had. I cared way more about her future than Jilk’s.

Around then, she began tearing up again, so I started to retreat, sensing my part was over. Besides, *I* was the one who wanted to cry. All my efforts today had gotten me no closer on my own marriage quest. All I’d managed to do during the festival was earn enough to build a mansion.

Wait. Wasn’t that pretty amazing on its own? I made a killing!

Clarice cut in just as I headed out the door. “Oh, Leon? I think you should go see Angie. I believe something happened between her and that scholarship student while you were out there on the track.”

Oh, no, what now?

***

I found Livia hiding in a corner behind the school.

“You look depressed,” I said.

She glanced up at me, tears in her eyes, her smile pained. “Leon, I don’t know what to do.”

I plopped down beside her. I'd already been to Angie's room and seen the scrapes and bruises on her face, but she'd told me she wanted me to go see Livia instead. And she'd looked so forlorn as she said it.

"Well, I completely suck at comforting people, but if that's all right with you, I'll give it a try," I offered.

Livia shook her head.

"If you're sure."

"Leon, do you think Angie and I were friends? Or could we have been?"

I struggled with how to respond. Honestly, I'd kind of been waiting for something like this to happen. "Would you prefer a sweet lie or the bitter truth?"

"The bitter truth, please."

I would have selected the sweet lie, but Livia was stronger than me. *I'd expect no less from the protagonist—uh, Livia, rather.*

"Well, perfect timing. I brought some sweet, hot drinks for us. It'll go perfectly with the bitterness of reality."

Her lips pulled taut in a strained smile. "You really are an odd one."

Well, regular me did reincarnate into a weird dating sim. It's only natural that I seem odd.

I passed her the drink, and Livia took a sip as I delivered my answer.

"Honestly, I think it'd be difficult for you two to become real friends. Incredibly difficult. You were raised in completely different worlds, and you have almost nothing in common. Frankly, it's a miracle things have been going so well between you. Too well, in fact. Picture a farmer who spends every day out in his field with his hoe. Now imagine you asked him to take up a sword and go off to the battlefield—tomorrow. Do you think it would go well for him? It's kinda the same thing here."

On a list of differences between these two, upbringing was only the first. There were always exceptions to a rule, but for most people in this situation, an odd-couple friendship just couldn't last.

Livia sobbed. “I was so happy, though. I finally had a girl friend at the academy. But I guess it really was too good to be true. I’ll only cause Angie trouble if I hang out with her. Earlier today, it was my fault that girl went after her. And…and she said I wasn’t even human to Angie!”

Okay, okay, oh boy, oh God, there’s a girl crying beside me. Say something thoughtful, Leon, come on!

I couldn’t offer compassion. That just wasn’t in my wheelhouse—that was more Prince Julius and the other love interests’ schtick. If only Marie hadn’t screwed everything up, one of them could be here comforting Livia. Instead there was me, and I did my best, the only way I knew how.

“You know, I’m sure she did have some messed up thoughts about commoners—maybe still does. After the mess I made with that duel, she lost most of her followers and that had to hurt. Maybe you and I were just convenient replacements. You’re probably right. She didn’t treat us like real people, did she?” I chuckled.

“What are you saying?” Livia’s brows creased in anger, and she glared at me. “Angie’s not like that!”

I grinned. “Exactly. So it’s fine, right? *You* know what kind of person Angie really is.”

Livia gawked, then turned way. When she eventually glanced at my face again, her cheeks were slightly red. “You really are mean, Leon.”

“Sorry. I told you I suck at this. Besides, if I tried to act suave and comforting, it’d come across as a lame gag.”

Imagine *me* trying to imitate the prince or Jilk. I’d never move a girl like that—she’d only laugh at me.

What is it that I’m lacking, I wonder? Sex appeal? No, it was my face, wasn’t it? Ah, being handsome was such a divine gift—one I hadn’t been blessed with.

Livia’s real smile tentatively returned. “I…I think I want to try to talk to her one more time.”

“Good. You should.”

***

That evening, Livia was in her room when she heard a knock on her door. She opened it and peeked outside to find Carla standing in the hallway.

“Y-yes?”

“Have a minute?” Carla smiled.

Livia hesitated before nodding. “Um, uh, sure.”

“To be honest, I was hoping you would participate in the mission to dispatch those pirates. You’re in the higher class, right? You can at least help out, can’t you?”

“Uh, um, actually, about that. The way you deceived us to request help was —”

Carla slammed an open hand on the doorframe. Livia jumped and clamped her mouth shut.

The girl standing behind Carla snickered and stepped forward.

“You’ll help us out, won’t you, mealworm?” It was the earl’s daughter from before, the one who had ruined Leon’s café and fought with Angie—Miss Offrey. Her face was a mess of scratches and bruises. She grinned. “If you *don’t* help out, I’ll make everyone around you miserable. That Bartfort scumbag, snobby Angelica, your family, and everyone else, too.”

Livia dropped her gaze and clenched her fists.

“I’ll send Carla to fetch you tomorrow. Better make your preparations, half-wit.” Miss Offrey turned to Carla. “And *you*. You better do this right or your family will be in peril as well.”

Carla trembled in fear. “O-of course!”

Livia had never encountered a girl willing to go so far—a girl willing to use her family’s power as a weapon for abuse. Before Livia knew what she was doing, the words fell out of her mouth: “Th-this isn’t right.”

“What?” Miss Offrey glared at her.

“Leon and Angie are both extremely strong. E-even if you threaten us, I’m

sure they'll—"

Miss Offrey burst out laughing, cradling her stomach. "What? Are you serious? Are you still talking about them like they're your friends?"

"I-I…"

Miss Offrey grabbed Livia by the hair and forced her face-to-face. "*Nobles* don't have friends. Angelica understands that better than anyone. You were a *pet* she adopted when she needed something to soothe her broken heart. You seriously don't get that?"

"You're wrong!"

"I'm not. The second a noble missteps, they lose all their allies. And even allies—'friends'—betray each other all the time. That wench Angelica is a duke's daughter. You can tell by looking at her, can't you? The reason she's so strong-willed is because she knows this game, so she doesn't open her heart to anyone. But you, you're not a noble, and in her eyes, you're not even a real human. You're a pet. That's why she's *nice* to you."

"I'm not a pet. I'm a person! And those two, they're my—"

"You really don't get it," Miss Offrey cut her off. "What can you do for them?"

"Wh-what…?" Livia was losing her composure. Miss Offrey had given voice to one of her greatest anxieties. Leon and Angie were always protecting her. What could she possibly do for them?

"Bartfort qualifies as a noble, technically, and he's got a few achievements under his belt. Meanwhile, Angelica is a true noble's daughter, born to wealth and power. Can you really say you're on the same level? Friends are supposed to be equals, aren't they?"

"W-well, I…" Livia's vision swam.

"Nothing to say for yourself? I knew it. Of course you aren't friends. No matter how you try to pretend, everyone else sees you for what you really are —their beloved *pet*."

Livia had never been forced to confront someone this vile by herself. When he could, Leon shielded her from such things, but he wasn't here right now. Nor

was Angie.

“Oh, I know!” Miss Offrey clapped her hands. “You’re actually kind of cute. Bartfort’s not popular with the girls. Maybe he was after you for your body. What a sad excuse for a noble. How pathetic.”

“No! Leon isn’t that type of—”

“That’s how men are. Try stripping and offering yourself to him. He’ll fly into your arms immediately.” Miss Offrey sneered. “How shameless. You seem to think sneaking into this academy makes you our equal. What an ego you have. It seems to me like you need some strict discipline.”

Miss Offrey shoved Livia and sent her sprawling. The girls who had been standing behind her took the opportunity to enter Livia’s room and began trashing the place.

“No, stop! Please, stop!”

Miss Offrey cackled. “Your room is garbage, just like you. We’re just making it look more like the dump it is.”

The commotion in Livia’s room drew the attention of a teacher patrolling the dorm’s hallways.

“Professor, please help!” Livia begged when the teacher passed by. “These girls are—”

Miss Offrey only grinned. The teacher immediately pretended she hadn’t seen anything and walked briskly away.

“What…?” Livia gasped.

“Now do you get it? You’re not like us, commoner. You’re not a *person*.”

Livia was in shock. Even a teacher had abandoned her. She sank to the floor and choked down sobs as the girls around her laughed.

“Look, she’s crying.”

“What useless lumps commoners are.”

“She honestly thought she was our equal? Learn your place.”

With Carla in tow, Miss Offrey swanned out of Livia’s room. “Bye, for now.”

The other girls snickered as they walked away.

Shaking, Livia shut her door and collapsed to the ground, head in her hands. The tears came in an endless stream.

Being friends with Leon had, prior to this moment, granted her a measure of protection from the worst bullying had to offer. However, she now realized this had also robbed her of the opportunity to grow tough enough to handle her own problems.

It was then that Livia decided she would indeed be taking part in the mission to dispatch the pirates.

Chapter 5:
Dispatching Pirates

WE LEFT THE CAPITAL in a small airship and arrived at an airship harbor on a floating island not far away. Vessels moved busily to and fro everywhere we looked. It reminded me of a train station or a bus terminal, minus the actual buses and trains. I went to wait at the appointed area, where I had left my ship, the Partner, docked on standby.

Luxion had built the seven-hundred-meter vessel himself. It looked as box-like as any other ship anchored here, though its superior size made it stand out. On the inside, the design trended plain but efficient.

"You actually have it waiting like I asked."

Luxion, hidden inside my luggage, responded, "It was a simple task for the *Partner*."

He'd based its underlying design and functionality on the spaceship where his main body resided, which was comparatively futuristic. Well, it *was* a spaceship, after all. However, I couldn't let anyone on that main vessel because no way could I lie around its obviously advanced technology. Everyone knew the story of how I'd unearthed a Lost Item—something we couldn't replicate with modern technology.

However, I'd had Luxion create the *Partner* for me to use in place of that ship. I didn't want anyone finding out the truth of Luxion's capabilities—if they did, someone would inevitably go to great lengths (a.k.a. kill me) in order to take him. Hence, regular-looking ship.

Dammit. If I hadn't sailed Luxion's main ship home that first time, no one would know about it, and I wouldn't have to go to all this trouble.

At any rate, Luxion was bragging about the *Partner* like an annoyingly proud parent, or maybe like a budding artist. Apparently he'd become attached. Did AI really feel that kind of emotional connection?

“Master, have you noticed?”

“Yeah, I see them.”

Livia and Carla stood beside the *Partner*. Livia held the latter’s luggage. The moment they saw me approaching, Carla snatched her bags back as if to pretend she’d been carrying them the entire time. Did she genuinely think I wouldn’t notice?

More importantly, what was Livia doing here? She seemed downright depressed about it, too. Had her attempt to mend fences with Angie not gone well?

“Baron, over here!” Carla called out to me in a singsong voice.

Well, that freaked me out a bit. “Girls are scary…”

“Just remember: they’re more frightened of you than you are of them,” Luxion said.

“You sure you’re not confusing fear for hate?”

As I reached the two girls, another pair of familiar faces approached. Red and Purple, i.e., Greg and Brad. Greg Fou Seberg had a toned physique—he loved to brag about his strength—and hair that was cropped short and slicked back. He carried a spear in one hand. Brad Fou Field just wore a disgruntled look on his face.

“Guh.”

“Why in the world is Bartfort here?”

Their malicious words pierced my fragile heart.

“Hey look, it’s a couple of losers,” I sneered back.

They stepped closer, glaring daggers at me.

Yup, they’re awful. Hair of popstars, personalities of common thugs.

“You lookin’ for a fight, huh?!” Greg snarled.

“Care to test who’ll lose this time?” Brad threatened.

I retreated behind Livia. “Yeah, yeah, I’m here for these two. Got no time for

you guys, so scram.”

Unfortunately, they didn’t leave.

Greg scratched the top of his head, and Brad turned his gaze to Carla. “Care to explain?”

She looked troubled as she averted her gaze—an obvious ploy to hide her true motives, whatever they were. Not that her duplicity came as any surprise to me.

“Um, uh, well…I figured it’d be most efficient if we all rode the baron’s airship back to my family’s lands together.”

“What?!” I turned on her. “You’re telling me to let these scrubs on my ship?!”

Veins popped on Greg and Brad’s foreheads.

Temper, temper!

“Who are you callin’ a scrub?!”

“Honestly, the nerve!”

“I-I’m sorry!” Carla apologized. “I should have told you. I actually asked Lord Brad for help as well.”

Everyone’s attention turned to Brad.

“Carla serves my former fiancée’s house,” he explained reluctantly, “so when she came to me for help, I agreed to lend her aid. She also promised a reward and said that those pirates have a bounty on them. I figured this could be a way to help Marie, so I accepted.”

His answer sounded perfectly reasonable—kidding. No it didn’t, it was warped as hell. Not because he, a student, thought he might as well go and fight some air pirates. No, it was this stupid otome game’s logic at work again, the one that thought it was perfectly natural for men to put their lives on the line solely to gain women’s affection. Successfully fighting off pirates *would* definitely raise a guy’s appeal on campus, but only because this world was screwed up down to the core.

Greg smacked the butt of his beloved lance against the ground. He stood with

his legs spread, making for an imposing figure. “And after he told me what he was doing, I decided I’d come along, too.”

And what the hell do you expect to accomplish with a single lance?

All the characters in this world might as well be brain-dead for how well they thought things through.

“And the other three?” I asked. “You know, Black, Green, and Blue.”

“Quit calling us that!” Brad snapped. “Our friends were summoned by their families. Marie had an errand to attend, so she couldn’t come either. Frankly, even if she wasn’t busy, I wouldn’t have let her accompany us. It’s too dangerous. So it’s just us two.”

Greg chuckled. “Those guys’re way too serious. They know they’re just gonna get an earful by going back home, but they went anyway. I was summoned, too, but I’m afraid I’m busy taggin’ along with Brad. Can’t trust him on his own.”

“Silence, meathead! If I’d had my say, I would have brought Chris, not you.”

“What’d you say?!”

Yep, definitely brain-dead. Two idiots weren’t much better than one idiot with a sharp stick. They didn’t even have any decent weapons with them. Our enemies were called *air* pirates because they had *air*ships. How were these two going to fight against a *ship*? One dude’s magic? Another dude’s spear? Was this some kinda joke? Talk about helpless.

In fact, given the renown these pirates had garnered, they probably all had Armor. Greg and Brad didn’t stand an ice cube’s chance in hell of winning without Armor of their own.

“A-at any rate, let’s work together and defeat them, okay?” Carla ushered us along. “Come on, Olivia, back me up.”

Livia only looked at her feet. When Carla realized Olivia wasn’t responding, she clicked her tongue quietly. Bet she thought I wouldn’t hear.

It did make me scratch my head. I hadn’t realized things were this bad for Livia. I needed to talk things out with her later.

“For now, get on the ship,” I said. “But I’m warning you, don’t try anything

funny with the *Partne*r."

Greg bared his teeth at me. "Unlike you, we're not that immature."

I snorted. Getting riled up at an offhanded comment was precisely what made him so immature. "I'm warning you *because* you're an infant."

"You wanna go?!"

"You wouldn't sound so much like a screaming infant if you didn't wail about every little thing. Moron!" I grabbed Livia's hand and ran for the ship.

Greg and Brad followed behind, along with Carla. I didn't miss her smirk, either—one that seemed to say: *Success!*

Okay, I thought, *we've gone this far. What're she and her puppetmaster hoping will happen next?*

***

Back at the girl's dormitory, Angie set foot in the general class building with a small present in hand. She nervously glanced down the corridors, searching for the right room.

"I…I wonder if this will be enough?" she murmured to herself.

Angie had nervously looked over the gift about a dozen times by now. She'd bought it for Livia, but she wasn't confident her friend would like it. She'd gone to the boys' dormitory earlier that morning to consult Leon, but he'd already left for Wayne House's territory.

"That buffoon. They're only using him, but he actually dragged his airship out for them."

Although Angie had tried to stop him, Leon insisted on going. She worried for him, so she had contacted her own house to alert them, but she had no airship of her own. Unlike Leon, she couldn't just make impulsive decisions and act on them freely. While she did plan to pursue him soon, she wanted to invite Livia along first.

Angie puzzled over what to say to her. *How should I act when I face her? Will she even forgive me?*

She flitted through the girl's dormitory, plagued by anxiety. When other girls spotted her, they hurried out of her way, squeezing against the wall as she passed. One of them tried to say something to her, but Angie just said, "I'm a bit busy at the moment."

When she finally arrived at Livia's room, Angie gaped in shock. "Wh-what? This is it?"

It was decidedly different from the living quarters the other students had been provided. In fact, a plaque on the door read *Storage*. The school had stuffed Livia in an old storeroom. Disparaging graffiti decorated her door and the surrounding walls.

Angie steeled herself and knocked, but there was no answer. "L-Livia? It's me, Angelica."

Even after she called out, she received no response. At least, not until someone behind her said, "Oh, if it isn't Angelica."

When Angie turned, she came face-to-face with the Offrey girl, who was surrounded by her pack of followers. The scratches from their previous encounter yet marred her face.

"Am I to be subjected to your hideous visage again?" Angie asked, eyes narrowed to slits. The Offrey girl was her senior, but Angie simply did not care anymore.

The Offrey girl sneered back. "You must really despise me. Don't care for an 'upstart,' do you? People like you are such an eyesore. You think you're better than everyone else just because your family's been in power longer."

"Upstart? Please, that word is too pretty for you. You'll insult actual upstarts."

On top of being from an opposing faction to Redgrave House, the Offrey House had, to Angie's knowledge, involved themselves in some rather unsavory affairs. On top of that, the Offrey daughter and her followers embodied every terrible stereotype about the academy's female students—partying slave owners, with a literal horde of freshly bought slaves to replace the ones they had been forced to relinquish. Was it any wonder Angie loathed her so much?

New money sure does make for childish tastes. It's pathetic watching them

parade around like that.

The Offrey girl clicked her tongue. “I owe you so very much for what you did during the school festival.”

Or perhaps she’d at last learned her lesson, at least enough to use words rather than fists to fight.

Angie smiled thinly. “I’m afraid I don’t have time to waste on you.”

The girl gave her an ugly grin. “Oh? You came here to see your beloved pet? You sure do enjoy showering her with affection.”

Angie glowered. “What are you trying to imply?”

The Offrey girl stepped closer, until their faces were only a few inches apart. Angie wrinkled her nose at the girl’s overpowering perfume.



“If you want to keep your precious follower and your darling little pet safe, you need a tighter leash. It would be so *tragic* if they died, wouldn’t it?”

Angie’s eyes widened, and the Offrey girl’s lips peeled back from pearly white teeth in a dastardly smirk.

“I knew you were behind that request,” Angie murmured.

“If you knew, then you should have stopped them. I guess the Redgrave daughter really is a cold one.”

Despite the taunt, Angie kept her cool. *Foolish girl, do you realize who you’re messing with? If you think Leon merely a talented guard dog, you have another think coming. He might not have realized Carla’s family serves yours, but he knows this is trouble. Oh, but then why did he agree to lend her his help? He’s as impossible to read as ever.*

However, all that being said, the one Angie really pitied was this girl.

“Oh, yes,” said the wicked girl, “and your beloved pet went out as well.”

“‘Went out’?”

“Quite. Carla took the commoner with her—said they were friends. She certainly does have strange taste. There are pirates absolutely everywhere out there, you know. Who would drag their *friends* to such a dangerous place?”

In the blink of an eye, Angie snatched the Offrey girl’s collar and slammed her against the wall. She pulled the girl’s collar suffocatingly tight around her throat and lifted her in the air with one hand.

“Tell me,” Angie snarled, “what have you done to Livia?”

“I-I can’t breathe…” The Offrey girl’s feet dangled helplessly, kicking the air as she clutched Angie’s arm with both hands.

Her followers and servants immediately rushed to her aid, but Angie’s menacing glare froze them in place.

“Don’t you dare touch me. I’ll tear you apart.” Angie’s voice held a murderous chill. Once she was certain they wouldn’t move, she turned her gaze back to the Offrey girl, whose face contorted in anguish. “My temper is short. Out with it.

What are you planning?”

“L-Let me go!” Suddenly, the girl’s panic subsided, and she turned smug as if she’d realized something. “M-my father won’t let this slide, you realize. Your whole family is already in deep—”

“I’m asking the questions,” Angie snapped. “Lately, so, so many fools have made light of me. You’re rather perfect timing. I might just make an example of you.”

Said fools were mostly other female students. This had been a point of anxiety for Angie for a while now. The boys were comparatively easy to deal with.

The Offrey girl grinned, despite Angie’s stranglehold. “Go see for yourself if you’re so worried.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Angie threw the girl to the ground. Then, she turned on her heel and walked away as if nothing had happened. Only when she rounded the corner did she break out into a run.

I have to contact Leon! Would it be faster for me to fly after him directly? No, if he’s taking the Partner*, it’ll be difficult to catch up.*

With that, Angie headed for a certain duke’s house in the capital. She would board one of their airships immediately.

***

When Black—or rather, Julius—returned to the palace, the first thing that awaited him was a lecture from his mother in her office.

She paused in the midst of shuffling through paperwork and said, very matter-of-fact, “You want to suppress pirates to gain fame? Julius, you don’t understand your position at all, do you? With your fall from grace, you don’t have access to a single one of our military assets. Not a ship, not an Armor. Nor do you have the right to command the kingdom’s troops. You wish to exterminate pirates? Don’t make me laugh.”

He flinched, yet he protested. “But, Mother, isn’t driving out such rabble our duty as nobles?”

“It’s the duty of those assigned such work. Julius, do you honestly think yourself more capable than the knights and soldiers who deal with air pirates every day? I realize sometimes academy boys involve themselves in matters beyond their capability, but we receive frequent complaints from those who view student ‘help’ as a hindrance. Were you not aware?”

Some of the male students went above and beyond the call of duty to try to earn names for themselves. The older knights and soldiers couldn’t exactly refuse when the boys insisted on helping, and some even supported the male students, aiding them in their quest for achievements. They held great sympathy for the boys’ desperate search for marriage partners.

“I understand the broader circumstances,” Mylene said. “So we let the *other* boys participate. Your *friends* may. But this baronetcy, they may go through the proper channels and have troops dispatched if they so require. *Then* they may recruit students from the academy.”

To Julius, Mylene seemed like an entirely different person at work. Her innocent persona was nowhere to be found. *Urgh! At this rate, I won’t be able to help Greg and Brad at all!*

Voices echoed in the hall. After receiving permission from Mylene’s bodyguards, Jilk suddenly entered the room, slightly out of breath.

Mylene scrutinized him, then turned back to her paperwork. “What is it?” Her pen kept moving.

Jilk took a deep breath, glanced briefly at Julius, then answered. “Your Majesty, Baron Bartfort has set off to eliminate the pirates plaguing Wayne House. Greg and Brad seem to be with him.”

Julius glanced at his mother, certain she’d lash out at Jilk for coming all this way over something so minor.

“What? Leon’s going?” Mylene blurted, sounding more like the mother Julius knew than a queen in work mode.

No—this was different. A faint blush colored her cheeks.

Mother! Please, open your eyes! What part of Bartfort could you possibly fall for?! No, wait a moment. This could be my chance!

“Mother,” Julius said in his most persuasive tone, “we must send reinforcements after them right away. Please, entrust the fleet to me. I will ensure these pirates are eliminated posthaste!”

The vulnerable, nigh shy expression on Mylene’s face vanished. “Julius, you haven’t any experience commanding a fleet. You’d only get in the way. Besides, we can’t have the knights and soldiers splitting their efforts by looking out for you, can we?” She turned to Jilk. “Is this information accurate?”

“Yes. I’ve already confirmed it. Earl Offrey’s daughter is involved, so I suspect __”

“Speak fact, not supposition.”

Jilk straightened his posture. “Duke Redgrave has sent an airship after the *Partner*, which is currently headed to the troubled baronetcy. The information comes from a reliable source.”

Redgrave House was involved? Julius glanced back at his mother.

Mylene appeared to mull the matter over. “Further reinforcements are unnecessary. This will be a good opportunity to learn the true extent of Baron Bartfort’s abilities. Is he merely a talented knight? Or is he genuinely capable of going head-to-head with these pirates? The duke’s decision to send a ship after them means he intends to provide Leon with backup. Given his precarious position right now, that would *seem* to be a dangerous choice…”

“Mother!” Julius protested. “Please, let me go as well. Why do you let Bartfort go but not me?!”

Mylene returned to her work, sighing. “Your inability to answer that for yourself is precisely why I can’t let you.”

***

The recreation room on the *Partner* came equipped with a pool table and dartboard, giving it a casino-like atmosphere. It was an ideal place to kill time, so soon, Brad, Greg, and I found ourselves there. Gambling, of course.

I wore a relaxed grin while they both scrunched their faces, studying their cards.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Are you gonna fight me or are you gonna fold?”

Greg growled. “Wait! Gimme a second to think!”

I’d already drained a decent amount of money from the two. They carried quite a bit—cash they’d earned during the school festival. What a shame they’d gone through all that work only to lose it to me.

“Why not give up now? If you back out, I’ll let you go,” I goaded.

Sweat poured down Brad’s forehead. “No way! I’m taking this round. It’s statistically impossible for you to keep winning like this. I swear, this one is mine!”

I’d beaten them in several consecutive rounds…by cheating, of course. Brad was right; my win record didn’t make sense statistically. I thought of it as my right in lieu of charging them for a ride on my ship.

Such gullible babies, these two. The second they got out in the real world, someone was going to take them to the cleaners. But before that happened, I’d teach them a thing or two about the harsh and unforgiving fate of an adult. They simply didn’t yet realize that the lesson I was imparting was a kind one.

“Here we go!”

“I’ll win this time!”

The two resolved themselves and laid down their cards.

Greg grinned triumphantly.

“How’s this?!” Brad was similarly self-assured. It certainly did look like he might have a winning hand. “This one’s mine!”

Dude, how many times do you have to lose before you recognize the pattern here? I sighed to myself and slowly revealed my cards.

Both of them went pale and collapsed on the table.

“Sorry,” I said. “I win again.”

Greg held his head in his hands. “There’s no way! You gotta be cheating!”

You’re right, I do! But it’s your own fault for not figuring out how I’m doing it.

Brad raked his hands through his hair and howled. “How many rounds did we lose?! This is inconceivable!”

I gathered the cards together. “You two really are a couple of morons.”

They both glared at me, but their wallets were too empty for them to challenge me again.

As I stowed away the cards, an exhausted Greg turned to Brad. “Hey, what kinda person was your ex-fiancée anyhow?”

Brad gazed tearfully at his empty wallet and sighed. His nose wrinkled in annoyance. “Miss Offrey is a rare type of woman, I suppose you could say.”

Oh, he was right about that. A real poster girl, that Offrey chick—for the worst nobility had to offer. Most girls descended from the higher houses were more composed, so the reckless consumption of Brad’s ex drew all sorts of attention.

I listened in as I prepared some tea.

“We only met a few times before our families agreed to the engagement. I can count the number of times we’ve talked at school on one hand. Although, I am glad I didn’t fight with her like the prince and Jilk did with their former partners. Our arrangement really was your run-of-the-mill political union. I knew Miss Offrey was…indiscreet, but I know little of her personality or her hobbies.”

“I’ve heard rumors,” said Greg. “Doesn’t Offrey House have a really bad reputation? Why’d you get engaged to a girl like that? I don’t see any merit in it for you.”

“I wouldn’t have if there were *no* merit,” Brad pointed out. “Offrey House was taken over, you see. The previous head was once a merchant. From their perspective, an arrangement with my house guaranteed them descendants of noble blood.”

Greg frowned, dissatisfied with this explanation.

Many of Holfort’s current nobles were descendants of the elite adventurers who’d founded the kingdom. Other families had climbed the social ladder over generations by making names for themselves, often with an adventurer such as

myself forging the way, or a scion who achieved greatness on the battlefield. Some houses had found less valorous ways to rise up the ranks. Those people were often labeled “upstarts,” but in my opinion, the sheer fact that they’d managed to find some kind of success in this world warranted praise.

There was, however, an exception, namely Offrey House. They’d been a mere barony before being usurped by a merchant who’d earned further titles through exploiting legal loopholes, resulting in their current earldom. Other nobles resented them for it. Who could blame them? Offrey House had no distinguishing feats or successes to its name before its rise to power. They were nobility by dint of contractual gray zones and boatloads of cash.

Since then, the family had stained their hands with a number of unsavory practices. People hated them, but they had their allies—never would’ve made it so far if they hadn’t. Specifically, they were in deep with one of the kingdom’s major political factions, but I didn’t know much more than that. I wasn’t interested in all that finicky stuff.

At any rate, Offrey House’s biggest current problem was all bloodline. The previous head of the family had essentially raised the house from commoner merchants into nobility. His son had inherited, which was all well and good, but neither he nor his sister possessed established noble blood. The miserable Offrey chick’s engagement to Brad had been intended to secure Offrey House’s place in esteemed noble lineage. By integrating with Field House, they could add greater legitimacy to theirs.

Honestly, I struggled to understand how anyone could be so hungry for prestige that they would put themselves through all that.

Greg raised his head, struck by epiphany. “Oh, right, her family’s been getting all buddy-buddy with the principality!”

“*Now* you get it?” Brad said, exasperated. “My family reigns over the border separating us from the principality. Earl Offrey asked my family to consider my engagement to his daughter if and when Offrey House proved able to secure diplomatic ties with the principality. We never imagined they would succeed, so my father agreed.”

“They kicked up a real fuss when they managed it, huh? Everyone was talking

’bout how we wouldn’t have to fear the Black Knight anymore.”

“And as a result, the two of us were engaged,” Brad finished.

Field House’s territory did indeed cover the front line—the border separating us from the Principality of Fanoss. Fanoss had the extremely powerful warrior (read: huge nuisance) on their side: the Black Knight. Every time the kingdom battled the principality, we suffered enormous casualties thanks to him. Offrey House’s brokered peace had obligated Field House to concede to Earl Offrey’s request for a marriage union.

“Details aside,” Greg continued, “they’ve actually done some good work since attaining earldom, I take it?”

“Which is exactly what makes them troublesome. Actually, Mister Wayne once insinuated he wanted me to break things off with Miss Offrey. A bit cunning, don’t you think? I suppose it’s no surprise a vassal house to a crafty lord would demonstrate the same tendencies.”

“Well, my engagement isn’t much different from yours,” said Greg. “I only met my betrothed a couple of times. Ha, as if I’d have any feelings for her.”

Thinking back, I realized that neither Greg’s nor Chris’s fiancées ever made an appearance in the game. Just what kind of women were they?

Luxion abruptly cut in with a report, discreetly enough that the two lounging nearby couldn’t hear him. “Master, it seems we have a welcome party.”

We wouldn’t get to the territory of Wayne House for some time yet, so by welcome party, he had to mean…

“Pirate ships,” he confirmed. “Two approaching.”

I drained the glass of tea I’d poured for myself and turned to the other two. “It’s showtime, boys. I expect you to impress me.”

They both gaped at me in surprise. They clearly had no idea what I was referring to.

“Enemy sighted,” I enunciated each syllable. “Go get ready.”

Greg popped out of his chair. “Y-yeah, no problem!”

Brad got up as well, but then the two of them just stood there, paralyzed, like a couple of lost children.

“Uh, so, what should we do?” Greg asked.

Oh, come on, you’ve got to be kidding me. Brad’s one thing, but, Greg, my guy, come on—aren’t you supposed to be an experienced adventurer?

“Forget it. For now, just remain on standby below deck.”

“And why should we do that?!” Greg snapped.

“Because I told you to get ready and you went brain-dead! Don’t make me spell it out for you!” I dashed out of the room, giving Luxion orders as I went.

***

The pirate ships flew black flags imprinted with a single skull. They called themselves the Winged Sharks.

Their captain studied the *Partner* and whistled to himself. “The boss’ll be real happy if we get our hands on that.”

His subordinate agreed. “It’s a big catch. But are there really only four twerps riding that thing? It’s huge!”

“Yep, three fellas and one lady,” said the captain. “Not sure whether I buy it or not, but supposedly the vessel’s a Lost Item. We’ll know soon enough, once we board ’em and check it out.”

“Want us to get rid of the four on board?”

“Moron! The fellas are rich noble brats. We can sell ’em to those wealthy old bats for some extra coin. As for the girl, we’ll play with her a bit, then toss her aside. She’s only a commoner, so she won’t make us any money otherwise.”

That galvanized the crew, and their ship, as well as the one flying beside them, began to descend. They came from straight above, planning to pin the *Partner* between themselves and the ground.

The captain put a hand to his neck and cracked it back and forth. “I heard one of them is unusually strong, but he’s still just a brat. Make sure you teach ’em what a real battle looks like.”

“Aye, aye! We’ll pound that lesson right into them!”

Suits of Armor launched from the ship, one after the other. Altogether, the two pirate vessels launched about twenty in total, all headed straight toward the *Partner*.

“We’re gonna have a good time today, thanks to these foolish kiddies,” said the captain.

“Hear, hear!”

They just had to secure the enemy ship so it couldn’t escape, and then it was theirs for the taking. They always took ships this way. But as their Armors approached the *Partner*, something flew toward them: a dark gray suit—an Armor noticeably larger than a standard model.

“What do they expect to accomplish with only one Armor? That kid might be kinda noteworthy, but he’s still nothin’ more than a brat. Surround him and—”

Before the captain could finish his order, the enemy Armor grabbed two of the pirates’ inferior suits in either hand and smashed them together. He discarded the broken Armors on the deck of his ship. As the rest of the pirates attempted to surround him, he effortlessly crushed them one after the other. One of the pirates attempted to stop him with an anti-Armor rifle, but the enemy dodged the shot, grabbed the muzzle, and used it to send the pirate’s Armor flying.

The captain now realized his crew was in legitimate danger. “What the hell is that thing? Retreat! Turn the ship immedi—”

Too late. A violent shock wave ran through the ship, and he caught himself on a nearby railing.

“What was that?!”

“Cannons! Our target is firing at us!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’re on top of them!”

The generally accepted pirate tactic in airborne warfare was to fly over your enemy. Cannons had poor accuracy, so they were usually positioned on the broadside of a ship. In honorable combat, crew would attempt to pull their ship

up alongside an enemy and fire as many cannonballs as they could to pierce the magic barrier that protected every vessel. The only way to bypass that barrier was to launch all cannons en masse.

To avoid such an assault, the pirates opted to descend from overhead.

“Their ship’s too big to maneuver well. How are they firing at us? And who’s manning the cannons? Aren’t there only four people on board?!”

A ship the size of the *Partner* needed a crew of at least a thousand, or it wouldn’t even launch. Four wasn’t enough—neither was five, if you included the pirates’ accomplice in the enemy crew. What manner of Lost Item was this thing?!

As the *Partner* continued firing, another shock wave tore through the pirates’ vessel.

“Surrender!” the captain barked. “Raise the white flag! We surrender!”

***

Greg stared as Arroganz landed back on the deck of the *Partner*.

Brad, on the other hand, busily tied up the pirates whose Armor Leon had destroyed. “Get over here, meathead!” he howled at his friend.

Arroganz towered over Greg, and as he gazed up at it, he thought to himself, *We don’t stand a chance.*

Arroganz was larger than most modern Armor—taller, broader, you name it—and, though covered in thick plating, it flew through the air like a dancing feather. The pirates’ crude suits had been no match for it.

Greg had never really imagined Leon’s strength beyond reach. That wasn’t the problem.

I always prided myself on practical experience, but what nonsense… Now that I’m out here on my own, I’m useless.

Greg had played an active role in battles before, yes—but only because of the support of his house’s retainers. In contrast, Leon fought completely on his own, like always. The moment the pirates showed their faces, he’d charged out to meet them.

This was the difference. The problem. Leon could stand alone and win. Greg had never even tried to do so.

"I really am immature, huh? Just a pretentious brat," Greg mumbled to himself. He felt pathetic. Worse, at the same time, he found himself unable to deny that Leon was far more impressive than he'd given him credit for.

***

Inside Arroganz, I ran a check on my surroundings.

"Have we disabled all enemy units?"

Luxion's portable body sat inside the Armor with me, perched on a bloodred pedestal, his single eye turned toward me.

"Yes," he said. "The two ships have already powered down their engines. Even if they do try to resist, it won't be an issue. We need only sink them."

"Idiot, don't do that. We're gonna take them home and sell them."

Our enemies' suits were shoddy, but their airships would fetch a fair price. And I looked forward to the bounty for their crews. I *had* resolved to take them alive—which was way better than leaving them to carry on their reign of terror.

"If I'm not mistaken, would it not be more expedient to shoot them down?" Luxion asked. "I suspect they'll be trouble if we attempt to take them back with us."

"Look here, I'm not mentally built to find joy in mindless slaughter. And if I'm gonna use you in battle, I've gotta be judicious."

"Master," my robot companion began, his electronic voice even colder than usual, "are you sure you wish to employ such caution even if it means failing your objective?"

The implication was clear: if you show enemies mercy, they will come back to haunt you.

Yeah, but they'll literally haunt me if I kill them, jerk! I groaned. "This is exactly why I don't like getting dragged into this kind of mess."

I disliked having to make this decision. It was one thing to fight of my own

volition, where I wholeheartedly accepted repercussions—even if I did my best to evade them. It was another matter to fight on someone else's orders. Either way, deciding whether or not to kill a man was not my jam.

Seriously, why is this even happening?

I just wanted to keep a suitable distance between myself and the primary characters so I could live in peace. But I'd long since missed my chance to leave Livia and the others to their own devices. And I knew it was my inability to commit that kept landing me in these troublesome situations.

Even now, I opted for the lukewarm approach: take my opponents alive. How long could I keep walking this fine line?

"Anyway," I continued, "wouldn't a warning shot have sufficed? Why'd you have to feed them a full barrage?"

"They tried to get the drop on the *Partner*. I refused to allow it."

This dude really has no place judging humans. For an AI, he can really hold a grudge.

Whether that was fantastic or terrible was up for debate, but thinking about it wouldn't get me anywhere—this otome game didn't ever adhere to its own logic. And besides, Luxion was my partner, so he could be inconsistent on matters like these if he wanted. If he were more realistic, now, I'd live in absolute terror of the day he revolted against me.

But the way he was? That was perfect.

***

Inside the *Partner*, Carla gazed out the window. She trembled as she gripped a communicator in her hand.

"You must be joking! How could you lose this easily?!"

She'd guided the pirates to the *Partner*, and the result left her dumbfounded. She'd never dreamed Leon could be so powerful.

The *Partner* had been shock enough on its own. It was fully operational with a mere five people aboard. It even ran with startling efficiency. Unbelievable. The pirates hadn't stood a chance.

“Lost Item? More like a cheat! At this rate, we really will reach my family’s territory.”

Carla had gone to Leon at the command of Miss Offrey, all in order to sic the pirates on him and the others. Carla was meant to be the sole survivor.

Her fingers tightened around the communicator. The connection had severed right after her first transmission to the pirates.

“Why’d you have to break on me?!”

Whether the signal was bad or it had some other mechanical problem, the noise on the other end terrified Carla. Although somewhat unreliable across distance, these communicators usually worked so long as the other party was near enough. With the pirates in such close proximity, it should definitely work. Why didn’t it work?

Frustrated and on the verge of panic, Carla flung the device at the wall. “I-I never even contacted my house. They have no idea I’m coming. If the young miss learns of this, I’ll be done for.”

After capturing the pirates, Leon would continue heading for Wayne House’s territory. Carla’s family would know exactly what she’d done the second they arrived. But more than whatever shame awaited her there, Miss Offrey’s ire frightened her beyond measure.

“Wait! The commoner!” Carla muttered to herself. “I’ll blame *her* for this disaster. Yes, perfect. Bartfort’s soft on that girl, so I’m sure he’ll forgive me for her sake. The other two have already been disowned, so they can’t even retaliate. Them, I can ignore.”

***

The *Partner* arrived in Baronet Wayne’s territory by the fading light of evening.

“The sun sure set quickly,” I said. To make things worse, it was cold outside.

This baronetcy lacked a harbor for the *Partner* to dock at, so we were forced to board a smaller vessel in order to land. That, however, became a problem.

“How can you be calm in a situation like this?!” Brad snapped at me.

Okay, so we were kind of surrounded by the baronetcy's soldiers. I lifted my hands in the air, namely because of all the guns aimed at us.

"Don't get so worked up," I said. "I feel just as uneasy as you do."

"I'm not sure if you're amazing or an amazing idiot," Greg said irritably.

The soldiers regarded us so warily because of the two pirate-like ships we'd brought along. Well, okay, not pirate-like, being actual pirate ships. I couldn't blame anyone for the cautious approach.

Baronet Conrad Fou Wayne appeared from between his soldiers, having been called on immediately. Carla's father was a middle-aged man with a large gut protruding past his waistband. As he approached us, his face was characterized primarily by exhaustion, but as he laid eyes on us, it soon turned to surprise.

"Put down your weapons! Immediately!"

Once I was no longer staring down the barrel(s) of (multiple) rifle(s), I dropped my hands.

"Lord Brad?" Mister Conrad gasped, bowing to him without even acknowledging me. "It's been so long."

"Huh? Uh, yes, of course." Brad didn't seem to remember the old man's face.

Mister Conrad gave him a self-deprecating chuckle. "We first met at a party at your father's estate. You've grown a great deal since then."

Brad, relieved by the explanation, eased up a bit. "More importantly, why are your soldiers so suspicious? We've come in response to your daughter's request for aid."

"Aid?" Mister Conrad seemed baffled. "My daughter asked you for aid, Lord Brad?"

Everyone turned to Carla, who tensed under scrutiny. Shocker. I'd instructed Luxion to keep an eye on her, so I knew the depths of her horridness. His camera had captured her entire plan.

"N-no!" she fumbled, "I consulted this girl about a problem I had, and she blew it out of proportion. S-so…"

Everyone's eyes flew to Livia.

"Huh? Uh, um, Carla asked me to…" Livia struggled. It was like, up to that moment, her mind had been somewhere else entirely.

She'd been really under the weather lately. Every time I tried to talk to her, she avoided me. What was going on?

Partly because of that, when Mister Conrad moved to question her, I intervened. "Your daughter wanted help, and she asked Livia to introduce us. So we hurried out here to lend our aid."

Mister Conrad peered at me as if to say, *And who the hell are you?*

"This is Leon Fou Bartfort," Brad said, introducing me. "I'm sure you've at least heard the rumors?"

Mister Conrad's eyes widened. "Baron Bartfort? Please pardon my rudeness. Um, however, my region is, to my knowledge, in no need of any especial assistance. Are you certain my daughter asked for your aid in this?"

Brad narrowed his eyes at Carla. "Care to explain?"

Now cornered, Carla tried to glare at Livia, but I stepped between them. Tears welled in Carla's eyes.

Sensing something amiss, Mister Conrad tried to cover for her. "My apologies, my lords. She seems confused. For now, allow me to invite you to my home, and—"

I snorted. *This stupid otome game. This world is especially soft on girls from the academy. Like I'm going to let this blow over.*

"Your daughter called us here with a promise of compensation in exchange for our assistance. You realize what this means, don't you, baronet?" I boomed, staring down the older man. "We're not playing around."

I'd never wanted the title of baron, but now that I had it, I was going to make the best of it.

"These two are future barons themselves," I went on, tilting my head at Greg and Brad, "and I've already received my title. I even brought out my own ship and seized two pirate vessels. You're not going to tell me this was all a

misunderstanding, are you?”

“B-but, I’m, the situation is certainly unclear—”

“Carla’s right there. Ask her to clarify. I understand you want to coddle daddy’s cute little girl, but don’t think that’s going to settle this. I have my own ways of extracting the payment I was promised.”

Luxion was kind enough to back me up and move the airship forward.

The baronet stared at the *Partner*’s massive form looming overhead; he likely assumed we had more allies inside. He seized his daughter by the shoulders. “Carla, what in the world is going on?! Did you really request their aid?!”

Carla sobbed, and at first, she tried to pretend she didn’t know what was going on. “Pirates? What pirates? I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“Really?” I said. “Because I’ve got two ships full of ’em ready to name you as an accomplice.”

That made her crack. She confessed everything, including the original etiquette trick she’d used to lure me out here. But the real treat was when she named the Offrey girl as the mastermind out loud.

Once we wrung all the details from her, we opted to return to the *Partner* rather than accompany the baronet back to his estate.

The second I was alone with Livia in a private room, I raised my arms and stretched my back. “Ahh, I’m exhausted. We’ll see how tomorrow goes, but I think I’ll take it easy for the time being. We still have a few days off.”

Day one of our trip, and we’d already resolved the pirate problem. In fact, it’d gone so well it was kinda anticlimactic, but this wasn’t a video game. I couldn’t object to a relatively calm spot of combat. The best thing I could hope for in this world was a future of peace and safety.

The only thing off was the absence of Livia’s worried questions—you know, like, *Are you sure that’s a good idea?* But now, her gaze was glued to her feet. She didn’t even attempt to converse.

“You okay?” I asked.

Slowly, she lifted her face. “I don’t get it.”

“Huh?”

“You’re amazing, aren’t you? You don’t need anyone. You can solve every problem all by yourself.”

Something about the way she held herself—her tone of voice—concerned me.

“Uh, Livia?” I reached a hand toward her, but she brushed me off. She even took a step back, putting more distance between us.

“Why are you always so nice to me?”

“Uh, well, because…”

The first thing that popped into my head was my usual excuse: *Because you’re the main character*. I couldn’t say that to her. The words caught in my throat.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? I’m a worthless commoner. What reason could you have to help me? I have nothing. Whatever you’re expecting, I can’t give it to you. So why go so far to help someone like me?” When I didn’t answer, her lips pulled into a dark smile. “Is it my body?”

“N-no! That’s not—”

Tears slid down her cheeks, and the smile on her face was so pained it made my heart ache. “Of course not. I’m not cute. Angie is far more beautiful than me, and she’s a refined lady. I really don’t have anything…not a single thing. There’s no reason at all for you to treat me kindly.”

Had I screwed up?

She sobbed as she sank to the floor, and I could find no words to offer her. I felt pathetic.

“Then…what is it that you want from me?” she gasped through the tears. “Why are you so *nice*? It’s *weird*. I can’t be of any *use*, not to you—not to Angie.”

Wait a minute—had Carla and the Offrey chick said something to her?

“You don’t have to be *useful*—that’s not why—”

That’s not why we do these things for you, was what I wanted to say. But then

I remembered how often I'd said things like *This world is a dating sim*, and *Those high lords are love interests in the game*.

Her words struck my heart like little knives. My excuses fell apart even as I tried to summon them. I'd realized something—some part of myself and my behavior that I hated.

I hadn't just treated the love interests with flippant disregard. I'd done the same to Livia. I'd been treating her as the protagonist—a mere 2D character with a role to play.

Livia was destined to become the Saint, at which point I had been planning to have her solve all the problems in the kingdom—for my sake. In other words, I was using her. Just like Carla had. What made me any different from that loathsome girl?

My thoughts ricocheted back and forth, rattling in my brain.

Had I ever really looked at Livia as a *person*? Or had I only ever seen her as a piece on a grand board game, essential for my future win?

Livia cried and cried, her legs splayed on the floor beneath her. "I wanted…I wanted to be friends with you—with both of you! But you treat me like an *animal*. Don't condescend to me! I'm not your pet—I'm a person!"

Unable to say anything in my defense, I fled the room.

Chapter 6:
Vented Anger

ALL THE GOOD I'd thought I was doing had backfired on me spectacularly.

I stood on the *Partner*'s deck, the wind biting into my cheeks, but I couldn't stand being cooped up inside, stewing in my thoughts. Regardless, my mind fixed on Livia.

"A pet, hm?" Luxion floated beside me. "True, the way you pampered her was much like one treats a pet. Not much to say in your defense when you spent so much time fawning over her like a favorite video game character."

"Yeah. You're right."

This A-grade AI jerk wasn't even trying to console me. If anything, his words pushed the knives in my heart even deeper.

"However, suffering repeated acts of genuine malice at school has rendered her emotionally weak," he went on. "She is, at present, mentally unstable. I therefore see no reason for you to lend her words particular weight."

"Do you think *I'm* a robot? I get hurt. I'm sensitive, I'll have you know."

"Yes, sensitive as a rock. Her words won't leave a lasting impression. You'll be fine."

"You think so, huh?"

Neither the experiences from my previous life nor the wisdom that came with it had softened the blow of Livia's accusations. They'd shattered me.

I shook my head. "This is for the best. It was totally out of line for a background character like me to involve himself with the protagonist and the villainess in the first place. I've learned a valuable lesson."

"Yet I question the wisdom of backing out now," Luxion said.

"Are you telling me I should stick around and watch over them till the end? Screw that. The protagonist herself just said she doesn't want to be treated like

a pet. We'll see how she fares by herself, then."

"Well, now you're throwing a tantrum."

"Oh, shut up." I already knew that, I didn't need it spelled out. After a moment of silence, I finally asked, "What do you think I did wrong?"

"In this case, the root of the problem is that you impeded her ability to grow and mature."

"I 'impeded her ability to grow'? What are you talking about? I've done nothing *but* help her grow. I helped her at the school, in the dungeon, with everything."

"Indeed. And originally, in the game, she solved all these problems by herself," Luxion pointed out. "In the short-term, yes, you succeeded in helping her. However, in the long-term, you hindered her. She was exactly correct. You thought of her as a pet, didn't you? An adorable, beloved pet, I'm sure. Given how unpleasant the rest of the women in this world are, Livia gave you far less trouble, and that made her valuable."

The blood rushed to my head.

"You bastard!" I threw my fist, bashing him into the floor.

He bounced, then slowly floated back up. "Satisfied?"

"No. I'd punch you again, but my hand hurts."

The anger left me heated, and I seethed in silence as I waited for the chilly air to cool me back down.

"I believe I'll keep going," said Luxion, "because you need to hear this. While you may possess the memories of your previous life, you are as yet very much a child. You require mental growth as well."

"Mental growth?" I huffed. "Don't need it. Do you know the real difference between adults and children?"

"I assume you don't mean physically. Perhaps self-discipline?"

I had no problem controlling my impulses, thank you very much. "Wrong. The difference is whether or not they can adapt to society's expectations. You want

proof of my maturity? I have you, and all your power—I could rebuild the whole world order—but I haven't."

Kids heard it all the time: *grow up, be an adult, conform*. The people who devised alternative value systems and tried to change the society as a whole? *They* were children. Tons of people out there had tons of growing to do. But me? I'd integrated, hence, I was an adult. A no-good excuse for one maybe, but an adult nonetheless.

"Such words might be moving coming from someone else, but they sound rather like a bad joke coming from you, Master."

"Well, excuse me." Sulking, I sank down on my butt.

Just then, Brad waltzed out onto the deck, sword in hand. The moment he saw me, his face scrunched in disgust.

Luxion hid himself behind my back.

"Sword training?" I guessed.

"That's right." After a pause, Brad added, "I'll be borrowing your deck to practice."

He promptly began swinging even as the chilly air whipped around us. His form was so terrible that calling him bad would have been flattery. Even I was better than him.

"Why not practice your magic?" I asked. "You're actually good at that."

Brad stopped swinging, sweat beading his forehead. He was really putting his all into this practice. He grimaced and turned his sword toward me. "You think I don't know that?!"

"What, now you're lashing out at me?"

Brad resumed swinging his blade, but apparently my presence bothered him. He seemed to find it difficult to concentrate.

"You swing every day?" I asked.

"Of course. I have to in order to become a knight."

I shrugged. "It's not required."

“I-It’s a martial art, of course it’s required!”

Okay, but being able to swing a sword didn’t automatically do you any status favors. Granted, if you were so good at it that people called you a Sword Saint, *that* was another matter, but for most people, swordplay alone wouldn’t get you knighthood.

Also, it was different for nobles—of course. Once they reached a certain age, most of them got knighted automatically.

When I pointed this out, Brad haughtily flipped his bangs out of his face. “Perhaps. But one day, I want to beat you. Until that day comes, I swore I would give it my all.”

Give it your all? That’s hilarious. I paused. *Wait, huh?*

“Are you an absolute idiot?” I asked. “I’m not fighting you guys again. You lost to me once, and there’s no round two—not for us.”

Brad pulled a face, but he continued swinging his sword.

“No reply for that one, eh?” I smirked.

“If I’ve got time to quibble with you, I should spend it on my forms. I’m the weakest of the five of us.”

I scratched my head. Brad possessed considerable talent with magic, but he basically had no other skill besides. I’d had a hell of a time utilizing him in the game for that very reason. Despite his weakness, he’d still rush to the front lines and die instantly. I couldn’t even remember how many times I’d begged him through the screen: *For the love of all that is holy, please don’t go out in front*.

“Put all that effort into something you’re good at,” I advised him.

“I do! But I don’t want to lose here either,” Brad continued, surprisingly frank. “I want Marie to look at *me*. When it’s all of us together, I fear I pale in comparison to the others. I mean, I’m obviously the most handsome. But in every other area, the gap between us…can’t help but be apparent.”

This jerk just casually complimented his own good looks. Is he actually depressed or what?

“What do you guys even like about that girl?” I asked, genuinely puzzled. “That short stack is flat as a board.”

“You dare insult her appearance?! And anyway, it’s what’s on the inside that counts.”

Right, and on the inside she was rotten to the core! She’d stolen Livia’s role, and her personality was a long list of red flags. Really, her mission to build herself a reverse harem said all I needed to know about her. Although I doubted these guys heard a word I said whenever I tried to point out Marie’s true nature.

“Honestly, I might have been more willing to believe you if you *did* say you just found her irresistibly cute—no, okay, I wouldn’t. You could play ping-pong on that chest.”

“What’s your problem?” Brad glared at me. “Breasts are mere decoration!”

“The hell they are! You take that back! Voluptuous breasts contain a man’s hopes, dreams, and desires. I can’t forgive you for—hm?”

A floating robot had wandered out onto the deck, a couple of wooden swords in its hands. After handing one to each of us, it promptly left.

“You know, those floating tin cans infesting your ship are somewhat terrifying.” Brad stared after the robot with a tight-lipped grimace, his legs trembling.

That’s right, I forgot he was a coward. A narcissist and *a wimp. What a pain…*

Personally, I found the robots cute.

Brad turned the tip of his wooden sword toward me. “Duel me, Bartfort!”

“I’ll pass. It’s cold out here.”

Frustrated, Brad stomped but resumed his practice. However, the way he kept stealing glances at me annoyed me enough to give in and pick up my wooden sword.

“Perfect, come at me!” Brad declared.

“Why are you so excited about this—you know you suck at sword fighting,

right? Are you stupid?”

“My grades are far better than yours, so I’d take care who you call *stupid*! I’m merely delighted by this chance. I swear, victory will be mine!” He took up his stance. At least his posture now was better than his earlier forms.

I lunged to strike at him, and he broke form all too easily. He handled himself with the absolute absence of skill.

“Come on, what’s wrong?” I taunted, striking at him again and again.

He stumbled, yet he managed a swift and brutal lunge toward me, sweeping his sword from the left. The diagonal slash had more power than I anticipated, and this time I staggered instead.

“Urgh!”

I’d simply let my guard down for a second, but Brad let it get to his head. He charged. “Now I’ll finish you—ah!”

I smacked him on the head with the hilt of my weapon, and he instantly crumpled to his knees.

“I knew it,” I said. “You *are* stupid.”

“D-dammit. I thought I had you.”

He’d probably be better off with a spear, honestly. His thrusts were quite fierce.

Brad lifted himself up and started toward the ship’s entrance. Apparently he was done.

“I…I’ll beat you next time,” he said, cradling his head in his hands, then disappeared inside.

I turned my gaze to the wooden sword in my hand. For the first time in a long while, I started practicing my forms. I’d gotten rusty.

“Well, that’s not entirely unexpected. I haven’t touched a blade outside of class. I just need some more training.”

Before I left home, I’d practiced every day. Since coming to the academy, I’d slacked off, mostly because of all the other things I suddenly had to do—mainly

finding a fiancée. That felt like a pretty pathetic excuse.

“You seemed to enjoy yourself,” Luxion said as he slipped out from his hiding spot.

“*You* went out of your way to invite more trouble. You had the robot bring the wooden swords, right?”

“Yes.”

“Seems like those guys have a lot on their minds, too,” I muttered. Brad worked harder than I’d given him credit for. That surprised me. I wasn’t sure why, but it made me kinda happy.

I pointed the tip of my weapon up at the night sky. The stars looked beautiful as they glimmered in the dark.

***

Marie and Kyle walked right past a sign labeled No Trespassing and made their way down the shaft of a certain dungeon beneath the capital, decked out in full armor and carrying weapons. Kyle, shouldering heavy luggage, was whining.

“We should go home. It’s super dangerous down here, isn’t it?”

Marie’s load was even heavier than Kyle’s. She shimmied down the rope. “Don’t you dare give up!” she snapped. “Our future lies before us. Dazzling glory awaits!”

“If you planned this from the beginning, you should’ve brought the boys,” Kyle grumbled under his breath. “The monsters here are powerful.”

As they bickered, something came crawling up from the bottom of the shaft.

“Eeek!” Kyle howled. “There’s one now!”

Little suction cups on the monster’s feet kept its gigantic lizard body from falling as it scurried up the wall. It cracked open its enormous jaws and headed straight for Marie.

She yanked a grenade from their luggage and slung it into the monster’s mouth. “Don’t underestimate me!”

It swallowed on instinct. When the explosion triggered, the lizard's head went flying, and the shaft filled with black smoke.

Shock waves caused the rope to sway violently, but Marie clung to it, yelling, "Kyle! Hang on tight!"

"I wanna go home!"

Marie and her slave continued the rest of the way down, eventually arriving at the bottom of the hole. Kyle sank to the ground with tears in his eyes, thankful to have something solid under him again.

Marie remained vigilant but set their heavy luggage down and took out her tools. *It's fine,* she told herself, *I've got this. I already knew about everything that's happened up until now.*

She had cleared the game up until the midway point. That was how she'd known about the hidden item past the No Trespassing sign above.

All I have to do is retrieve it. Then we can get ourselves out of this mess. Marie pictured Livia's face in her mind. *That's right, I'm going to step over you and find happiness!*

It was reckless for her and Kyle to charge this deep into a dungeon by themselves. But Julius and the others had obligations, so she hadn't mentioned the trip to them. Another reason had driven her secrecy as well.

I didn't think Olivia capable of anything on her own, but that useless background character made her a force to be reckoned with. I have to get this item quickly, or my plan to surpass them will crumble.

She'd been wary of Leon for some time now. He'd seemed flippant and carefree as recently as the festival, but her intuition told her he couldn't be underestimated. When Olivia eventually entered the dungeon herself, he would most definitely be at her side, which meant they might obtain the item before Marie could. The thought terrified her.

Marie couldn't wait for anyone else. No matter how tough things got or how hard she had to push herself, she would get her hands on this item.

Marie held up her shotgun and glanced back at her servant. "Come on, Kyle."

He slowly picked himself up off the floor, and she hauled her cumbersome pack back over her shoulder, snatching up a lantern. She started forward, illuminating the path ahead.

“What are we even looking for down here?” Kyle asked.

“Come with me and you’ll find out. And don’t worry, after this, we won’t have to worry about our finances ever again.”

That made Kyle’s face brighten, though he quickly shook his head. “No, but really, how are we going to get home safely?”

Marie held her shotgun steady, ready for whatever might come, her face determined. “I will do whatever it takes to get the treasure that lies ahead of us. Our *lives* are on the line.”

That item was essential to enjoying the ideal life she’d planned for herself.

With Kyle following, Marie trekked deeper into the dungeon.

***

At the palace, Julius attended a strategy meeting with Jilk. Now that he was no longer the crown prince, people didn’t seem to expect much of him. No one visited him daily, as they once had, and personally, he preferred it that way.

“I’ve figured it out, Jilk!”

“I knew you had it in you, Your Highness!” Jilk readily complimented the prince, even though Julius had not yet explained his plan.

“I say we sneak out of the palace and rush off to join Greg and Brad to offer our support. What do you think?”

“That’s a brilliant idea.” Jilk smiled.

“Great, I thought so, too. The only problem is…*how* are we going to sneak out?”

Jilk grew thoughtful. “The greatest obstacle is your recognizability within palace grounds. Queen Mylene has a number of lookouts on watch, and they’ll be on their guard for you. It won’t be as easy as simply slipping away.”

“I see what you mean.” The prince fell silent, momentarily discouraged. Then,

seconds later… “I’ve got it, Jilk!”

“I knew you had it in you, Your Highness!”

“Masks! If we hide our faces—wait, no, we should prepare cloaks, too. It’ll be better if we hide our clothing as well.”

“I see.” Jilk nodded. “We’ll disguise ourselves and escape.”

“Exactly!”

“One small matter, Your Highness… How are we going to procure these masks and cloaks?”

Julius’s face fell. “That certainly is an issue.”

The two contemplated quietly for a few minutes before the prince again came up with a truly innovative idea.

“I’ve got it!”

“I knew you had it in you, Your Highness!”

Together, the two worked out their plan to sneak out of the palace, so excited that they momentarily forgot their motivation for doing so in the first place.

That’s right! Julius thought suddenly. *Once I get out of here, maybe I should go see Marie. I’m sure she’ll have a brilliant idea for us.*

For a moment, he allowed himself to be distracted by lingering on the thought of seeing her again.

For so long, these two young men had been a source of hope for so many people. With the weight of those expectations lifted, Jilk and Julius were left feeling strangely energetic.

“Let’s get to it, Jilk!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

***

Mylene scanned the report from her subordinate.

“What in the world is that boy doing?”

The document detailed how Julius and Jilk had submitted a budget request to

cover the costs of buying masks and cloaks. They weren't being at all forthright about the reason, but it was clear they were up to no good.

Mylene thought she might cry from stress.

"Was my son actually an idiot this entire time? I always thought him so capable. Is he seriously thinking about sneaking out of the palace in such a rudimentary disguise? This is anxiety-inducing."

Even if she gave them the benefit of the doubt and pretended a mask and cloak could abet a serious attempt to run away, their decision to submit a *budget request* made her want to sit them both down for a talk.

I don't mind buying these things, she'd say, *but* why *would you let me know what you're planning by turning this in?*

"What do they even intend to do after they get out? Have they even thought that far? No…no, that's just silly. They're not *that* stupid."

Mylene wanted to be optimistic. Julius was her adorable son, and she'd known Jilk since he was a little boy.

"I must be wrong. They're both so capable, and such serious boys. They've never tried to sneak out of the palace before, so I'm sure that's what's tripping them up. In fact, maybe they *wanted* me to notice. Or perhaps this is a trap to lure me into a false sense of security?" She sighed. "Neither of those options seem terribly likely. Regardless, those boys are intelligent enough. I'm sure I just haven't realized their true aim here. If a mother can't trust her own son, who will? No doubt this is a brilliant, strategic move!"

However…

"But it is also true they're trying to run away." She gestured to a subordinate. "Call them in here. Tell them I wish to discuss their immediate future."

***

I still didn't have any answers when the sun came up the next day. At the breakfast table, Greg chowed down while Brad gracefully lifted each bite to his mouth.

"Only morning and it's already a sausage-fest in here," I grumbled.

Livia had stayed cooped up in her room, so Luxion had delivered her breakfast.

“Not like I want to see your face this early in the mornin’ either,” Greg said as he wiped his mouth. “Anyway, what are we gonna do now? The pirates’ main forces are still out there, right?”

As far as the game went, we weren’t supposed to meet the rest of the pirate group until the middle of our second year at the academy. But if we left them alone, they’d grow more troublesome. The Winged Sharks, as they called themselves, were an especially fiendish band. Handling them later sounded like a pain—it would be way easier to finish them off while we were already out here.

“We’ve figured out where they’re hiding,” I said. “We just need to wait a bit longer before we rush in, and—”

Luxion interrupted me. “Master, it seems they’ve decided to launch an attack against us first.”

I jumped out of my chair and stared out the window. Greg and Brad watched me nervously.

“Looks like they came faster than expected.” I turned to leave the room. I needed to welcome our uninvited guests.

Greg called out to me on my way out. “Bartfort, I don’t care if it’s half-broken, let me take one of the Armors.”

Brad wore an earnest expression as well. “I salvaged a couple from yesterday’s batch. We’d both like to use one.”

What were they planning to do with busted Armor? “Absolutely not. Do you really think you can ride a couple of defective suits? You’re still nobility.”

“Please!” Greg bowed his head. “I know I’ll slow you down, but I can’t just sit in here and watch.”

Brad bent his neck as well. “We realize it’s selfish. And those Armors, broken as they are, belong to you. But we’d still like you to lend them to us. We want to fight.”

I considered turning them down, but when they looked up at me, their sincerity was so intense I had to avert my eyes. “Let me check them over first,” I said. “You’re free to take whatever you want after that.”

“I owe you one.”

“I won’t let you down, I promise!”

Both of them sounded so cheerful about leaping into the fray. What the hell!

Worse, Luxion didn’t even wait for my command. “I will perform maintenance and resupply two of the more intact Armors in our hangar.”

You royally aggravating piece of junk.

He was so annoyingly competent that I didn’t even have any ammunition with which to retaliate. How was I supposed to harp on his faults if he didn’t have any?

“Make sure you’re thorough,” I muttered.

***

For some reason, it grew noisy outside.

Livia had been sitting listlessly on the floor of her room, but the clamor coaxed her to her feet. She started toward the window, her eyes red and puffy from all the crying, her face an utter mess. Even her legs shook, unstable from fatigue.

“Why is the *Partner* moving?” she asked absently as she felt the ship jerk forward.

She peered through the glass to see Leon aboard Arroganz, launching into battle. “Leon?”

A pirate ship similar to the one they’d battled yesterday crept toward them. Wait, no, five ships. The biggest easily exceeded three hundred meters—absolutely enormous.

It lined up alongside the *Partner* and fired a barrage of cannonballs.

“Eek!” Livia threw her hands over her head and crouched, but a dim light encircled the *Partner* and left it unscathed. “I-Incredible…”

When Livia peeked outside again, Leon was charging at the enemy's flagship, its sails billowing in the wind. Leon shattered its mast.

The sight initially brought Livia relief, but her depression quickly returned.

I said such horrible things to him. I have to apologize. Why did I say all of that? She couldn't even identify why she'd been so upset, not after all he had done for her.

As Livia fidgeted and worried, an enemy Armor suddenly sent Leon spiraling through the air.

"What…?"

Unlike the other Armors, which typically ran much smaller and lighter than Arroganz, this one measured up to Leon's suit. And despite Arroganz's strength, this Armor overpowered it.

Livia's heart seized painfully. Drained from lack of sleep, knowing her judgment was impaired and keenly aware of her own helplessness, she nonetheless flew out the door and raced down the corridor. She had to run quite a distance to reach the deck, the *Partner* was so large.

On the way, robots floating through the corridors tried to impede her.

"Sorry, but let me through!" Livia cried, and for a moment, they froze. They rebooted quickly and raced after her, but they couldn't catch her in time.

Livia stumbled out onto the deck. The battle was far louder out here, and her ears rang painfully. Gunpowder exploded, and cannonballs smashed against the *Partner's* magical barrier. Violent tremors accompanied the cacophony, and smoke enveloped the battlefield.

Livia peeled herself away from the door to search for Leon. She wasn't thinking about whether or how she could be useful. She simply wanted to know he was safe.

"Leon? Leon!"

Just then, an enormous Armor landed on the deck in front of her. When she peered up at it, she saw not the dark-gray of Arroganz but a thorny Armor with a skull painted on it.

“Eh…?”

This was the Armor that had sent Arroganz spinning through the air. It held a large broadsword in its right hand, and its left hand stretched out toward Livia, large enough to swallow her whole. Fear paralyzed her, but suddenly, tiny, cylinder-shaped robots with spindly arms and no legs swarmed between her and the enemy.

“Tch, what’s this garbage getting in my way?” a deep voice scoffed from within the Armor. The Armor smacked the robots aside and flung them away, then reached toward her once more.

Livia snapped her eyes shut and turned her head away. *No, Leon, save me!*

“Get your hands away from her!”

But this wasn’t Leon either.

Piloting one of the enemy suits, Brad swept in and tackled the huge Armor. His momentum only sent the pirate sliding back a short distance. With the difference in their Armors, it was like a small child shoving at their parent.

The pirate seized Brad and launched him into the air. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, brat!”

Livia forgot how to breathe.

Brad went sprawling across the deck.

As he tried to struggle back to his feet, Greg came charging in with his Armor. He spun his spear through the air, managing to destroy several enemy units as he lunged.

“Hey, you, get outta my way!” he roared, thrusting his spear at the pirate. However, the enemy’s armor was too thick to pierce. “Guess you’re a tough one, aren’t y—”

The pirate yanked the spear from his suit and slammed it against the deck, sending Greg tumbling along with it.

Livia watched in horror, too gripped with fear to retreat.

Brad moved protectively in front of her. “What are you doing?” he snapped.

“Get out of here!”

“M-my legs won’t move!”

***

Being flung through the air had me annoyed as hell, and I took out my frustration on nearby enemy units.

“Outta the way!”

I snatched an enemy in Arroganz’s hand and hurled him at the pirate ships. A whole group had surrounded me, and my breath came out in short, uneven gasps as I sat scrunched up in the small, cramped cockpit.

“Don’t kill them!” I shouted angrily at Luxion. “Capture them all!”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Luxion, likewise, was disgruntled. “We wouldn’t be having such a hard time if you didn’t insist on taking them alive.”

Drones launched from a container on Arroganz’s back, taking up a defensive position in the air around me.

The pirates, rifles in hand, screamed.

“Monster!”

“What the hell?! What the hell is that thing?!”

“Unload all your bullets—no, don’t come near me!”

The man who’d thrown me was the bandits’ boss—he had a bounty on his head and piloted an enormous Armor. Most modern suits were sleek and lightweight, like what the other pirates piloted. Their boss, on the other hand, used the same kind of heavy Armor as Arroganz.

“Let’s hurry up and catch that bastard!” I might have been panicking.

“Master, your reaction time is slower now than when you last piloted,” Luxion warned. “And it is far from the only one of your skills suffering. Your aren’t as sharp today.”

Yeah, I get it. I’ve been slacking off in my training here, too. “Sorry. Been a bit busy with other stuff.”

“No. I believe this to be an unresolved mental issue.”

Arroganz, with its thick, charcoal plating, soared through the sky. Any bullets the pirates fired at me ricocheted off. Arroganz’s immense superiority—strength, speed, and power, you name it—were readily apparent. Yet despite the fact that I piloted such an elite weapon, I struggled.

I had underestimated my opponent. Their boss had left me to his underlings, thereby avoiding direct confrontation between us. Any time I tried to seek him out, the other pirates surrounded me and started shooting, and trying to deal with them was proving to be a huge pain. I had to get close and crush each of their individual heads in Arroganz’s grip. When I did, through the cracks of their Armor, I saw the pilots regarded me with abject fear.

“I can’t keep messing with you idiots. We’re going to finish this now!”

“Master,” Luxion interjected, “the pirate boss has landed on the *Partner*’s deck. Also, Livia is there.”

“What?!”

I choked in surprise, and numerous cannonballs came blasting at me from the enemy ship, swallowing Arroganz in the explosion.

Despite our predicament, I laid into Luxion. “Why did you let her go outside?!”

“My apologies. The worker robots’ system suffered a temporary malfunction. I suspect there is an underlying cause, however—”

“Forget it! We’re going back to save her right now!”

One of Luxion’s cameras followed the action on the *Partner*’s deck, and he pulled up the feed for me to see. Brad and Greg were making a valiant attempt to fend off the enemy’s leader, piloting the Armors Luxion had repaired.

“Agreeing to their aid was the right choice. For now, they have protected Olivia.”

The image of them fighting desperately to keep her safe looked so…natural. It haunted me. In my past life, I’d seen this scene play out hundreds of times.

I dropped my gaze and laughed. “That’s right. This is how things should be.

They're the love interests, and she's the protagonist! It never made any sense for me to be beside her!"

"Master?"

"Yeah, that's right. I knew it, deep down. It's not worth getting upset over now." I took a deep breath, adjusted my grip on the controls, and flicked off the feed.

No use thinking about that right now. I needed to deal with the enemy in front of me. I had my own role to play here. After all, I was a background character, right? How presumptuous to think I could ever have stood beside the protagonist—beside Livia. That just wasn't my place.

"Increase our output. Call up the third container," I said.

"Understood."

Luxion sensed a change in me, at least enough to stop with the unnecessary comments.

What's wrong? Not gonna say anything? I almost feel a little lonely without your scathing sarcasm.

Two axes popped out of the third container, and I snatched them up in either hand. I bent my head, clenching the immense weapons in Arroganz's fists. Slowly, I lifted my gaze back up toward my monitor.

"I'm going to crush them."



***

On the deck of the *Partner*, Livia still couldn't move. Her legs had given out. Greg and Brad both lay collapsed in front of her, the pirate boss towering over them.

"D-dammit!"

"How is he able to exert that much power in such an unwieldy Armor?"

Though they still lived, their suits were in no state to continue battle.

The pirate boss leaned his broadsword against his shoulder and reached his left hand toward Livia. "Those two sure wasted my time. Girl, you're gonna be my hostage."

This man means to use me against Leon. Livia staggered to her feet—she needed to run.

The second she did, the pirate thrust his blade through the helmet of Brad's suit.

Brad screamed in anguish.

"Mister Brad!"

"If you try to run, I'll kill him." The pirate's voice trickled out from the behemoth of an Armor. He extended its hand toward her again. "Now hurry up. Get over here."

Brad writhed in agony. Tears streamed down Livia's face, but she took a hesitant step forward, her knees shaking, even as she sobbed in frustration. *All I did was hold them back. I'm nothing but a burden to everyone.*

Just then, a gray blur swept in front of her, and the wind from its passage whipped Livia's hair and ruffled her clothes. The pirate boss went flailing through the air.

"Leon!" Livia exclaimed, but almost as quickly, fear returned. "What…?"

Leon hacked away at the enemy with a massive axe in either hand, ripping through the pirate's protective plating.

Livia had last seen Arroganz during Leon's duel with Julius. For that, Leon had

wielded a shovel, which had made the suit look almost silly and kind of adorable. Now, Arroganz appeared far more sinister. The suit was a weapon, forged for battle, and its murderous aura made her mouth fall open.

“You can’t do that, Leon! You can’t!”

He alternated hands as he chopped into his opponent, playing with the pirate’s Armor as if it were a toy. While he slashed away, the man within screamed in terror.

“Spare me! I surrender! I surrender, so please!”

Leon cackled. “Surrender? Pretty lame for a famous pirate like you. There’s no fun in it if you don’t resist. Come on, fight back!”

He slammed his foot against the pirate over and over again, until the man sobbed, pleading for his life.

“Please, spare me, I beg you! Please!”

“That’s an awful lot to ask after the mess you caused. Shouldn’t you be telling your men to stand down and surrender first? Go on, spit it out before I kill you!”

The pirate had fought Greg and Brad with such ease only moments before, but facing Leon reduced him to little more than a bug.

Even as he ordered his men to surrender, Leon continued to mangle the Armor, ripping the plating right off it and tearing through the frame and internal structures.

Livia watched in abject terror.

Arroganz jammed its hand into the Armor’s stomach and wrenched something out. Visible inside his helmet, Leon grinned. “Found it!”

“G-give that back!” the pirate boss gasped. “That component is vital to—”

“Like I care. It’s not yours anymore. If you’ve got a complaint, come at me.” Leon slammed his foot into the man’s broken Armor, sending him tumbling across the deck. The pirate wailed, so at least he still lived.

Livia searched the skies, but it seemed Leon had already taken care of the pirates’ airships. Black smoke billowed out of each one. They still managed to

stay adrift, but the remaining pirates scurried to hop onto small lifeboats, hoping to flee.

Leon had also defeated most of the pirates' Armors, which now floated on the sea below. Their flotation devices had deployed, keeping them from sinking, and the pilots slowly lifted themselves out of their suits. Each peered up at the sky with a look of despair, as if afraid of what would come for them next.

They reminded Livia of Brad. She hurried over to where his suit lay; he was visible in the cracked open cockpit, his injuries likewise apparent.

"L-Let me help you," Livia said.

Brad popped his head out of his helmet, a cold sweat covering his anguished face. He tried to force a smile. "Th-thanks."

"No, it's my fault you—"

He shook his head. "No, it's not."

"What?"

"Greg and I agreed to this." He nodded in Greg's direction. "We said we'd fight to protect you. After all, we're trying to become knights. A knight must always serve a lady, otherwise—hey, that hurts!"

As Livia busied herself tending his wounds, she was nevertheless relieved to hear Brad didn't resent her for being a liability. Still, she felt horribly pathetic. She pressed her hand over one of Brad's injuries, and a faint light emanated from her palm. The wound sealed itself, then disappeared entirely, leaving Brad gawking.

"You're incredibly skilled at healing magic—just like Marie. Thanks!"

Only a rare few were able to wield such magic, and this information sparked Livia's curiosity. "So Miss Marie can use it as well?"

"That's right. She's our goddess," Brad boasted, grinning. "No matter your injury, Marie can heal you right—"

Just then, he lost consciousness. Perhaps he'd relaxed too much from the lack of pain.

Leon emerged from Arroganz and watched as Livia cleaned the lingering blood from Brad's healed wound with a handkerchief.

"Leon!" she said when she noticed him. "Uh, um…"

He smiled down at her, though Livia thought he looked a bit sad. "This suits you perfectly. I guess it's normal for things to return to their original state."

What on earth was he talking about?

As Livia tried to stand, Leon moved over to Greg. He pulled the man out of his Armor and confirmed that he hadn't sustained any significant injuries. "Nice job out there," Leon said with a grin. "You're actually pretty tough."

"You mocking me? Ugh, sorry 'bout this. We borrowed these from you, and then we broke 'em."

"No big deal." Leon shrugged. "You were worth it. Could you give me a hand getting Brad inside?"

"Is he okay?" Greg furrowed his brow.

"He's fine. Miss Olivia healed him right up."

Livia pressed a fist to her chest. Her heart squeezed as painfully as if someone were crushing it between their fingers. She opened her mouth to protest, but no sound came out.

Leon brushed past her without even meeting her gaze. Together, he and Greg pried Brad out of the cockpit. Some robots brought a stretcher, and they lifted Brad onto it. Once the three of them went inside, Livia allowed herself to cry.

"Why…? Call me Livia, *please*…" Her legs once more gave out, and she collapsed to the ground, a sob in her throat.

***

The pirates' treasure glistened before me, but I had no interest in any of it. We'd stowed it all in one of the *Partner*'s storage rooms. I'd also taken something else from them, something far more valuable. I turned it over in my hand but quickly shoved it in my pocket.

"Impressive that they managed to collect this much." Luxion floated through

the air beside me. “I doubt we can expect much from Wayne House in terms of compensation, but we will earn a reward for dispatching the pirates and apprehending their leader. Going by kingdom standards, it should be a handsome one.”

That hardly mattered to me now. What was I going to do with even more money? It was all so pointless. “Maybe I’ll buy a new tea set. Not sure what I’ll do with the rest.”

The image of Brad and Greg protecting Livia—no, *Miss Olivia*—popped into my mind. This was how things were supposed to be, yet something about it made my heart uneasy.

I glanced at Luxion. “Hey, did you find proof of a connection between Earl Offrey and those pirates?”

“Yes. I have collected correspondence between them, as well as some other material.”

“Guess we should inform the palace. I can leave the rest to Duke Redgrave. A rival house’s scandal will make for a nice gift.”

“It’s more than a scandal. You hold the key to their undoing,” said Luxion. “You realize Offrey House may try to intercept and retrieve the pirates?”

I shrugged. “We just have to crush them if they do, right?”

What *was* the purpose of everything I’d done up until now? I had all this power at my disposal, and I’d made proper use of nearly none of it. Was I an idiot?

Yeah. That’s exactly what I was—an idiot.

“If we clean up trash like them,” I mumbled, “it might make the kingdom a slightly better place. No, that’s not good enough. The kingdom itself is garbage. In fact, this whole world is crap, isn’t it?”

I started laughing.

Luxion eyed me but didn’t offer any of his usual derisive comments. He simply asked, “Are you certain this is what you desire? *I* would have no compunctions about destroying this kingdom—no, the whole world. All you need do is order

me, and I will take action. After that, we would be free to construct a world that better suits your tastes."

A world that suits my taste? That sounds wonderful!

"That'd be the life. I could have women waiting on me hand and foot, make my *own* harem. Gather up all the elf girls, cat-eared girls, and beast girls. Maybe I'll make a world that's the exact opposite of this one, one where the women are at the bottom!"

As soon as I said that, I realized something awful. I was fantasizing about the exact ugly situation I was already in, except with the roles reversed.

"Seriously…? So I'm no different from the girls at the academy?"

"So glad you realized that on your own," Luxion remarked. "Do you feel a little better now, having taken your anger out on those pirates?"

Not in the least. If anything, my emotions felt like wretched worms squirming inside my belly. I wanted to be rid of them, but I didn't know how.

"The girl," Luxion began, then clarified, "Olivia, I mean. She doesn't hate you. She's simply emotionally volatile—"

"I know that," I snapped. "You thought I was angry with her? Thought I was pissed she was being *ungrateful* despite all the effort I'd gone to just to look after her?"

"Yes."

"You little…" I glared at him. "What kind of person do you think I am?"

But then, when he'd told me Livia had come out onto the deck, I'd definitely thought, *You idiot! What are you doing?!*

However, her actions had enabled Brad and Greg to prove their bravery and determination. This was how the protagonist and love interests were supposed to operate in relation to each other.

Overall, the mission was a resounding success. Yeah. It was great to see how it had all turned out. I wouldn't have to fill in for the love interests anymore. I could go back to being a background character.

I slipped the Holy Necklace out from my pocket. “All that’s left is to figure out how to give this to her, I guess.”

It would be so much easier if Brad or Greg could just open their eyes and get with Olivia. Then *they* could give the necklace to her instead of me. In fact, that would be best. I hoped they’d give it their all.

And me, I’d give it my all trying to help them return to where they belonged.

“Which means I know just what I have to do with this thing.” I stuffed the necklace back into my pocket.

“Master,” Luxion announced, “it seems Earl Offrey’s fleet is headed this way. An airship from Duke Redgrave is also incoming.”

Welp. Today truly was turning out to be one hell of a day.

Chapter 7:
Karma

I WAS THINKING ABOUT karma. I wasn't entirely clear on the definition of the word, but it sounded cool at least. Like fate or destiny—like you had all this stuff riding on you or something.

"I wonder if I can escape the karma of being a background character."

"Karma is a deed," said Luxion. "Cause and effect. You act, and it results in good or bad karma. To wit: you don't know the meaning of the word."

Do you know what it feels like to have your badass catchphrase pedantically corrected by someone else? He might as well have dug a hole for me to bury myself in! "Pretend I never said anything."

"As you wish."

We stood out on the deck under the cold night sky. The *Partner* was lined up with three of Duke Redgrave's airships. Flying opposite us was Earl Offrey's fleet—an armada he'd put together in case of battle.

Long story short, the earl was demanding we hand over the pirates we'd captured. Meanwhile, the duke's side—my side—responded that the earl was an idiot for thinking we'd willingly hand them over when their vassal house had requested my assistance. Earl Offrey was obviously desperate to keep us from getting our hands on proof that his house had conspired with the pirates. Unfortunately for him, now that the Redgraves were involved, Offrey House couldn't simply force me to relinquish my prisoners. Instead, they had to negotiate—or try, anyway.

Angie had taken Li—ahem, Miss Olivia back to her ship and intended to fly her home. The moment she'd seen Miss Olivia's tear-stained face, she'd glared at me and slapped me across the cheek with her open palm. Pretty damn mad, I'd say.

"Are you sure this is for the best?" Luxion asked me.

“You mean leaving talks up to the duke? Do I look like a master negotiator to you?” I shook my head. “Obviously this is the way to go.”

I had asked the duke and his family to see to the discussions with the earl. Surely they wouldn’t make demands of me after I left everything to them, right? Not that paying compensation to anyone would be a hardship, since I was sitting on a fortune right now. I had the pirates I’d taken captive, all their Armor and airships, and their treasure as well.

What other problem could there be?

“That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about the credit. Why did you attribute your achievements to Brad and Greg?”

“Because I benefit from them getting to return to their inheritance. They’re plenty willing to protect Miss Olivia, right? Even if they fail at some point, I have a feeling they’ll pull through when the time comes.”

The game’s story was already way off course. I had to correct its trajectory as much as I could. I didn’t like to think of what might happen otherwise. Besides, even if those two couldn’t reclaim their positions, they’d come out of all this looking way shinier than they had before. They’d put in the effort, and they deserved a reward. I could at least do that much for them.

“So you settled things with Olivia, gave credit to Greg and Brad, and kept only a few items for yourself. Were the results worth the cost?”

This inorganic jerk. Was he not factoring the treasure, airships, or Armor into his calculations? “Of course. This is more than enough for me. Plus, I have you.”

Although now that I thought about it, Luxion was supposed to be Miss Olivia’s. The little I’d done to help her hardly made up for the fact that I’d stolen what was, theoretically*, her* cheat-tier spaceship. But if I said that, Luxion would let it go straight to his ego, so I kept my mouth shut.

“You made Olivia cry,” he said. “Angelica was quite angry about that.”

“Yeah, well, our princess is hard to please. Looks like she hates me now.”

“You intend to put distance between yourself and Angelica as well?”

I laughed dryly. “Come on, I’ve been way too close to her.”

There was this little thing called “appropriate distance” to which I had not in any way been adhering.

As I waited on the deck, Earl Offrey’s fleet took off in another direction. Apparently negotiations were over.

***

A room had been prepared for Angie on the duke’s airship, and she had invited Livia to stay there with her.

Livia sat with her arms wrapped around her legs, telling Angie of the trip thus far. Angie could only sigh in exasperation.

“I won’t say you behaved with perfect ladylike grace, but Leon’s more than a little pathetic for throwing such a sulk.” Although, Angie knew she was being a bit hypocritical.

Livia cast her eyes downward. “No, it’s all my fault. I took my feelings out on Leon, and now he hates me.”

Angie reached out to console her, but she paused, fist clenched. *Do I have any right to blame Leon and console Livia?*

As she reflected on everything she’d said and done up until now, her heart flooded with regret.

“Let’s rest for now,” Angie said. “We’ll be going straight back to the academy.”

She had no idea what she ought to do. Livia was her friend, one she’d made without the influence of her house; she was neither a follower nor a yes-man. However, Livia was also a commoner. Angie doubted her every impulse as to how to genuinely engage her.

Was their relationship—and the one they shared with Leon—doomed to crumble?

***

When Brad and Greg returned to the capital, the palace invited them to a meeting to discuss their future. But the government official who delivered the news of their reward could not fathom their response.

Brad slammed his hands on the desk. “What in the world is going on—ah, that hurt.”

His arm had only just healed.

Greg shook his head in exasperation and scowled at the official. “*We* didn’t dispatch the pirates. All we did was help. Why the hell are we receiving the reward?!”

Greg and Brad were to be officially knighted. They would also be compensated for disposing of the pirates known as the Winged Sharks.

“Don’t mock us!” Brad protested, tears in his eyes. “Bartfort defeated them. Are you telling us to steal the credit?!”

The official glanced uneasily between the two, already at his wit’s end. “We *need* you to accept. Baron Bartfort himself reported your deeds, claiming he only assisted you. Ah, and I am afraid, as neither of you possess court ranking or titles, and as the baron possesses an upper-sixth court ranking *and* a baron title, his report takes precedent over yours. I-If you feel there has been a misunderstanding, we may launch an investigation.”

Normally, people would have jumped for this reward. If Leon had tried to steal the glory out from under Brad and Greg, the official would likely have insisted on an investigation. However, from the look on his face, he clearly wanted to tell them, *Shut up and take it*.

That bastard. *He’s being weirdly considerate.* Greg folded his arms and took a deep breath. “We. Only. Helped. Bartfort defeated the pirates. All we did was show up. If you wanna give us a participation trophy, sure, but we won’t take anything more than that.”

Brad nodded. “We did nothing noteworthy. We simply can’t take full recognition.”

The official sighed. “I was asked not to say anything to you, but I’ll make an exception, given the circumstances. Baron Bartfort made an appeal to both of your houses. He asked them to examine your accomplishments and consider reinstating your inheritance.”

Greg and Brad’s jaws dropped.

“Wh-why would that jerk do that?!” Greg leaped to his feet.

Brad furrowed his brows. “Y-yeah. What would motivate him to go that far for us?”

“I don’t believe it’s my place to imagine what the baron is thinking,” said the official, “but he’s made quite the financial contribution to the palace. He sent money and gifts to your houses as well. Perhaps you should be grateful and accept his kindness, hm?”

With that final implication—that they could return the favor later—the official promptly left the room.

***

Greg and Brad took a seat in the palace’s courtyard, neither able to sort out their dizzying array of emotions. Greg sulked while Brad gazed, forlorn, at his feet.

From a distance, Julius spotted the two and rushed over. His face was lined with exhaustion, but as soon as he saw his friends, he lit up with a smile. “I heard about everything, you two!”

Apparently someone had informed Julius of their “deeds.” Both boys frowned.

“Your Highness?” Brad glanced up.

Julius grinned, evidently in high spirits. “I hear you safely disposed of those pirates! And in front of Bartfort, no less! We’ve claimed victory this time, haven’t we? Not to mention, I heard your families have reconsidered their stance on your inheritance after hearing of your accomplishments. It won’t be long now before they reinstate you as heirs!”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Greg grumbled. “We didn’t win anything. Not in terms of strength or spirit.”

Brad couldn’t disagree. “Your Highness, we did decide on something, though.”

“What’s that?”

Both Greg and Brad got to their feet.

“We want to win against Bartfort,” said Brad. “It’s not that we want him to lose anymore. It’s that we want to beat him, as men.”

“You said it.” Greg clenched a fist. “We’re no match for him the way we are now. The dude’s an amazing knight. We never stood a chance against him in the first place.”

The time for sulking was over. They would take action immediately.

“Your Highness, would the queen grant us an audience?” Brad asked.

“My mother? I’m sure she would. But what are you planning?”

Greg laughed awkwardly, embarrassed. “After everything he did for us, we gotta return the favor. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be men.”

***

So this is what it feels like to show someone kindness only to be slapped in the face, I thought.

Classes would resume tomorrow. I’d somehow managed to return to the academy in time and was sitting in my room in the boys’ dormitory, an official correspondence from the palace in my hands.

“Brad, Greg… So this is how much you hate me, huh?”

I clenched the paper hard enough to wrinkle it. The words on the page basically amounted to: *Congratulations! You’re being promoted to lower-fifth court ranking!*

Yup. I was to ascend from upper-sixth to lower-fifth, courtesy of Brad and Greg (and my involvement in the pirate incident). All I’d done was try to reconcile them with their houses, and somehow that became a reason for me to receive a higher court standing? This had to be some kinda joke.

“Who the hell is pulling the strings here? How is this even allowed? What does ‘lower-fifth’ even freakin’ mean? My dad’s lower-sixth. Why do I have to be two whole ranks above him, huh?!”

Most people would be happy to receive more clout, you say? Wrong! I wasn’t the least bit pleased. Receiving more influence and power meant more *responsibility*. All I wanted was to hole up in the countryside. What good did

clout do me? If your court ranking got too high, the palace started calling on you all the time, and I did *not* want to get involved with politics. Why else would I lend those two lordly nincompoops my support? Now *I* was moving up in the world?!

Normally, you needed a number of achievements before the palace gave you much of any recognition. Higher titles required things like a thorough check on your territory, and court ranking was similarly difficult to obtain. And yet!

As I protested, Luxion drifted behind me to peek at the document. “I never dreamed you would be rewarded with higher rank. You certainly do have a habit of exceeding my expectations in the most unpredictable of ways.”

“What part of me is accomplished?! I didn’t want a freaking promotion! No matter how you look at this, the outcome makes no sense! There’s plenty of other guys out there that’d love to know how I did it, and I can’t even explain it to them!”

Expelling a few pirates shouldn’t have been enough to warrant this “honor.” Normally, you needed achievements on the battlefield, years of dedicated service, or some especially exceptional deed.

Come on! Why me? Why now? Promote someone else, I’m begging you here!

As I grumbled, I heard a knock on my door. I opened it to find a dorm employee looking nervous, who promptly bowed her head.

“Baron Bartfort, I-I have a letter and a package for you.”

“You do, huh?”

“Y-yes. I can’t bring the package to you, so we’ve set it outside.”

“Outside?”

She gestured for me to step out into the hall, where I found an airbike waiting for me. A large and luxurious vehicle, it didn’t take a genius to figure out it cost a buttload. *Probably even more than lower-end Armor.*

The sender’s name graced the envelope—Atlee House. I opened it and scanned the letter.

“Guhhh?!” I screamed, and several nearby employees jumped.

I held an apology from Clarice's family. They wanted to make amends for the incident during the school festival. They also thanked me more personally—their daughter had recovered her high spirits. Part of their gratitude came in the form of this airbike.

Seeing as I was a man, and therefore liked anything with wheels, I was, technically, happy to receive it. The problem came in at the last line of the letter.

"This can't be. This has to be a lie. Does…does everyone really hate me *this* much?" Tears welled in my eyes.

The dorm employee swiftly bowed and made a strategic retreat.

Tears fell one after the other, sprinkling across the letter and blurring the ink as I read it again:

Considering you received a higher rank recently, the palace requested we wait to bestow further honors upon you. You will be elevated to upper-fifth ranking upon graduation, so please wait until then.

Earl Atlee, a court noble, held a cabinet minister position. In accordance with his status, he also held a high court ranking. And, he apparently felt indebted to me. Therefore, he had requested further promotion.

The airbike would've been more than enough, thanks!

"Why?! Why does everyone want me to get promoted? It's just weird! It's almost like you all know how much I hate it, and that's exactly why you're doing it! How can you all be so heartless? And you call yourselves human?!"

Luxion floated over to me and extended one of his cords toward the airbike, where he plugged himself in. "The engine entirely differs from the model you rode during the festival. The parts are high-quality. It's an exceptional bike."

"What are you doing?"

"Administering improvements and taking control."

It looked like he was assaulting the poor machine. Luxion could be a real villain.

Right around then, my knees gave out from under me. I landed with a thud on

the ground and stared at the bike.

“You know what,” I said, “let’s go on a journey. An adventure in a country we’ve never been to before.”

“You can’t. Classes resume tomorrow.”

“Of course they do. My life suuuuucks!”

Why do things like this always happen to me? I keep telling you, world, plenty of other guys want what you keep socking at me! Me? I don’t want it!

***

By the time Chris returned from his family’s estate, his face was heavy with exhaustion. They had already disinherited him and cut him off, so they had only called him back to tie up some loose legal ends and deliver a seemingly endless train of lectures.

When he first left for home, he had mentally prepared himself for official disownment and to be told to never show his face again. Yet it had been worse than he could have imagined. His body, his posture—everything spelled fatigue.

When he returned to the dormitory, he spotted Leon with his legs splayed out beneath him in the hallway, shoulders slumped forward.

Why’s that Bartfort jerk sitting there on the floor?

Chris didn’t bother calling to him. Instead, he made his way to his room, only to find a letter waiting for him. He picked it up off the floor and saw Marie’s name signed on the bottom. His lips pulled up into a smile, and he adjusted his glasses before reading it.

“Marie went into a dungeon over break? W-was she okay by herself?”

The letter continued, saying Marie wanted to meet him and show him something once he came back.

Chris hastily prepared himself and flew out the door. Now on his way to see Marie, he completely forgot the troubles he had endured back home.

***

The next day, I remained hunched over my desk in despair all through class.

The instant the first break began, Daniel and Raymond came over to me.

"You look awful."

"Shouldn't you be a little happier?"

Rumors were already spreading. The girls had heard about Brad and Greg's successful bandit fight, and they lionized the boys at every opportunity. Me, though? Not a single high-pitched shriek in my direction. Neither Miss Olivia nor Angie contacted me either. The general vicinity of me was defined by a distinct lack of women.

"I didn't want another stupid promotion," I grumbled.

Daniel forced a smile. "I get where you're coming from. A higher rank means more trouble. At your status, your vassals will have vassals, and you'll have to command entire fleets."

The higher your rank, the more the kingdom expected from you. In the event of a war, a baron at lower-sixth rank was only obligated to launch a single airship. Now, I'd have to provide way more than that. You were further compelled to offer aid in proportion appropriate to your status, hence why some nobles didn't *want* to be elevated. Meanwhile, those who did seek influence flaunted their power by collecting airships.

Raymond glanced at some girls sitting nearby, who regarded me with conflicted looks. "But," he said, "at upper-fifth ranking, you should have a much easier time getting married, right?"

Marriage. Yes, that *was* the whole reason for attending the academy.

"I guess." I shrugged. "Maybe it will make it easier, but it still sucks."

Raymond laughed. "We still have our school trip. And who knows? A girl might take the opportunity to approach you then. I'm jealous."

Yeah, but any girl who made a move on me now would be practically announcing to all and sundry that she only cared about my status. *Oh, wait, that's right. That's the only kind of girl at this academy in the first place.*

Daniel looked put out. "I wish I were going with either of you."

Irrespective of grade, all students at the academy took school trips every year,

with separate groups going to one of three different destinations. Daniel, Raymond, and I were each headed to a different place.

In the game, you selected the same destination as your love interest of choice, which gave you more opportunities to increase his affection for you. You could obtain Limited Items in these locations as well. I'd maneuvered myself to a destination where I could find just such an item, one that I'd found invaluable during the game.

"I'm bringing you souvenirs, so you better look forward to it," I said.

They both laughed.

"You got it."

"We will, then!"

At least I could count on my daily life to remain steady and unchanging; I appreciated that. A lot of students took their school years for granted. I certainly had in my previous life, but that meant I now knew how I should treasure this time.

Raymond glanced at me. "So, Leon, you're on the same boat as Miss Angie and Olivia. Why not use this opportunity to apologize and make nice with them?"

"Why are you making it out like *I'm* the one at fault here?"

Daniel's eyes widened. "Aren't you?"

Raymond—the jerk—nodded. "Yeah, he's gotta be."

It seemed I needed to sit my friends down to find out just how many treacherous thoughts they harbored.

***

On the day of our departure, an extravagant luxury cruise liner awaited us. Once aboard, my group headed for a warm island in the South, a popular destination for many schools. The seasons there ran differently, so at this time of year on the island, summer reigned.

"So it's like traveling from the northern hemisphere to the southern

hemisphere? Huh…”

Although a school trip in name, the whole thing reminded me more of a cruise. I spent my time aboard the cruise liner hanging out with the upperclassmen I knew, including Lucle. Together, we wandered around the ship’s casinos.

“The island we go to is a tourist attraction,” Lucle said, “and they hold a festival this time every year. If what they say is true, the unique atmosphere should prove enjoyable.”

“A festival, huh?” I stroked my chin.

“They want us to experience a different culture. Girls wear yukata to the festivities, and if the boys are lucky, they might get the chance to escort a girl and get to know each other. Time for you to give it your best, Leon.”

Lucle was right. If I wanted to get married, I had to put in some effort. The only problem: the other boys were already swarming the popular girls. Any untaken girl had their servant pampering them instead.

I spotted Angie at the bar counter, conversing with some people. Her former followers hungrily sought the chance to win back her favor, but she seemed annoyed by their efforts. As I idly scanned the casino, I spotted Miss Olivia ducking outside. Perhaps she felt uncomfortable with the atmosphere.

Lucle glanced at me. “You picked a couple difficult ones.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not in any position to go after either.”

“That’s for the best. We low-middle rankers have our own set of girls to aim for. And those two have boys aiming for them, too. Pursuing someone whose status doesn’t match yours is only asking for trouble. But you already know that, don’t you? You saw it play out with the prince and the high lords.”

Speaking of, the prince and his posse had been split up for the school trip. Julius and Jilk were with one group, and Marie had been lumped in with Brad and Greg.

Lucle’s gaze landed on Chris. “Look, it’s the Swordmaster.”

Chris sat at a poker table, but even when he won, he didn’t crack a smile. Just

then, he stood from his chair and left. He had to be bored, all separated from Marie and the others.

“So, Chris is by himself, huh…?”

His cool aura alone still attracted a horde of girls, though.

“Lord Chris, what do you want to play next?”

“There’s a pool on the deck. Won’t you swim with me?”

“No, come eat with me!”

He sighed and hurried off, but his dismissive attitude only fueled their enthusiasm.

When I breathed out a sigh of my own, Chris’s head jerked my way. A vein bulged on his forehead, and he glared at me.

Lucle interrupted our staring contest by nudging me. “I’m headed over to roulette. Want to try your luck with me?”

“Nah, I’m not one much for gambling,” I said, eager to ignore Chris as soon as possible.

Lucle’s jaw dropped. “What?”

He clearly didn’t believe me, but I really *did* hate gambling. Who went into battle without knowing whether they’d win or lose? Absurd.

I only fought when I was sure I could claim victory.

***

As the cruise liner headed for the southern island, a couple of girls secretly met in the vessel’s storage area, whispering to each other.

“If we’re humble with her, she acts all arrogant!”

“Well, she’s a duke’s daughter. What do you expect?”

The two were some of Angie’s former followers. Their group had been trying to regain Angie’s favor since losing her trust. However, some among their number—namely these two—nursed ulterior motives.

“My house will be cutting ties with the duke’s family.”

“Mine, too. I mean, the faction supporting the crown prince is all but gone. And Redgrave House keeps losing power.”

Julius’s downfall had caused a ripple effect in the faction that supported him, especially affecting his primary ally, Duke Redgrave. It was only natural; the prince had been the faction’s rallying point, and with him disinherited, nothing could hold the former allies together. The houses who had coalesced around Julius in hopes of reaping the benefits after he became king now fled for greener pastures—they had no hope of seeing their original goal fulfilled.

These two girls, however, were a bit different from the rest.

“How are we supposed to use this thing?”

“They said to pull the string and fling it outside. We’ll stand out if we do it on the deck, so they said to throw it somewhere else.”

They held a cylindrical object with a string attached to it. One of the girls yanked the string, and smoke instantly began spilling out. She promptly tossed the object outside.

“Will this work?”

“I guess?”

The two clueless girls slipped out of the storage area and made their way back to Angie.

***

Upon arriving at the island, Livia borrowed a yukata and meandered through the town in the fading light of evening. Normally, that would be dangerous, but the festival meant that stalls lined the streets and red lantern lights dangled everywhere, lending the town a uniquely warm and lively atmosphere.

“How beautiful…”

A drum and flute played in the distance, their melody joined by the voices of people enjoying the festivities. The festivals in Livia’s hometown looked entirely different; she wandered the streets alone, engrossed in this brand-new culture—as much as she could be.

She hadn’t spoken with Leon since the incident with the pirates. Speaking

with Angie gave her a hard time, too. The gap between the three of them had only widened. Livia caught sight of Angie walking through the festival as well, but with her clique surrounding her, Livia couldn't possibly approach.

A range of aromas danced through the air, salty and sweet. A variety of games awaited as well, and Livia watched people scoop goldfish out from a tub of water. Fireworks burst overhead, and Livia flinched as they colored the night sky. She could call the scene nothing but beautiful, but at the same time, she couldn't truly enjoy herself.

Despite her misgivings, she tried searching the crowds for Angie again, or Leon, but couldn't find either. She honestly hadn't thought to look for them lately. In the wake of everything that had happened with Carla, she loathed herself too much to try.

Is it really all right for me to be here?

When Livia had asked that question before. Leon had said yes. She'd been so happy. Now, she felt pathetic, embarrassed by the cruel things she'd said to him.

Why did I put so much weight on other people's words?

Even Livia didn't know the answer. Lately, she didn't find much meaning in anything, no matter what she did. She wandered aimlessly, farther and farther away from the festival.

Oh no… I'd better go back.

But just as Livia thought that, she overheard the sound of people arguing.

"N-no! I won't give them to you! I don't care that you're a noble! Please, stop!"

Unthinking, Livia raced toward the sound. It had to be one of the students harassing a local. She burst onto the scene, even though she didn't yet know what she intended to do. "Uh, um…!"

"You there! What are you doing?!"

Livia wasn't the only one who'd rushed to the sound of altercation; Angie also charged into the alley, her yukata in slight disarray. The two glanced at one

another in surprise, and then, awkwardly, they turned to the source of the argument.

“Leon?” Livia gasped.

“You…” Angie was similarly aghast. “What in the world are you doing?”

Leon was the one threatening the poor local. He glanced uneasily between them. “Uh, this isn’t what—”

The local—a man wearing a mask—pleaded with the two girls, nearly in tears. “Pl-please, help me! This noble is demanding I give him everything I have.”

The girls frowned at Leon. In that moment, he looked just like a sleazy noble, drunk on power and trying to rob a poor merchant of all his wares.

Leon jumped to his own defense. “N-no! I told him I’d buy it all, so hand it over! I have the money!”

The man shook his head. “No. Other people are looking forward to these as well! It doesn’t matter how much you pay me. I won’t let you rob other people of their joy!”

He clung to several boxes of tiny little objects folded inside slips of white paper, presumably meant to be sold at the festival.

“What are these?” asked Angie.

The man brightened. “Charms my granny made. They’re quite popular and provide many benefits. She makes all different kinds, and I wrap them in these white papers. What you get is entirely luck of the draw.”

Leon waved a roll of cash at the man. “That’s why I said sell them to me. I’ll buy them all. You want ten times the normal price? Done.”

He was being awfully persistent.

The man cowered. “What’s wrong with you?! This isn’t a problem money can solve. I’m selling these because I want to see people’s smiles!”

Leon withdrew a coin purse from his pocket. “Here, how’s this? Gold coins. Twenty of them. I’ll give you this on top of my previous offer.”

The man paused but shook his head. “My granny made these to give people

joy. I refuse to yield!”

“You’ve got guts. I like you!” Leon’s grin grew sinister. “Actually, I have some platinum with me, too. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I already told you, no!”

Angie snatched Leon’s ear between her fingers.

“Ouch. Owie! That hurts, Miss Angie!”

“Drop the ‘miss.’ I don’t want your formality. Now come on, we’re leaving.” She glanced at the local. “We’ll be taking this bother with us.”

The man clutched his goods protectively. “Th-thank you!”

He soon disappeared through the crowds outside the alley, making his way toward the festival.

Even as Angie maintained a firm hold on Leon’s ear, Leon stretched a hand toward the man. “Waaait! My item!”

Livia had no idea what to say.

Chapter 8:
The Principality

THE THREE OF US wandered over to a shrine not far from the summer festival. I plopped myself down on the stairs, my eyes glued to the ground as tears of frustration welled.

You might think it weird for a fantasy world like this to have a Japanese summer festival. Well, tell that to someone who cares! Look, even I found it weird, but this world ran on crazy otome game logic. You couldn't expect it to make sense.

"I really wanted a charm…"

Even now, I wanted to chase after that merchant and buy up everything he had. Alas, neither Angie nor Miss Olivia would give me the opportunity. They watched me like a couple of hawks. Although, my abject disappointment had both of them uneasy.



“You…really wanted those charms that bad?” Angie peered into my face. She had shaken off her followers. Awfully convenient how they clung to her now, given how they’d abandoned her without hesitation when she really needed them.

“I was looking forward to this day so much that I couldn’t even sleep last night.” I wiped away my tears. It wasn’t an act! My heart was seriously broken!

Livia stammered awkwardly. “Um, uh, but…I don’t think you should go about it that way. Trying to buy up all of that man’s charms, I mean.”

I understood what she meant, but what good was money if you couldn’t buy things with it?

“As long as he gets paid, who cares?” I paused and stroked my chin. “Maybe I should have offered him one hundred times his asking price…”

If his charms actually worked the same way in real life as they did in the game, they were well worth forking over a fortune.

Those charms were the whole reason I’d come to this island in the first place—one of them was a special Limited Item. The only problem was you couldn’t know if you’d struck gold until you opened it. In the game, you were in the hands of the RNG gods. Unlucky players got a simple Luck Charm. A better get was the Battle Charm, which improved the bearer’s skill in melee combat and increased stats for physical attributes. The best draw was Elemental Protection, which improved the power of your spells. It also increased your magical stats and your aptitude with the elements. In short, awesome.

I had specifically orchestrated my assignment to the group going to this island during my first year at the academy all for these charms. How did I manage this, you ask? Simple. I bribed a teacher.

The charms also gave you a leveling bonus, which was why I had avoided entering dungeons any more than absolutely necessary up until now. However, with the opportunity to obtain my sweet, sweet charm gone, my dreams of min-maxing flew out the window.

Both Angie and Livia wore creased frowns. They probably hadn’t expected me to cry.

I continued sniffling, and as the festival drew to a close, the man in the mask happened to pass by our spot. Most of his wares had sold already.

“Oh, there you are. Mister Noble, I have two extra charms. If you want, you’re welcome to them.”

I stood and pulled out my money. “Come on, I need a jackpot!”

“Uh, you realize there’s no such thing as a hit or miss with these,” he said. “They’re all good; they just have different effects.”

Moron. By that very definition, some effects are better than others!

I slowly peeled away the white wrapping from the first charm, my cheeks red from the tension.

The first charm was a white ball, about as small as a marble, adorned with metal and a red string.

Nope, this isn’t it.

White indicated healing magic, and I had no talent in that area. Useless.

I ripped the paper off the next charm only to discover a red ball. “Red, huh? I don’t have any skill in that either.”

Both charms were beautiful, sure, but I didn’t really feel any boosts just by holding them. How beneficial could they be? Now if they’d been yellow or blue, it’d be a different story. As it was, though…hit and a miss indeed.

Angie tilted her head. “What are you talking about? Aren’t you glad you got a couple of charms?”

“Well, I must be off, then.” The man in the mask clambered up the stairs. “Take care of yourselves. If I may, sir, I think those charms would better suit the two ladies with you.”

With that, he disappeared into the darkness.

Angie and Miss Olivia, huh? Guess he has a point.

My shoulders slumped as I held out the charms to the girls—the red toward Angie and the white toward Miss Olivia.

“Y-you’re giving them to us?” Angie wrinkled her nose. My earlier desperation

had likely made her skeptical.

"I wanted a different one."

"Oh… All right."

Miss Olivia shook her head. "I-I can't take that."

"I insist. It won't do me any good. Wasn't even expensive." I practically flung it at her.

Miss Olivia's lips pulled into a thin line as she cradled the charm in her hand.

I plunked myself back onto the steps and breathed out a long sigh, holding my head in my hands.

"Leon, uh, um…" Miss Olivia struggled to come up with the words she wanted.

Angie's followers appeared from down the road, cutting her off. "My lady!"

Angie immediately took off in the opposite direction. "Sorry, I have to go!"

Her female followers charged noisily after her, but all three of her male followers stopped to circle around me.

"So it's you, Bartfort."

"Don't get cocky just because you've been climbing the social ladder lately."

"You're just a destitute noble trying to butter up Lady Angelica."

Might as well have scrawled *brain-dead* on their faces; they looked the part. They could blame their own hostility for most of their problems. Anyway, they had betrayed Angie when she needed them most, and anything they did from now on, unless it went truly above and beyond, would do little to earn back her trust. Their balance was so far into the negative that their best efforts would only bring them back to zero.

Get a clue.

"What? Does it get on your nerves? You jealous because Angie likes me? Too bad for you." I crossed my arms and smirked. "If you hadn't tossed her aside during the duel, maybe she'd like you instead. You do okay at reading the air at school, but maybe you shoulda focused on the political scene instead. Bit late to

brownnose now. Don't you feel embarrassed for yourselves?"

That pushed them to the brink. I was already steaming, so I was only too happy to brawl if they threw the first punch.

Unfortunately, Miss Olivia stepped in front of me and flung her arms out protectively. "Y-you shouldn't fight!"

"He's the one asking for a beatdown!" one of the boys bellowed.

"I-I'm sorry. But still, you really shouldn't fight!"

"Tch, let's get going. He's pathetic, hiding behind a girl like that."

Like you're any better. You losers only want Angie for the support she can provide.

As they left, I turned to Miss Olivia. "You don't have to bother with me, you know. They weren't going to cause any more fuss than they already had. I'm sure they'd have backed down soon enough."

They never would've followed through. Probably? Young, hot-blooded guys just come at you sometimes. And hey, if they did, I had some adult-level punishment in store for them. Fights between grown men didn't end with a mere few punches.

My mood took a sudden turn when Miss Olivia let out a sob. "I'm so sorry, Leon. Really, I am. I wanted to apologize to you for so long. I am so, so sorry for causing you so much trouble when we were facing the pirates. I said such awful things to you, and I—I'm so sorry."

Tears stained her face as she repeated herself over and over again.

I scratched my head, unsure of my footing in this situation. "There's nothing to apologize for. Besides, I was never supposed to…"

I trailed off when I noticed an old woman standing nearby, a cane in her hand. When had she appeared? Kind of unsettling how she came out of nowhere.

"Uh, who are you?"

Miss Olivia's eyes widened as she followed my gaze.

The old woman laughed. "No one important. My boy told me he ran into

you.”

Oh. Did she mean the guy in the mask who sold charms?

I averted my gaze. “Please,” I said, “allow me to express my deepest apologies for—”

She slipped a small white bag out from her pocket. “You’re the first person who ever wanted my charms so badly they offered a fortune for them. Those charms my boy sells really are for the people at the festival to enjoy, but I feel bad leaving you with our leftovers. You’re welcome to have this.”

I peeked inside the bag. “A Battle Charm? No, the shape is different.”

“You seem to know quite a bit about my work,” she said. “That one was specially made. Do you like it?”

So, a prototype, then? It wasn’t exactly what I’d hoped for, but I could only be grateful.

“Thank you. How much—”

She waved a hand. “No need. If you really feel indebted, then visit the shrine and pray. The deity there binds people together. Quite effective.”

The old woman turned away and began hobbling up the stairs.

She must work at the shrine, I guess?

Miss Olivia stared after the woman in surprise.

I dangled the charm to study its design a bit closer. A normal Battle Charm came decorated with a sword and shield. Instead, this one had three crossed swords. I closed my fist around it, satisfied. “Not bad at all.”

I couldn’t have told you its effects, but I liked the design. When it came to souvenirs, I had a preference for keychains with sword designs.

It had been a busy night, but in the end, I might just have enjoyed myself. As for the shrine? Waaay too spooky to wander up there at night. I’d go in the morning. Come to think of it, didn’t the protagonist and her love interest have an event at that shrine? One that brought them closer together?

Ah! Could this be…?!

“Um, Leon,” Miss Olivia said, her cheeks flushed, “by ‘binding people together,’ did she mean…”

“I think you’re exactly right. It helps you find a partner. I’ll visit tomorrow morning. I need to pray for a good match.” I’d take a load of cash to donate, too.

Miss Olivia looked forlorn as I stepped away and left her behind, but I tried not to dwell on it. She was better off not being involved with me anymore.

***

The following morning, the schedule allotted us free time to sightsee with the condition that we return by noon for the ship’s departure.

Only airships could reach floating islands like these, which meant they often developed unique cultures of their own. Adventurers could connect these islands to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, the bad sort saw them as opportunities to invade and destroy. Regardless of how glamorous the adventuring profession appeared, a lot of unsavory types gravitated toward it.

I couldn’t claim to be much different. I’d trashed that old ruin in order to get my hands on Luxion.

I hiked up the stone steps leading to the shrine. The traditional orange archway and the shrine itself perfectly resembled those found in Japan. This whole island was so profoundly Japanese that it really did feel like being back home.

I stumbled across a shrine maiden along the way who was sweeping the grounds, an adorable girl of about ten years.

“Hello there. Does the deity of this shrine really help bind people together?”

She smiled at me and nodded. “That’s right. The deity’s blessing is beneficial for melee combat and magic, as well.”

Any warrior or magician would love this deity then.

I thanked her, but right as I made to leave, two other people walked up behind me.

“Oh…”

“So you’re here, too, huh?”

“Uh, um…”

The pathetic squeak I let out when I saw Miss Olivia in particular had Angie glancing between the two of us, her brows knitted. She and Miss Olivia had apparently met at the base of the steps by chance and climbed up to the shrine together.

The little shrine maiden smiled and greeted the two of them. “You must be nobles from the academy. Um, do you know the proper method for praying here?”

Angie and Miss Olivia shook their heads, and the girl was kind enough to instruct us.

Ahh, a cute shrine maiden. Now this is soothing to the soul. It was as if her presence alone purified my mind of all the absurdity in the game.

Anyway, that was how the three of us wound up standing side by side in front of the shrine’s offering box.

Well, this is awkward…

“So, uh, you’re supposed to give a donation, right? I wonder how much is appropriate?” Angie fished out her wallet and produced a couple of gold coins.

Miss Olivia gasped. “Y-you’re really going to give that much?”

“Is it weird? This is how much we normally give the temple.”

Thankfully, the Holfort Kingdom’s temple wasn’t the kind of monotheistic religion that rejected all others. A religious war was the last thing I needed to deal with. For the first time, I felt some gratitude for the game’s vague lore.

As I stood beside Miss Olivia and Angie, I pulled out the gold coins and the roll of cash I’d planned to use to buy the charms.

What, you think I’m crazy? No, no. See, in the game, your affection with a character increased dramatically based on how much money you donated. Therefore, I put my faith in the effects of this shrine and offered up a fortune. I’d only remembered that little tidbit last night, and it had left me lamenting that I hadn’t brought even more money.

The other two stared, dumbfounded, but I ignored them and put my hands together in prayer instead.

“O Lord of this shrine, I won’t ask much of you. But please, please give me a bride!” My dearest wish spilled out of my mouth. “A kind woman of good character is all I seek. I don’t want a girl who will look down on me or make me look after children she has with other men. Please, give me a good woman!”

The other two looked exasperated, but this was a matter of extreme import. I had put my all into finding a good partner up until now, but so far, my efforts had backfired.

Lord of this shrine, please take pity on this poor soul and grant my wish!

As I prayed fervently, Angie and Miss Olivia clasped their hands together as well. Unlike me, they kept silent.



I wondered what they wished for. I had no clue about Angie, but I suspected it had something to do with a partner, since that was the purpose of this shrine. As for Miss Olivia… Greg and Brad were still both useless, but I hoped she'd hook up with *one* of the love interests.

Yeah, good luck. Julius and Jilk are lost causes, frankly. But that still leaves Chris.

Whatever, it didn't matter who she ended up with. I just hoped she would be happy. And while I was on the subject, it was worth throwing in a prayer for the kingdom's salvation as well. After that, I returned to pleading my own case.

"It'd be really great if she had huge breasts and a tiny waist. In fact, it'd be even better if she was a bit of a pervert! Frankly, I'd love a mature woman who wants to dote on me, and—"

In the midst of me rattling off my wish list, Angie and Miss Olivia grabbed me by either ear and hauled me away from the offering box, both of them flushed in embarrassment.

"Wait! I have more! I'm not done yet!"

Angie's face burned. "You idiot, you can't wish for all of that in front of a child!"

I glanced at the shrine maiden and noticed she had gone red as a tomato.

Wow, she's super cute. Like man, I wish I'd had a sister more like her than the garbage piles I actually ended up with. She's downright precious.

"I'm sorry about him." Miss Olivia apologized to her. "Please forget what he said."

"Oh, um, d-don't worry! I was really, um, surprised, but good luck!"

Yeah! I'm going to need it. Definitely *going to need it.*

She grinned and waved after us as we descended the stairs.

***

Once we returned to the cruise liner, I stood on deck as our vessel drifted farther and farther from the island. I pulled out the charm the old lady had

given me and peered at it.

“What’s that dangling from your neck?” Luxion asked.

“Now that you mention it, do you think this thing really has any effect?” I asked him.

“There’s nothing wrong with finding mental comfort in an object. Although I would advise you not to rely on it overmuch.”

In other words, he had no qualms with people praying to a higher power, but he thought I should expect to find happiness by my own effort.

I dropped the charm, letting it hang around my neck, and gazed up at the sunny skies. “Sure is hot out.”

“Indeed. By the way, I’ve been wondering something.”

“What’s that?”

“Is the reason you haven’t made a concerted effort to enter any dungeons because you hadn’t yet obtained that charm? Are you expecting some game-specific effects to come from it?”

I frowned. “I-Idiot. Of course not.”

“Oh, really? I suspected otherwise, since you still haven’t gone to retrieve the Holy Bracelet.”

I turned away, lest he read the lie written on my face. “You sure are suspicious.”

That was *exactly* why I hadn’t gone into that dungeon yet. I *did* expect the charm to function as it had in the game, but whether it would in reality remained to be seen. I felt ashamed by his criticism of my shallow thinking, though.

“It’s hard to get to the place where the bracelet is located,” I said. “Even the upperclassmen would struggle. If we’re going to reach it safely, we’re gonna have to prepare.”

“Oh? You seem in no rush to retrieve it. It concerns me that you would go about this so leisurely despite Marie’s presence.”

If Marie had played the game like I had, surely she wouldn't do anything stupid. We wouldn't make any real attempts at conquering that dungeon until our third term, and then we'd keep making headway there until the middle of our second year.

"On another note, I thought on this trip we would finally have a chance to unveil Schwert. How disappointing."

I shook my head. "You gave the airbike a name? You do realize *I'm* the owner, right? Oh well. Schwert, was it? Has a nice ring to it, so I guess it's fine. What's it mean?"

"Master, do you know how some people liken airbikes to fish? They're smaller than a ship, after all."

"Sure." I shrugged. "I've heard of that. And?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Schwert means sword."

I clapped my hands together. "That's awesome! Now I like it even more. It does have a sharp front end, so the name fits perfectly."

"Yes, originally I wanted to go with swordfi—no, never mind."

I had to give him props, he had good taste when it came to names. "You sure did make a lot of improvements to it. That metallic paint job is incredible."

"I see no problem with it," he said, seeming to interpret my comment as criticism. "If you'd like, I could add a little blue? Then it would look even more like a swordfi—no, never mind."

"I'll leave the color coordination to you."

"Very well. Also, do note Schwert is a bit moody and stubborn when it comes to making adjustments. So please, be careful when you ride her."

Huh. He sure was showering it—her?—with affection. Come to think of it, he'd done basically the same thing with the *Partner* before.

I better not say anything critical about either one of them, then.

At about that point, Chris suddenly popped onto the deck. Luxion hid behind my back.

Chris's face was lined with exhaustion. It was quite obvious he'd just escaped from some ladies. "Honestly, I can't find any alone time on this ship."

The moment Chris noticed me, he put on a fearless smile and strode over, the wind tousling his hair. It did nothing to diminish his good looks—which only infuriated me.

He pulled off his glasses and said, "Bartfort, I heard you had a match with Brad. Why not duel me as well?"

I snorted. "Brad challenged me in something he knew he sucked at, but *you* want to challenge me in something you're good at? He had way more guts than you."

Chris's face pulled into a sneer. How immature, getting worked up over such an insignificant insult. "Fine, I'll challenge you under the same terms. Duel me."

Chris specialized in the sword to the extent that he was near worthless at literally everything else. Wait. That meant he was the same as Brad! Ugh, these love interests really were critically unbalanced.

"It's not like I actually consider myself that good with the sword, you know." He dropped his gaze, slipping his glasses back on.

I shook my head. "Disgraceful. You're a Swordmaster. Have a little confidence."

"I'm telling the truth! I've practiced with the blade for years, but my father insists I have no skill. When I went home, he called me a failure and dismissed me from his tutelage."

Ahh, his family must have given him a real earful.

It obviously bothered him a lot, but I couldn't blame them, considering what he and Team Idiot had gotten themselves into.

Thinking back on the game, Chris had some kind of inferiority complex because his father was the Sword Saint—or something like that. Talk about annoyingly angsty. Moreover, it wasn't just him; all the love interests had ridiculously cumbersome backstories. You could fill whole notebooks detailing their extensive tragedies.

I cursed about it under my breath, once more fed up with the whole thing.

Luxion, hidden behind my back, whispered, “Are you sure it’s not merely your basis of comparison that’s skewed? Perhaps you have led a shallow, boring life.”

Shut up! Fine, okay? The only special thing about me was that I’d reincarnated here from another world. But I was still better than these depressing jerks! At least, I thought I was. Right?

“You call yourself a failure after you put all that effort into becoming a Swordmaster?” I snapped. “Well, if you have no talent, what’s that say about the rest of us? The ones who couldn’t reach your level even if we wanted to?”

He pinned me with a glare. “Devote everything you have to swordsmanship, *then* say that to me. I will be more than happy to apologize—or whatever it is you’re after. What do you know about me?”

Oh, boo-hoo. Ask me if I care. I crossed my arms. “I don’t know anything, and I don’t particularly want to either. But I could say the same to you. What do *you* know about *me*? If you want to whine to someone who’ll take pity on you, go crying to Marie.”

“I hate people like you,” he hissed. “People who don’t put any effort into anything they do.”

Don’t put any effort in? You bet your pretty boy face I have.

I’d slaved in the fields my whole childhood and studied by lantern light. Meanwhile, my sisters had electricity in their bedrooms and never had to set foot in the fields. *They’re girls, you have to take precious care of them!* people said. Ugh, it made me want to vomit. This world treated men like garbage.

“What a coincidence!” I threw my hands up in the air. “I absolutely despise you and your little pals, too. Especially Brad and Greg. I expected better from them, and they betrayed me.”

Worst of all, they’d managed to pinpoint the number one thing I didn’t want, like a direct kick to the nuts. I swore to myself I’d see them pay.

Suddenly, the blaring of a warning siren interrupted us.

I scanned the area. “What’s going on?”

“We haven’t seen anything all trip!” Chris exclaimed.

Just then, a white cloud billowed around us, and monsters appeared everywhere, left and right. As the ship moved deeper into the cloud, creatures poured out of the mist by the dozens—no, hundreds!

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

They resembled pinkish-gray marine life and swam through the air as if it were an ocean. Their numbers soon increased beyond counting, and they only grew.

We were already quite a distance from the island, with no other airships in sight. Crew members stumbled onto the deck, weapons in hand, but they soon cowered at the overwhelming quantity of monsters. One young man trembled as he clutched his sword.

Chris stormed over to him. “What in the world is going on here?! What’s with all these beasts?!”

“W-we have no idea. They appeared out of nowhere. Th-this has never happened before.”

Chris wasn’t the only one panicking; the crew was losing it, too.

“Why are they only surrounding us?” I asked, keeping a wary eye on the monsters. “Why aren’t they attacking?”

Normally, when you stumbled across a monster, it immediately attacked. These remained eerily well-behaved as they encircled us.

Luxion peeked over my shoulder. I knew he would only risk exposure in front of this many people if he felt we were in real danger. Chris’s gaze landed on Luxion for a moment, but he ultimately ignored him. Everything else was already too ridiculous for Chris to worry about a floating robot.

“The monsters are under something—or someone’s—control,” Luxion said. “Their behavior doesn’t match the data I have on file.”

While some monsters did move in groups, I’d never heard of—let alone seen—a cluster being *controlled* before. Although… Something glinted on their foreheads. I couldn’t get close enough to check myself, but Luxion helpfully

pulled up a feed to show me a close-up.

“A crest?” I said. “I feel like I’ve seen that one before.”

“It’s the Principality of Fanoss’s crest,” said Luxion.

“Fanoss?” My jaw dropped. “You’re kidding!”

The Principality of Fanoss had once been a dukedom in Holfort Kingdom, but quite a while ago, they had declared their independence. Whatever the case, they took the stage as the last enemy in the game.

Luxion turned his single eye toward me. “Do you know something about them?”

“In the game, they launch a war on the kingdom. But it’s way too early for that. They don’t make a move until the third year. We should’ve had more time.”

“And what relation do monsters have with Fanoss?”

I took a breath and thought back. “Fanoss has a Magic Flute that can control monsters. But I had no idea it could manipulate this many.”

We faced several thousand, maybe even ten thousand. The monsters completely surrounded our cruise liner.

A few girls had come on deck, and they shrieked at what they saw.

“Hey, someone do something about this!”

“Y-you at least have weapons on board, don’t you?!”

“I’ve never seen so many before!”

We might have held our own against a few dozen monsters, or even a few hundred, but our cruise liner was no match for this. While we did have weapons, the ship prioritized comfort. It wasn’t made to engage in battle.

The girls and their servants fled back inside, but the uproar only continued to grow. Some of the crew regained their bearings enough to fire guns at the monstrous horde.

Luxion, however, was the picture of composure. “I will have the *Partner* and our main ship launch immediately. Master, give me the order.”

“Do it! How long will it be until they arrive?”

“I will speed them along as much as I can, but it will still take some time.”

As we spoke, the largest beast we’d seen so far burst through the cloud. It looked like a whale, and on its back rose some sort of man-made construction—a building.

“A monster that’s been turned into an airship,” I mumbled. “So the princess is here.”

The princess of Fanoss wielded the Magic Flute. If she led this horde, we were in for some real trouble. I’d never dreamed we’d face her while still first-years. This was the final boss! Come on!

Battleships appeared around the enormous whale, an armada bearing the principality’s crest. The cloud behind them dispersed, swallowed up by the monsters and the battleships, revealing a floating island fashioned into yet another airship.

Chris lifted a trembling hand and adjusted his glasses. “The principality?” His voice was strained. “What are they thinking, entering the kingdom’s airspace like this?”

Pretty obvious, wasn’t it? This was an invasion force. Although they only had a few airships, they compensated for their lack of military power with the number of monsters at their command.

While other students retreated to the lower levels, Angie and Miss Olivia hurried onto the deck, probably to see what the fuss was about. They spotted me and made their way over.

“Leon, there you are!”

“Leon! Oh my… What’s that beside you?”

Miss Olivia meant Luxion, currently floating next to me. She and Angie glanced at him, then studied the feed he projected.

“What is that thing? Is it safe?” Angie furrowed her brow.

Miss Olivia reached a tentative hand and tested the image projected into the air. “Leon, is this round robot doing this…?”

It would be too exhausting to explain, so I kept it simple. “Oh, this guy here? He’s my familiar. Go on, say hi.”

“Excuse me, ‘familiar’? I cannot accept this. Familiar implies magic, and I have nothing to do with magic. I am the ultimate culmination of scientific labor. *That* I cannot compromise on. But I digress. It is nice to finally meet you ladies. I serve a supporting role for my master. You may call me Luxion. And I am *not* a familiar, but rather a robot equipped with artificial intelligence.”

Miss Olivia’s expression turned to awe, as if genuinely impressed.

Angie just frowned. “What an odd familiar. Leon, I didn’t know you possessed any skill with magic. But I believe the more important matter is our current problem. It seems the principality is here—but why do these monsters accompany them?”

I shrugged. I knew the reason, but only because I’d played the game. It would look suspicious if I revealed anything now.

Chris pointed at the whale. “Wait. Someone is coming out.”

Angie squinted and her brows shot up. “Princess Hertrude?”

“Uh, um, do you know her?” Miss Olivia asked, even as she continued to inspect Luxion.

“I met her once, in the past,” Angie said. “But why is she here?”

People across the deck gasped as a large image of the princess was projected in the sky high above the enormous whale monster’s head. Everyone went rigid with tension as a megaphone roared above the noise.

“I am the Principality of Fanoss’s first princess, Hertrude Sera Fanoss.” Despite her youth, the princess maintained an impressive poker face. “And on behalf of my country, I declare war on Holfort Kingdom!”

I’d known they would come eventually, but I was not at all prepared for this now. “Come *on*,” I muttered. “Even if they were going to accelerate their invasion, this is still a bit soon, isn’t it?”

“You foolish noble children. It’s time for you to choose your fate. Will you surrender or die? I give you one hour to decide.”

Just one hour to make our move. They were going to use us as pawns for negotiations in their crusade against the kingdom.

Angie slammed her hands against the railing. “She plans to take us as hostages? How loathsome!”

The crew members fell into a panic, but a few students on deck kept calm. They likely figured being taken hostage at least meant they wouldn’t be killed.

The principality sent a small boat down toward our ship.

Luxion whispered, “Master, things seem to have taken a turn for the worst.”

“You can say that again.”

I glanced at Angie. The rest of us were small fries compared to her; she was the daughter of a duke’s family, one descended from royalty. From the principality’s standpoint, she was the most valuable hostage available.

I wanted to cradle my head in my hands. *Why* was a third-year event happening now?

“Where did everything go so wrong?”

Chapter 9:
Laughter

AN ENVOY from the principality disembarked on our deck. His attire spoke to high status, and he introduced himself as Earl Gelatt. The slender man wore a perpetually snide expression, and when he addressed us, he stroked his mustache haughtily.

"Those from families bearing the baron rank or higher will be taken as prisoners of war. We have no interest in children from knight families and the like. Same goes for your demi-human servants. And of course, we have no use for the crew either."

This devastated half the people on board, while the higher class students sighed with relief. One girl among the latter group, however, stepped forward.

"W-wait! Spare my servant at least. I really like him."

Earl Gelatt sneered at her. "Well then, girl, you and your lover can swim with the fish together. It's no skin off our backs to lose a hostage or two in the process."

Although all the girls' expressions twisted in anguish, they turned their eyes away from their servants and pursed their lips.

No surprise there. Of course everyone values their own life too much to worry about someone else's.

I kept my mouth closed, too. I planned to wait till the enemy brought me into their ranks before I launched my counterattack. At least, that *was* the plan.

"Urk!" I tensed as Angie stepped past me, but I was too late to stop her. She strode right up to Earl Gelatt.

He looked down his nose at her. "What do you want, girlie?"

Angie crossed her arms and met his gaze confidently. "My name is Angelica Rapha Redgrave. I'm sure you have heard of my house, yes?"

His eyes flew open, and soon his grin spread from ear to ear. “I never dreamed Duke Redgrave’s own daughter would be on board. The kingdom is more foolish than I thought. They shouldn’t send someone as precious as you out this far without proper protection.” He spread his arms and laughed. “Wonderful! I respect your courage. Come with me.”

At that, he moved to guide Angie away.

I stepped forward on instinct, but before I got far, something slammed into me from behind and threw me forward onto the deck.

Several academy boys pinned me down from behind. “Release me!” I snarled, recognizing some of Angie’s followers. “Are you out of your minds?!”

“It sure is noisy back there.” Earl Gelatt looked over his shoulder, frowning. “Who is that boy?”

Angie glanced at me before closing her eyes. “He’s my friend.”

She avoided mentioning I’d already made baron, or that I was a knight to boot.

“Well, your *friend* certainly seems concerned about you.” Earl Gelatt strode over and planted his foot on my head. He grinned maliciously.

Although I couldn’t move, I still managed to glare up at him.

“My, you are a defiant one. I think it’s time I give you nobles your first job. Punish this brat here,” he told the boys holding me down. “Quickly, now.”

At once, the boys pummeled me with their fists and stomped on me with their feet. I tried to fend them off, but there was little I could do.

“Bastards!” I spat.

“Lady Angelica is trying to do us a kindness! Are you going to spoil that? Be quiet!”

A well-aimed punch cut the inside of my mouth, and the coppery taste of blood washed over my tongue.

Seething, I hissed, “And you guys call yourselves loyal—”

“It was *her* decision to give herself up!”

Angie interrupted with a sharp order. “That’s enough! Stop it already.”

Earl Gelatt pinched his mustache between his fingers. “Oh? What an attitude for someone requesting a favor. A duke’s daughter ought know better than that.”

“Please…please stop. I’m asking you.”

Earl Gelatt smiled pleasantly for a moment, but his lips soon cracked open as he cackled. “Too bad, I’m not in the mood. Now, come with me. The rest of you, make sure to kick the snot out of that brat there.”

He grabbed Angie, making to leave.

I stretched a hand out after her, but someone stomped on my arm. All I could do was watch helplessly, barely even conscious.

Angie desperately tried to negotiate further. “I’m more than adequate for a hostage, don’t you think? Let the rest of them go.”

The earl stroked his mustache. “Ah, and now you’re offering yourself up to save everyone else, eh? That almost moves me to tears. Come along, we can discuss the matter further on our airship.”

As he dragged her off, Miss Olivia shouted after them. “Angie!”

The demi-human servants on deck restrained her as she struggled to follow.

“Angie, don’t go!” Aside from me, only Miss Olivia protested.

Angie gave her a courageous smile, but her legs trembled with each step. “Livia, thank you.”

And with that, she and the envoy boarded the boat and left.

A heavy kick sent me rolling across the deck. I squeezed my arms around myself, trying to protect my stomach.

“Leon!” Miss Olivia raced over and flung herself protectively in front of me.

The boys and the servants stared down at us in contempt.

Aw, crap. Me and my damn mouth.

“Miss Angelica’s sacrifice almost went to waste because of you!”

“You scumbag.”

“Hey, crew members. Drag this loser down to the brig.”

Staff from the cruise liner surrounded me.

You guys are the real scumbags here. It was my last thought for a while.

***

The principality’s airship rode atop the enormous monster they commanded. Inside, a squadron of armed knights surrounded Angie and led her to a VIP room. There to greet her was none other than Princess Hertrude herself.

“It’s been so long, Angelica. Although we did little more than exchange pleasantries when last we met, this reunion feels a bit nostalgic.”

Angie smiled fearlessly. “Are you really planning all-out war? You can’t pass this little stunt off as a neighborly spat.”

The gap in military might between Holfort Kingdom and the Principality of Fanoss could only be called enormous, and Angie knew this well. Nevertheless, Fanoss had attacked. Though Angie maintained a composed attitude, internally, panic rose.

What in the world could they be after? What could they hope to accomplish with such a small armada?

Hertrude flashed a smile. “I suppose you’re right. It would be exceedingly difficult to overcome your kingdom’s might. But surely you already know the answer to your question. You saw our companions.”

So they are *intending to use these monsters.*

“You are attended by some extraordinary creatures,” Angie acknowledged with a shrug. “You think they would secure your victory against the kingdom?”

“I do. And if you’re curious as to how—”

“Your Highness,” a noble at the princess’s side interrupted, “I think the matter of the hostages takes precedence for now.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right.”

Angie was sweating. She had given away her identity and entered

negotiations in order to bargain for the cruise liner's safe release. "I've surrendered to you, haven't I? Let the others go."

"What an amusing assumption for you, Angelica." Hertrude tilted her head. "Did Gelatt ever say he would do such a thing?"

Angie squeezed her eyes shut. *The original plan it is, then. Anyone from a baron house or higher will be taken hostage.*

"Although, honestly, I think a noble girl like you will be all we need."

Angie's eyes flew open in surprise, and she stared at the princess in horror. "Wh-what?! That's ridiculous! Those are the sons and daughters of nobility! You would really kill them?!"

In response to Angie's rage, the surrounding knights unsheathed their swords.

Hertrude sounded entirely disinterested. "When they brought you here, only two of the people on board protested, no? How heartless. How immoral. They are unworthy of their titles."

"What do you think you're—"

"Angelica," the princess interrupted. "You will bear witness to it all. We're about to destroy your kingdom."

With these words, the princess deployed another envoy to inform the academy students of their fate.

***

The crew tossed me in a cell below deck, and I slumped against a wall, staring up at the ceiling.

Miss Olivia crouched on the other side of the bars, sniffling. Despite her pleading, the other students had insisted I be locked up. Predictably, my peers were nastier than our enemy.

"Quit crying." I sighed.

"But Angelica…I couldn't save her. And I can't even get you out of here. I feel so pathetic."

Long ago, I might have derided this kind of talk as weak-willed. In my previous

life, I had hated the protagonist. Seeing a woman cry had only annoyed me. But now…I thought it was a pretty bold and powerful thing, being able to cry for someone else.

"Come on, you got all beat up because you kept throwing a fit," I said. "Look at you. Your hair is a mess, and you lost some of the buttons on your uniform. You wouldn't have landed yourself in such hot water if you hadn't stuck your neck out like that."

The students who threw me in here had said something about how it was "time to put an end to me." Honestly, thank goodness Miss Olivia had stopped them. Normally, she never got involved in physical altercations, but she had fought for me, trying to help. She'd gone toe to toe with some girls who were Angie's followers. They'd really ganged up on her. It had terrified me, watching her struggle by herself against them.

But…I appreciated it. If not for her, who knows what Luxion might have done to keep me safe.

"I'm so frustrated with myself," Miss Olivia continued. "I can never *do* anything."

"You did your best. Now dry those tears." I looked back up at the ceiling. *What now, though? Should I take Miss Olivia with me, rescue Angie, and run for it?*

There were a lot of issues with that plan, though.

Before I could give it much thought, we heard the rapid approach of footsteps. Chris appeared around the corner, his expression heavy with sorrow. He ignored Miss Olivia as he faced me.

"Bartfort, an envoy came a moment ago. They said Angelica is the only hostage they require, and that we had better prepare ourselves. In one hour, they're launching an attack. 'Put up the best fight you can and die as proper nobility,' they said."

In other words, we were useless to the principality.

"And? What do you want me to do about it?" I asked.

Chris slipped his glasses off, his face tight with determination. “Lend us your strength. We have six Armors aboard this ship. You and I could provide a diversion to buy the cruise liner time to escape.”

I snorted. “Like hell.”

Chris narrowed his eyes, but he didn’t take me to task. “Please, bend on this and help me. We can’t leave everyone to die. At least be a bodyguard for the ship. I’ll stay behind and keep them occupied while you escape.”

If he stayed, alone, he would die for sure—so would we, probably. Chris had to know he didn’t stand a chance of winning. The numbers just didn’t stack up.

“Leon,” Miss Olivia piped up. The hope in her eyes said what her mouth hadn’t: *If anyone can save us, it’s you.*

Her eyes were so beautiful and pure it frightened me. Like they saw right through me, or like they were a mirror that reflected my wretchedness back at me. It shamed me to look at her.

“Don’t look at me like that.” I turned away. “What do you even want me to do here? These losers abandoned Angie, and you want me to save them? Don’t make me laugh. And don’t forget, they beat the crap out of me, too. They can drown for all I care.”

To my shock, Chris agreed. “You’re right. The rest of us were useless. Maybe we *do* deserve to drown. Nonetheless, I’m asking you for this favor. This is the only means we have to save the people on this ship. Please, save us.”

He lowered his head.

I slowly lifted myself to my feet. “No.”

He hung his head, forlorn. “Very well. I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

Why does everyone in this stupid game stop listening before I’ve finished?!

“Idiot!” I shouted. “I wasn’t done. Besides, we’re completely surrounded. No way can the cruise liner escape. Even if you stay behind, they’ll just circle us and massacre everyone. You didn’t learn anything from fighting me, did you?”

Chris stared at me, frozen. “So what?! Do you have a better plan? If you’re suggesting leaving everyone behind and escaping by yourself, then go ahead. I

won't stop you."

What a hardheaded goon, even more stupid and socially inept than me—and that was saying something.

"What I mean is, you fighting by yourself isn't going to cut it. The two of us wouldn't be enough either. In which case, the only chance we've got is for *all* of us to fight together. Those morons are going to take responsibility for abandoning Angie." I clenched my fists. "Got it? I'm not a Goody Two-Shoes who saves people who won't do anything for themselves. You want me to save you? Screw that. If you guys wanna live so bad, you gotta fight."

"Impossible." Chris shook his head. "The students are devastated. They can't summon the will. Besides, I would think it should be obvious. *I* came here to rely on *you*, of all people. You know what that means, right?"

Uh…that I'm your last resort because everyone else is useless?

While I could emphatically agree with the latter part, it didn't change my stance. Those sleazeballs were going to help or I wasn't going to lift a finger.

I stepped up to the bars, and Chris did the same, until our noses were inches apart.

"The only thing we can do is gather our courage and charge straight at them," I said. "There is no other option."

Although strategically speaking, no matter what, we would enter this battle at an extreme disadvantage.

"Straight at them? Now *you* sound like the idiot."

"Yeah." I threw my hands up. "That's right, *I'm* the idiot. But you know what? I think it's a lot smarter to do that than wait for death. You feel me? We're going to storm their fortress and take their banner. We'll break right through their stupid blockade."

Sweat trickled down Chris's cheek.

"You protect the ship," I continued. "You can show off that swordsmanship you're so proud of right here."

His nostrils flared. "I've never bragged."

“Trust me, you don’t have to say it. Your actions do all the boasting for you. Point is, show me where that hard work has led you. Think about it, the whole reason you’ve practiced was for a day like today, right? *I* have no intention of dying. You don’t wanna die either, do you?”

He glanced down for a moment, then looked straight at me. “You’re right. I want to see Marie again.”

Goddammit. He just had to ruin everything with that one line.

Have you all been brainwashed? What do you guys even see in that girl?

Chris produced the key to my cell, unlocked the door, and released me. On my way out, I paused, holding a hand toward Miss Olivia, who was still on the ground.

“You’re going to help, too,” I said.

“O-oh, of course! I’ll do my best!” She quickly thumbed her tears away and grabbed my hand. Her face hardened with determination—she would do her best to save Angie.

This girl is waaaay better than Marie, hands down. Chris, man, you gotta open your eyes.

Chris put a hand to his chest and murmured, “Marie, I want to see your smile again. Please, lend me your strength.”

He was clasping a charm.

“Hey, that’s…”

“This?” He glanced at me. “I bought it at the festival. It’s a Battle Charm, supposedly. Now I’m starting to think it was a good omen.”

It was a small talisman decorated with a sword and shield.

I laughed. What a perfect item for someone like Chris. “It suits you. You really do have the best luck.”

“R-really? It’s kind of embarrassing hearing that from you.”

Come on, don’t blush like that. You’re making me feel awkward.

***

At Chris's behest, all the students and crew members gathered in the reception hall. I walked in holding a shotgun I'd bought off one of the crew members on my way.

Everyone looked downcast, their eyes on the floor.

As I checked my bullet supply, Chris stopped partway up the stairs in the middle of the room in order to address the crowd. I plopped myself down on one of the lower steps and surveyed their faces.

"We've determined the best course of action to save everyone is for us all to fight," he said. "Please, lend us your strength."

They proceeded to jeer.

"You're a first-year. Don't get carried away!"

"You're not even that tough. Where do you get off, acting all high and mighty?!"

"You're the one who lost to that scumbag over there!"

"Besides, this is all Angelica's fault! I bet she just bargained a way out for herself."

"Some duke's daughter she is."

I scowled at the boys demeaning me and the girls mocking Angie. They hurriedly hid, but I already knew their faces. They would pay for those words. I'd make sure of it.

This being a school trip, students from all grades were present, and Chris trying to take the lead made for a real mess. The upperclassmen got all fussy about taking orders from someone younger. Nonetheless, they stood a very real chance of dying in the next hour. This was a stupid time to quibble about hierarchy.

A group of boys from the general class even laughed.

"Fight? Higher class students sure are arrogant. You really think anyone will listen just because *you* give orders?"

"Real full of himself, demanding we fight for him."

“He doesn’t even have any real authority. Mister Swordmaster’s family disinherited him.”

The girls’ reactions didn’t impress either; some of them even got nasty with their servants.

“Hey, you, obey my orders!”

“Shut up, brat! Like I’d listen to you after you abandoned me!”

The whole place erupted into chaos. I lifted myself off the step, rested the shotgun on my shoulder, and waited. The crowd fell silent at the sight of my gun—the only weapon in the room—and they stared at me with equal parts fear and loathing.

“You sleazeballs yap like a bunch of cowardly dogs!” I snarled. “Listen up. Unlike the rest of you, I’ve been officially knighted *and* given the title of baron. Even better, I have a lower-fifth court ranking, which effectively puts me above any of our teachers. You got that?”

Our professors averted their eyes. They did little more than fade into the background most of the time, but they were technically nobles. They just lacked particularly high ranking. The headmaster certainly outranked me, but everyone else swam below.

What about my tea master, you ask? I afforded him such respect—was that not a matter of rank? Of course not. That respect was respect in itself, the truest form, and regardless of rank, I’d never presume to speak over him.

But I digress.

“Now, the hierarchy being what it is, I’m giving you an order: Fight! If you don’t want to die, fight!”

Someone immediately protested. Gasp.

“S-screw you! *You* fight!”

“Yeah,” I barked back, “I’m gonna. After all, I’m a real noble, unlike you fakers.”

One of the third-year girls furrowed her brow. She seemed strong-willed, almost like a queen; the curls of her blonde hair looked like drills, and she wore

bright crimson lipstick. She addressed me with a voice tightened by anger.

"Fakers, you say? An insult. You address an earl's daughter, sir."

Among this lot, she probably had the most influence after Angie. Everyone around her fell silent. The fact that the boys here would openly oppose Chris but get all meek in front of her just went to show their total lack of spine.

"And who are you?" I asked.

"You mean to say you don't know who I am?! My name is Deirdre Fia Roseblade. I'm the daughter of Earl Roseblade!"

Sure, I'd heard of her. But I shoved my finger in my ear and twisted it around, feigning ignorance. "Who again? Roseblade, Rosebutt, whatever—just what value do you have right now, anyway?"

"Excuse me?! H-how dare you!"

This haughty princess gave me the perfect reaction! *You're just the girl I was waiting for!*

"I don't care how amazing everyone else thinks your house is," I went on. "Frankly, it doesn't matter. You're a fake."

"How dare an upstart like you call *me* a fake!"

"That's right." I grinned at her. "I *am* an upstart. But unlike you, I'm also a *real* adventurer. I actually achieved things with my own two hands, which means I'm a true noble. Fakers like you have no right to take a pompous attitude with me."

"You pretentious nitwit!" Deirdre snapped. "You're a lowly baron. The Roseblade earldom offered an immense island to the kingdom as tribute, on top of conquering multiple dungeons. We are the noblest of nobility! You dare to compare us? You should be ashamed of your arrogance!"

I rested my shotgun in the crook of my arm and clapped for her. "Bravo, that's incredible. Your ancestors were the real deal."

Deirdre stared at me in surprise, as if shocked that I was agreeing with her. "You…would do well to remember that. Your feeble accomplishments can't begin to measure up to—"

I cackled on the inside. *You're the perfect character for this little charade, Miss Deirdre!*

"Wonderful!" I interrupted her. "Yes, your *ancestors* are the real thing. Too bad their grandchild is a coward. I bet they're turning in their graves right now. You trembling, cowering losers—you're all fakers."

"What did you say?!"

"Am I wrong? When Angie offered herself up in your place, what did you lot do? Some of you were *relieved*. You thought if you kept quiet, you could hunker down and wait for the storm to pass. Even worse, when you knew you were gonna be killed, you cursed Angie for it. If the shoe fits, as they say—and trust me, it fits. You're a bunch of cunning little fakers."

"You take that back!"

I moved down the steps toward Deirdre, grinning from ear to ear. "No." I spread my arms wide and laughed. "You're all about to be killed, and you won't even put up a fight. You only complain. Your ancestors were adventurers who struggled to accomplish all they did, but you, their descendants, are absolutely worthless. You don't have the courage to set forth in an airship and travel the skies, nor do you have the knowledge to conquer dungeons, nor do you possess the strength to vanquish monsters. All you did was inherit the hard work of others. You're a bunch of pathetic, no-good losers."

I feel like I should mention that House Bartfort hadn't accomplished anything notable as adventurers either. They'd achieved their status by participating in wars and earning themselves a floating island of their own (or so I'd heard).

Honestly, I didn't place much emphasis on ancestry, honor, or bloodlines. I didn't *really* think these kids' noble ancestors would be disappointed with them. If anything, they'd probably worry about their descendants and tell them to run for it while they could.

But not me. I would deride them all! Why? Because it was convenient!

"The principality's envoy was right. You lot don't have the willpower or the pride of real nobles. You cling to the accomplishments of the people who came before you. You're all a bunch of pathetic fraudsters. You huddled together in

fear the moment you heard we would be attacked. I bet your noble ancestors are crying—no, they're laughing!"

The crowd grew increasingly irate.

That's the spirit!

"I bet they're wrapping their arms around their stomachs like this and cackling!" I held my stomach. "'Oh, look at how pathetic my descendants are! They call themselves nobility, but they're actually a bunch of losers who freak out about their status because they have no abilities of their own.'" I wiped tears of laughter from my eyes.

Berating them all to their faces was insanely refreshing—I mean, uh, no. It was all an act to get them fired up.

"I admit, your ancestors were pretty great. They worked for what they had. Unfortunately, none of that matters because you're the ones who inherited their legacy. You've got no guts. You're going to lose to the principality without even putting up a fight, and your ancestors' accomplishments will be overwritten by your cowardice. That's what it really means to tarnish one's family name. Here, I'm your surviving kin two days from now: 'They were a disgrace.'"

All the nobles in this kingdom were proud to have descended from adventurers, and the school reinforced that pride. Some students even revered their ancestors. So I laid it on thick.

"D-don't you dare look down on me!" one boy shouted. "I…I'd never shame my forebears! I couldn't stand to dishonor my family!"

I laughed. "You have some spunk, I'll give you that. But if you do nothing here, you *will* dishonor your family. Put your hand over your heart and listen. Can you hear it? The blood of your ancestors runs in you, and right now they're laughing at how sad you are!"

A few people in the crowd ignored my suggestion, but most put a hand to their chest. Some weren't even nobility—crew members and demi-human servants did it, too.

"You can hear them cackling, can't you? Or do they sound grief-stricken? Can

you hear them sigh in exasperation as they shrug? Some of them may even be thanking you for giving them a good laugh. If I were one of your ancestors, I'd say, 'I want nothing to do with a coward who runs away with their tail tucked between their legs!'"

Few could say anything in their defense. Frankly, if they tried, I'd have laughed at them more.

My smile fell. "Is the adventurer's blood running through your veins fake as well? Do you want to wait here for the principality to come have its fun so you can die like worthless fools?!"

Deirdre looked me straight in the eyes. "A daughter of Roseblade House cannot die doing nothing. It would be a disgrace. Are the rest of you content to let this man speak to you this way? If we do nothing, we'll be too ashamed to face our ancestors in the next world!"

The boys in the crowd started hollering.

"You scumbag, don't you dare look down on us! Someone, bring me a weapon!"

"Do you know how much I've been training in dungeons up until now? You're only a first-year! Prepare yourself, 'cause you're about to witness how much stronger we are!"

"You talk big for an underhanded conniver! We don't need to hear it from you. We're gonna fight!"

Every one of them was suddenly all motivated to join the fray. Having a woman spur them on did wonders. *You idiots, you should have been fired up from the get-go!*

Chris glanced at me. "Bartfort, you—no, never mind."

Don't stop like that and leave me curious!

"After goading us, I assume you have some kind of plan, don't you?" Deirdre said. "You claim to be a true noble, so surely you must be capable of getting us out of this mess."

"All right, idiots, listen up!" I bellowed. "I don't expect you'd understand if I

gave you complicated orders, and we don't have the time for long explanations. So a frontal assault it is! We're aiming for the principality's banner—that's all we need!"

Voices of unease washed through the crowd.

Miss Deirdre, however, chuckled. "Ah, yes. That's perfect! And why aren't you girls raising your voices? I won't let any of you get away with cowardice either."

As an earl's daughter, Deirdre was essentially the boss here. At her words, everyone reluctantly began to prepare themselves for what was to come.

Deidre turned back to me. "I understand we're going through the front. But what will *you* be doing? You spoke so eloquently. I'm sure we can expect great things from you, yes?"

In other words, *You talked the talk, but if you can't walk the walk, I'll never let you live it down.*

"Of course!" I chuckled. "I'm going to cut through their vanguard with my airbike."

"Airbike? Do you have a death wish?"

We were surrounded by monsters and airships. The principality would no doubt deploy a number of Armors to intercept us as well. If anyone else started talking about charging the enemy ranks on an airbike, I'd have laughed at them, too.

"I have someone I want to save. I'll snatch their banner while I'm at it and laugh in the face of their fleet."

"Do you mean Angelica? But you're not one of her followers, are you?"

Like that mattered.

"I'm a man. Every guy dreams of being the prince who saves the princess in her time of need, right? I might be willing to abandon you guys, but I can't do the same to Angie. She's a good woman. In fact, the rest of you girls could learn a thing or two from her."

Deirdre bit one of her nails. "Praising another woman to my face? I've never experienced such a thing."

“Yeah, ’cause everyone’s always walking on eggshells around you. Anyway, come on, you guys need to get ready. Time’s a-wastin’!”

Passion swelled in the reception hall as people busily moved to and fro. Standing in the center of it all, I found my thoughts circling back to the moment Angie gave herself over to the enemy.

If only she’d told them I was an officially titled baron, she wouldn’t have had to go alone. And sacrificing herself as a hostage in place of everyone else? The goddamn audacity—she was *sixteen*. Ugh. Angie’s daddy terrified me, to be sure, but more than that, I’d regret it for the rest of my life if I didn’t save her after that astounding show of courage.

In this whole rotten otome game world, Angie was my light in the darkness.

Deidre grinned at me.

What? Hurry up and go. We don’t have time for this.

“You’re like an undisciplined dog,” she purred. “With that brazen attitude, you’d make a perfect pet. If you weren’t Angelica’s favorite, I’d take you for myself.”

Oh boy, this girl was as depraved as the worst of them, albeit in a different way. To the point, I wasn’t getting any closer to her.

“I’m flattered.”

***

Luxion reported his findings while I changed into an outfit suited for riding my airbike, Schwert.

My eyes narrowed at his words. “So we have traitors in our midst.”

“According to my investigation, two of Angelica’s female followers leaked our location to the principality.”

Of all the people it could be, it had to be Angie’s followers?

“Seriously?” I shook my head. “They have to be idiots to make an enemy of Redgrave House.”

“The Redgraves suffered a great political blow upon Julius’s disinheritance.

Traitors often crop up in such circumstances.”

“Politics? Yeaaah, not interested.” After I finished changing, I grabbed my shotgun with one hand and my helmet with the other.

“Would you prefer to leave those girls to their own devices?”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I wanna take care of them now.”

“I believe you should contact the crew. You can use the cell they threw you in earlier.”

“Roger that.”

***

I stood in front of my former cell, which now held the two culprits who’d revealed our position to the Principality of Fanoss. Their demi-human servants were confined in a separate cell. The girls pleaded for mercy from the rest of Angie’s followers.

“Hold on! This is a misunderstanding!”

“Please, save us!”

Crew members stood around me with weapons in hand, on the alert and ready to intervene if necessary.

One of the male students turned to me and said, “Th-this has to be a mistake, right? I mean, these girls have been with the young miss since childhood. They would never betray her.”

I tossed a cylindrical object to the ground. The girls fidgeted restlessly the moment they saw it.

“We searched their rooms thoroughly,” I said.

The traitors scowled at me.

“You pervert!” one of them cried.

“Like I have any interest in you! Besides, the female crew searched your rooms, not me.” I nodded at the uniformed female staff.

One of them stepped forward. “We found several of these, in fact,” she said,

“as well as what seemed to be a list of instructions. These girls knew exactly what they were doing.”

The traitors glowered at her. “We’ll remember this. You won’t get away with it!”

The uniformed women trembled in fear.

I slammed my foot against the bars. “Shut your mouth,” I barked at the traitors. “Do you want me to blow your brains out right here?”

They quivered, but one of Angie’s male followers grabbed me by the shoulder.

“You’re taking this too far! Even if they did betray the miss, we need a proper investiga—hey, wait a minute!”

I turned the barrel of my shotgun on him. “Do you understand the position you’re in? This is exactly why Angie’s trying to avoid you all. You had traitors in your midst. Do you get what that means?”

As brainless as they were, these goons did seem to comprehend their predicament.

I smacked the butt of my rifle against the boy, sending him crashing to the floor. “Fight like it’s your last day to live. Doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl. You all better prove you weren’t colluding with Fanoss. Otherwise…” I pinned the girls in the cell with a glare, “…you’ll end up just like these two, and you wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Angie’s daddy wouldn’t be so forgiving with traitors. These idiots knew that better than I did, hence why they quickly shook their heads.

I left the rest to the crew members and headed to the storehouse where Schwert was held.

“They knew her since they were kids,” I mumbled to myself, “and they still betrayed her? Seriously? Politics are a hot mess. Now I *really* have to save Angie.”

I refused to let her be sacrificed to save these slimebuckets.

***

I wore a skintight inner suit made specifically for riding an airbike, as well as a helmet, vest, a pair of thick cargo pants, and some boots. A camera on the airbike sent a feed directly into the helmet to show me my surroundings.

“You’re up, Schwert,” said Luxion. He’d built a slot for himself on board when he made improvements to the bike, and he nestled himself there for the ride.

I straddled the machine and reached for the handlebars, revving the engine. It roared to life, the vibrations reverberating through the storehouse.

A crew member had been kind enough to open the hatch so I could drive right out. Wind whipped noisily through the storehouse.

“So you’re really doing this?!” the crew member shouted to be heard.

“Of course! I’ll pluck that sleazy envoy’s mustache right off his face and bring it to you as a souvenir.”

I’d rip so hard that Earl Gelatt would have a permanent bald patch.

“Wow, I’d love that!” the crew member yelled. “Well, no, actually, I don’t think I would.”

I flashed them a thumbs-up, then I leaned low over Schwert and drove out of the storehouse.

When we raced into the open air, the bike bobbed up and down as if coasting over waves. I grabbed the shotgun off my back, and the monsters surrounding the ship instantly started toward me.

“You ready for this?”

“Whenever you are,” Luxion replied. He took over maneuvering the bike so I could shoot.

“This is the best weapon for getting rid of small fries,” I said, hefting the gun. A magic circle appeared in front of the barrel and multiplied, locking onto all the monsters in our vicinity.

“I’ve equipped it with an electric-type scattershot,” said Luxion. “Fire away.”

“Now I’ll blow you to pieces!” I pulled the trigger, and one of the shells zoomed forward, piercing the magic circle. Bullet fragments went flying. As they

did, the light from the circle transitioned from yellow to blue, and the magic began maneuvering the trajectory of the fragments through the air.

The monsters tried to avoid being hit, but the light gave chase and pierced every one of them in a series of violent firework explosions. This magic went perfectly with ranged attacks, but it was so advanced that many found it difficult to handle.

Several dozen monsters fell to that single attack, and I broke out laughing. “See that? This is what it looks like when Luxion and I put our genius together. We can even use complex techniques like this!”

Me trying to do this by myself? Wasn’t going to happen. The spell took too long, and trying to lock on to a moving enemy was insanely hard.

“Well,” I continued, holding my nose high, “basically, one of us is doing 70 percent of the work while the other does 30 percent.”

“Why do you make it sound like you’re doing the bulk of it? If we’re talking percentages, I easily did 70 percent, Master.”

“You always gotta rain on my parade.” I sighed. “Come on, the next wave is coming.”

“You really are scum.”

I aimed my shotgun and pulled the trigger, blowing another wave of monsters to smithereens.

***

Chris boarded his Armor and watched as Leon took off. “So he really does plan to cut through their front line.”

The cruise liner changed course and sped after Leon. They headed for the enemy’s flagship, the large one on the back of that giant whale monster, where the princess and Angie waited.

Chris stared at Leon as he reached for the controls inside his suit. “Bartfort… You’re strong, I’ll admit.”

Based on sword strength alone, Chris possessed far more talent. But as he watched Leon cross the battlefield, Chris knew he didn’t stand a chance. Leon

commanded such phenomenal magic, and he had *guts*. Charging into the enemy ranks alone sounded appealingly courageous at first blush, but few men would actually dare to do as much. Leon made it look simple. Chris honestly didn't think he could convince himself to ride an airbike into a horde of monsters.

"Will I ever be as strong as you, Bartfort?" Chris wondered aloud. Then he turned to the others guarding the airship in Armors of their own, the charm dangling from his neck swaying. "Our objective is to protect the ship. We keep them safe at all costs!"

The other five cried out in unison, then closed the hatches on the front of their Armors and took flight. Chris maneuvered outside the ship as well and cut into his first monsters.

He dove into the enemy ranks, slashing through one creature after the other. They disappeared behind him in puffs of smoke. Students watching from the deck cheered him on.

Chris dropped through the air, sticking close to the side of the vessel as he dispatched several more beasts.

"I promised you, Bartfort. I won't let anything happen to this ship!"

***

A siren blared on the principality's flagship. Hertrude lifted herself from her seat, her long, beautiful black hair swaying against a snug black dress.

As she moved toward the window, one of her maids held out a hand. "You mustn't, Your Highness."

"Step aside. I wish to see for myself."

Angie was curious as well, but she couldn't move far with the knights surrounding her.

Hertrude glanced back at her captive and beckoned her over. "Come, Angelica. It seems your friends at the academy chose to die honorable deaths. I'll let you witness their last moments firsthand—"

Angie scowled at the princess, but Hertrude broke off as she noticed

something outside.

What Angie saw surpassed her wildest imagination. “What?!”

The cruise liner drove toward them on a collision course.

“You,” Hertrude shrieked at her maid, “bring the Magic Flute at once!”

An airbike led the charge, making way for the principality’s ship. Angie gasped, tears pricking her eyes. “Idiot! You utter fool! Why…why didn’t you run?! If you’re strong enough to fight, you could have run!”

Just then, the maid swooped down with the Magic Flute. Hertrude snatched it up and put the mouthpiece to her lips.

A bizarre melody drifted through the air, and all the monsters moved in unison. Now, Angie finally understood the reason for the principality’s confidence.

“So this is your secret weapon.”



Hertrude lifted her lips from the flute. “Correct. With this, we can overcome the difference in our power. Your kingdom *will* fall.”

Although the princess spoke with conviction, the students on the cruise liner resisted with everything in them. They slew the monsters charging at them one after the other, and they erected a shield to protect themselves using magic while returning fire with more spellwork.

Hertrude and Gelatt had made light of the students, but the kingdom’s future knights were strong. They needed to be. Many of them had delved deep into dungeons to scrounge up as much cash as they could to court a marriage partner and fund their marriage. By the time boys graduated, many would have forged themselves into brawny adventurers. Now, they fought with all that gathered strength.

Hertrude bit her lip as she watched the students struggle to repel her creatures. “Opposing us only makes this harder on them.”

Angie steeled herself and stared down at her. “Unfortunately for you, the kingdom’s nobility doesn’t know when to give up. This is what you asked for. They’ve come to show you their true willpower—their real pride. Do you see the man cutting through your front line? I’m afraid I forgot to mention him. He is Leon Fou Bartfort, and he is one of the kingdom’s finest knights!”

“Bartfort?” Hertrude traced a finger down her chin.

“They certainly don’t know when to give up,” Gelatt agreed as he strolled over, stroking his mustache. “But this is as far as their efforts will take them.”

The principality’s warships surrounded the cruise liner, staggering their formation so none of their other ships would need to fear crossfire. Even though the monsters would be caught in the coming blast, they aimed their cannons at the cruise liner and Leon.

Hertrude scowled at Gelatt. “You do this without my permission.”

“So we can win, Your Highness. Besides, we have plenty more monsters where these came from.” He gave an eerie grin as, simultaneously, their fleet launched hundreds of cannonballs.

Angie shrieked. “Leon! Livia!”

The knights restrained her, and Angie could only watch in horror as black smoke enveloped the cruise liner.

Chapter 10:
Friendship

TREMORS RIPPLED THROUGH the cruise liner's deck, and Livia latched on to the handrails to steady herself. As quickly as she could, she rushed over to an injured crew member and summoned her healing magic.

"Are you all right?!"

"Y-yeah, I will be." He forced a weak smile at her. A monster had chomped down on his arm moments ago. Fortunately, one of the male students had thrust his spear into the beast and killed it.

"Leave the small ones to me!" the student bellowed as he brandished his spear. "Protect the girls with everything you've got!"

Some of the girls chanted spells, maintaining the shield around their vessel. Others used offensive magic to counterattack.

"Get away, you stupid beasts!" one of them shouted.

"Eat this!" Deirdre whipped her hand through the air, sending wind blades slicing straight through one of the monsters. It dissolved in a puff of smoke.

The deck was a battlefield.

Armors flew above them, defeating monsters too large for the people on deck to contend with. Chris proved to be exceptional at repelling the enemy, a reminder to the rest of them that regardless of his loss to Leon, his strength was otherwise unparalleled.

Livia finished healing the crew member and looked for the next injured person. But before she could find anyone, the principality's fleet shifted, lining up around the academy ship.

"Hey, they're aiming their cannons right at us!"

"They've got us surrounded!"

"Are they planning to blast through their monsters and annihilate us?!"

Livia's breath grew raspy and uneven. She clenched a fist over her chest, and the white marble dangling from the charm on her wrist began to glow.

"No. I can't let this happen. Noooo!" Livia hunched forward, letting out a sharp cry as the cannons fired. While everyone else turned their eyes away, light poured out of Livia, gentle rays bathing everything around her.

Students and crew alike gasped in surprise. Then voices broke out around her.

"Wh-what's—"

"Hey! The monsters were blown away!"

"No way! That deflected the cannon fire, too!"

Livia took a deep breath and lifted her hands. Her eyes opened wide. Numerous magic circles floated around her. The white marble on her wrist emitted a radiant light, enveloping the entire cruise liner even as the enemy fired round after round. The circles glowed faintly and shot beams that pierced the closest monsters.

The crew members stared at Livia.

"You sure are something else," one of them said.

Livia glanced back at them and smiled before turning her attention forward—toward Leon. "This is what I can do for now! Please, go forward, Leon! I'll protect the rest!"

Her shield glowed brightly, fending off the monsters and the principality's warships alike. Any creatures that dared to approach were skewered on beams of light.

The students watched in awe, occasionally glancing back at Livia.

"That scholarship student did all this?"

"You've gotta be kidding."

"But now we actually stand a chance. The rest is up to Bartfort."

Livia watched Leon as she continued to withstand the oncoming attacks. She gritted her teeth as she pushed herself well beyond her limits.

"Just a little bit more," she whispered. "Please. Keep this up a little longer."

***

Black smoke filled the air around the ship, but Luxion's voice filtered through.

"I must say I'm surprised," he said.

"Yeah, me too."

The wind dispersed most of the smoke, and when I looked back, I sagged in relief to find the cruise liner intact. An enormous sphere of faint light now encompassed the vessel and seemed to be protecting it. I could make out an enormous magic circle glowing on the deck.

I recognized this as one of Miss Olivia's abilities as the Saint. Her sheer power blew my mind; not only had she protected the ship from enemy fire, she'd blown back the monsters as well.

"She doesn't even have the key items she needs, and yet she's still capable of this…"

"A result of her diligent studying," Luxion remarked. "She works exceptionally hard at the academy. An opportunity she owes to her meeting with you. Thanks to your protection, she has been able to devote an enormous portion of her time to studying."

"Well, if she got something out of it, that's what matters."

"Master, this is our chance. Forget what's behind us and charge forward."

"You're right. She bought us some time. Let's make sure it doesn't go to waste." I reloaded my weapon, leaned forward, and gunned Schwert's engine. "Here we go!"

"We'll take the shortest route to our destination. Master, please do be sure you don't fall off."

Our airbike sped through the air, weaving past monsters as we dove toward our target. That enormous whale loomed right in front of us, and when its jaws opened wide, I faced a whole host of eyes inside its mouth. They all stared right at me.

"Well, that's creepy as hell!"

“How dreadful.” Even Luxion was disgusted. “Nonetheless, we’re going in.”

Beams of light shot out from those eyes and streaked through the sky straight for me.

We dodged them all and sped right into the creature’s mouth.

***

The guards had crammed Angie into the same room as Hertrude, so Angie took the opportunity to give the princess a piece of her mind.

“This ship of yours is nightmare,” she snipped. “It looks disgusting, too.”

Hertrude’s jaw dropped. “Wh-what did you say?! It’s adorable!”

“What part of this is adorable?! Are you blind?”

Angie would have never thought to make an enormous monster into an airship. Maybe it was ingenious in a way, but the creature certainly was *not* adorable.

Gelatt turned to them, grinning at a report he’d just received. “Seems our *adorable* ship ate the boy leading the charge.”

Angie swallowed her sudden terror and glared at him.

He smirked, amused. “What a fool. That’s what he gets for charging in all by himself. Fear not, we’ll engrave his name in our country’s history. He’ll be the half-wit who died most pointlessly. How could a boy that age be a knight?! The kingdom must be sorely wanting for worthwhile prospects if someone like him received the title. Fanoss is far superior!”

Angie’s heart squeezed painfully. “Leon,” she mumbled, dropping her gaze.

Suddenly, the floor beneath her began to creak and tremble, then burst open. Leon shot up from below, riding his airbike.

He had plunged right through the creature to break into the building above it.

“You’re alive!” Angie gasped.

“Duck!” Leon lifted his shotgun. The blasts he fired whizzed through the air where Angie’s head had been moments before, slamming into the knights standing behind her. Thanks to their magical defenses, none were critically

injured, but the attack paralyzed them for the time being.

Leon hopped off his bike and whipped the butt of his shotgun across Gelatt's chin before pointing the barrel at Hertrude. "You're coming with us. It's your turn to play hostage."

Hertrude stared back at him. "It seems I underestimated you, Sir Knight."

A maid standing behind the princess raised a weapon, and Leon pulled his trigger again. The blast sent her reeling through the air.

He's using nonlethal rubber bullets? Angie realized.

Leon was the picture of composure. "Don't bother trying to buy time. Bring your Magic Flute and come with me. We don't have a moment to lose. If you try to resist…"

It struck Angie as odd that Leon had prior knowledge of the flute, but Hertrude promptly tossed it to him.

However, Luxion interjected, pausing in the midst of singeing off Gelatt's mustache with his lasers. "Master, that is a fake. They hid the real one underneath the desk."

Then he returned to his work on the earl's nonconsensual hair removal treatment.

Leon's helmet still obscured his face, but Angie could practically see him grinning through it. "Too bad for you, Your Highness."

Hertrude scowled, but Angie hurried over to the desk and retrieved the real Magic Flute, which she passed over to Leon.

After that, Hertrude put up little resistance, to Leon's evident surprise. He tied her hands and plunked her down on his bike. By the time Angie hopped on behind them, the warship was beginning to list to one side.

"Leon, don't tell me…"

"Yep, I had to kill the monster this thing was riding on. It's disappearing. The ship will fall, but I'm sure it'll be fine. They probably have emergency brakes or something. Either way, it's time for us to move." He revved the airbike's engine and tore through the wall right in front of them.

Once outside, he turned his gun on Hertrude and bellowed. “Attention, idiots! I’ve got the princess!”

The principality’s Armors froze in midair.

“H-how underhanded! You call yourself a knight?!” one of them shouted at him.

“Moron!” Leon barked. “Look in a mirror and ask yourself who lost his liege! Now put down your weapons!”

Angie smiled against the fabric of Leon’s vest as she clung to him from behind. The knight who’d come to her rescue was neither dignified nor graceful—he contradicted every tale she’d ever heard.

Yet she couldn’t have been happier.

“You really are so…” She hesitated. “Thank you, Leon.”



***

“Dammit! They have us surrounded.”

I waited until Princess Hertrude and Angie dismounted from Schwert onto the deck of the cruise liner, then used the brief opportunity to check how many shells I had left. Only a few. A quick glance revealed the monsters hovering around us, unmoving. However, Fanoss’s warships still encircled our ship. They weren’t just at our front, back and sides—they had positioned themselves above and below us, too.

Chris landed his Armor on the deck. The hatch popped open, and he peeked his head out. “Bartfort, what are we going to do now?!”

I hadn’t thought this far. No, more like I’d figured we’d be able to return to the kingdom by this point, but our opponent showed no intention of letting us do that, even with our hostage.

Exhaustion lined everyone’s faces. They were running on fumes. They’d done well to fend off the enemy until now, but Fanoss still had energy to spare. By thus far using monsters to fight, they had reserved most of their own military might.

“Negotiations would be the easiest route,” I said, glancing at my pocket watch before turning my attention to Miss Olivia.

She’d collapsed onto the deck, completely drained. She bore no signs of injuries, but she’d pushed her body to its limits. It would be difficult for her to move for a while.

Chris’s Armor was in shambles as well, his sword cracked in two. Had he really fought in that condition? What kind of monster was he? Maybe I hadn’t given him enough credit.

“Okay, now what?” I mumbled.

I didn’t have to wonder long; a voice blared over a megaphone from a nearby warship.

“The princess sacrificed herself for our country! Ships, commence fire on the enemy!” It was Gelatt.

Chris's expression soured. "She's still alive. Are they planning to let her die?!"

"You know nothing of my people." Princess Hertrude smiled faintly. "This won't be enough to stop Fanoss. They have replacements for me. I was only entrusted with the vanguard."

"The vanguard?" I didn't believe my ears. "Are you saying you're *not* the final boss?"

Sensing we had let our guard down for a moment, the princess took the opportunity to mumble an incantation. I turned the barrel of my gun on her, but she only laughed. Her spell had already been cast—and in an instant, the monsters were on the move again.

"What did you do?!" I tightened my grip on my gun.

"You lack determination," she said. "You should have shot me. I just released my control over the monsters. Now they'll turn their aggression on the person who controlled them—they will besiege this ship."

It didn't take long to see she'd spoken truth; the monsters lunged toward us, as if lured by something unseen. Fanoss's warships also closed in.

Angie fisted her hands in the collar of the princess's dress. "Why would you go to such desperate lengths?!"

"I told you already. I will see the downfall of your kingdom."

My hopes had fixed on Miss Olivia, but she was no longer in any state to use her magic to protect the ship. And I couldn't make her push herself any further than she already had.

Straddling the bike, I turned to Luxion. "We need to buy some more time. Help me out!"

"Certainly. I will be by your side until the end."

As my bike hovered through the air, I turned my shotgun on the gathered monsters and pulled the trigger. Our combined magical blast turned them all into wisps of smoke, but any sense of victory was short-lived as new beasts appeared to replace them.

Well, this freaking sucks!

***

When Leon shot off, Angie stretched a hand out after him, loath to watch him go.

Chris retrieved a new weapon to replace his broken one and lifted off, felling several enemies as he went.

“I…I also want to…” Angie’s voice trailed off.

The red marble dangling from the charm on her wrist began to glow faintly. Soon, she was surrounded in flames. They roared around her before converging into six lances.

Angie recognized the spell immediately. “Fire Lance? But how…”

She was shocked; never before had she been able to call on such powerful magic. Grateful for this miracle, she turned her new weapons at the enemies crowding around Leon. “Pierce my—no, Leon’s enemies!”

The flames skewered the monsters before her, swallowing them up in a giant explosion.

But enemy Armors launched from the Fanoss airships and came charging toward the cruise liner.

Angie’s heart raced. Struggling to conjure the lances once more, she spotted Livia collapsed on the deck nearby. A monster reared its head right above Livia, its jaw cracked open, ready to swallow her up.

In a panic, Angie released her magic. A fiery ball flew from her hands and slammed into the beast, burning it to a crisp.

Angie raced over and lifted Livia into her arms. “What are you doing? Hurry and get up!”

Livia’s breathing was unsteady, and her feet quaked beneath her.

“Don’t tell me you used all your mana…?” Angie gasped.

Livia’s face was drained of all color, and she could barely walk. She would recover if given the time, but until then, it was dangerous to leave her so vulnerable out here.

Angie wrapped her arms around Livia, trying to support her as they made their way toward the relative safety away from the deck.

“I was never of any use,” mumbled Livia, tears of frustration streaming down her cheeks. “I always dragged you and Leon down. I hated myself for that, so I… for once I tried my best to help. I want to do more for you both, but my body won’t work the way I want it to.”

“Foolish girl!” Angie smiled. “You’ve done more than enough already. Helping you is never trouble. Because you’re…you’re one of my most precious friends.” She forced herself to blurt out these words, unconscionably embarrassed.

Livia’s eyes widened, her face a mess of tears and snot. “Angie…”

But the warships of Fanoss continued to close in on the ship, depriving them of their moment.

Angie furrowed her brow. “Do they plan to ram us?”

Sure enough, a principality ship slammed into the side of the cruise liner, and tremors rocked the deck beneath their feet. Angie and Livia lost their balance, just in time to see a monster come racing toward them, its mouth gaping wide.

Angie shoved Livia out of the way and threw her right hand up. The creature disappeared in a flicker of flames and ash.

Then the deck began to tilt, and Angie’s feet slipped out from under her.

“Angie!” Livia called after her.

Angie managed to latch on to the handrails on the side of the ship. The cruise liner flew at such a high altitude Angie couldn’t see the ocean below. If she fell here, no one would be able to save her. To make matters worse, monsters gathered below, ready to swallow her before she even hit the water.

The other students saw Angie’s peril, but everyone had their hands full defending themselves. As if to add insult to injury, the rail Angie grasped creaked. Slowly, it peeled away from the body of the ship.

Angie gasped. “Oh, I wish I’d told them how I felt sooner…”

Images swam through her mind, of her family, Livia, and even Julius. The last one she saw was Leon, that taunting grin on his face. She found herself smiling.

“You had better make up with Livia, you idiot.”

Just as Angie’s hand lost its strength, Livia lunged over the side, a look of pure determination on her face.

“Stay away!” Angie snapped, her throat raw.

“No!” Livia reached past the broken railing, grabbing for Angie. She was clearly pushing herself despite her mana exhaustion, huffing and puffing as she grabbed Angie’s arm.

Angie summoned her last iota of strength and, with Livia’s help, clawed back over the edge and onto the deck. Once safely on the floorboards, she rounded on her friend. “You complete idiot! You could have fallen with me!”

“I had to do it! I had to!” Livia lifted her chin, tears streaking her cheeks. “You said I’m your *friend*!”

“You *fool*,” Angie said again, flushing as she turned away. “That’s no reason to —”

“I-I don’t care if I’m a fool. If it means I can be your friend, then—”

But another violent quake ran through the cruise liner, and this time, Livia went tumbling over the edge. Angie scrabbled after her, thrusting out a hand, but she couldn’t reach Livia in time.

“Aah!” A sob caught in Angie’s throat. For a brief moment, she saw Livia smile before she lost sight of her plummeting toward the ocean, the wind whipping past her.

Just then, a gray airbike raced forward, plunging straight after Livia.

“Leon!” Angie gasped.

***

I lifted my shotgun, aiming it at the monsters racing to feast on Miss Olivia as she fell.

The moment she saw me, she clasped her hands in front of her chest as if praying and closed her eyes. Her expression was serene—as if, much to my chagrin, she *trusted* I would save her.

I'm gonna look like a real goddamn jerk if I fail her now.

I pulled the trigger and dispensed with the monsters surrounding her, then tucked my gun away and relinquished my grip on the handlebars.

"I'm leaving it to you," I told Luxion.

"I will match Schwert's speed to hers," he promised. "Please be cautious when you take hold of her."

Of course!

I held out my arms to catch Miss Olivia—she fell into my grasp, and I clutched her to me, princess-style.

"There will be splashdown," Luxion warned. "Prepare for impact."

"You really keep me on my toes!" I said through gritted teeth as I tightened my hold around Miss Olivia.

I braced myself as the bottom of the airbike smacked against the ocean's surface. For a few seconds, we raced across the water, white mist spraying as we went. Slowly, the bike began to gain altitude again. All the while, Miss Olivia clung to me, sobbing.

I gently patted the back of her head as I held her, attempting to console her. "You're safe now. Don't worry, I'll take you back up to the ship, Miss Olivia."

"Livia!" she demanded. There was more determination in her voice than I'd ever heard before. Wait—was she *mad*?

"Uh, look…"

"*Livia*! Why won't you call me Livia? Do you hate me now? Why… Don't call me Miss Olivia anymore, please!"

Luxion kept silent. Granted, he was busy guiding the bike through the air so we could return to the ship, but he could have thrown me some kind of bone here. I was no good at situations like this.

"Look, Mi—Li—you, you can't…be with me," I said. "You need to be with a guy more suited for you."

"What are you saying? Why are you even mentioning other men?!"

“Because!” I swallowed hard, a lump sticking in the back of my throat. “There are way better guys out there. Good-looking ones, rich ones—all kinds, you know? They would be *such* a better match for you than me.”



“I don’t care about any of that!” Livia clenched her tiny hands into fists. Why didn’t she get it? She looked so defiant and sounded so stubborn.

You’re supposed to be with one of the love interests. They’re all worthless pieces of crap, sure, but if they make you happy, that’s all I care about. Regardless of how much I badmouth them, they’re all way better than me.

“Look—Prince Julius, for one!”

“No way! He abandoned Angie!”

I hesitated. “Well, fine then! How about Jilk?!”

“He’s a wicked schemer!”

“Then Brad!”

“A narcissist!”

“Greg!”

“A meathead!”

“Chris!”

“A show-off!”

Huh, you sure have them pegged. This is actually amusing.

“I don’t want anyone else,” Livia protested. “I…I want to be with you, Leon! I want to have fun with you and Angie, like we used to!”

But…being with me wouldn’t do her any good. “Y-you can’t be with me! What’s even good about me?!”

“I *want* to be with you,” she insisted. “You’re kind and strong… Wait, no, that’s not quite right. It doesn’t matter, I love you! That’s what’s important here! I love you, Leon!”

My gaze fell. No one had ever declared their affection for me so openly. Well, besides my mom, but she didn’t count. I’d certainly never thought I would ever hear such a confession in this world.

Luxion piped up, “Master, we’ve arrived at the cruise liner.”

I reached for my shotgun and loaded some more shells. I kept my voice quiet

so Miss Olivia—Livia—wouldn't notice my embarrassment. "Climb back behind me and hang on tight, L-Livia…"

"Okay!"

When I'd used her nickname before, it had been a casual thing, as friends. I hadn't thought anything of it, and yet now, I was keenly aware of how intimate it sounded.

Livia grinned as she sat close behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist.

Oh crap, this is usually where a girl presses her chest against the guy's back and there's all that sexual tension!

There was just one problem…

My vest is so thick I can't feel a thing!

Luxion apparently guessed what I was thinking. "That pilot suit was custom-made," he dutifully informed me.

"Thanks for the backtalk, as always!" I growled. I held my gun level, blasting away the monsters in front of us.

The cruise liner listed to the side after one of the Fanoss vessels had rammed it. Right now, though, the swarm of monsters also made it hard for the principality ships to move.

Once my shotgun was out of bullets, I landed Schwert on the deck, skidding across the floorboards before screeching to a stop. I whipped my head around, taking in our surroundings.

"You did a splendid job, Schwert," Luxion praised the bike like a proud parent. "I'll be sure to give you proper maintenance later."

I left my gun behind and helped Livia dismount.

Angie raced over toward us, flinging herself at Livia. The two wrapped themselves around one another in a tight embrace. "You idiot! You absolute fool! You had me so worried!"

"Angie, I'm sorry!"

They both bawled as they clung to each other.

Okay, who was the idiot who thought female friendship was fleeting? This is a beautiful sight right here.

The battlefield was in complete chaos. Thanks to the warship that had rammed into us, the other principality ships couldn't fire on us again, but at this rate, our liner would sink. The silver lining: no one from our side had died yet. But it was only a matter of time.

"Luxion, what's our ETA?"

"As planned. Incoming now."

I pulled out my pocket watch and checked the time again. Right on schedule. The *Partner* appeared on the horizon.

The girls, still hugging, followed my gaze and noticed my airship.

"No way. You called it?" Angie's jaw dropped. "But how did you reach it from this distance?"

I grinned. "I had it on standby not far from here. I'm a bit paranoid, you see. Luxion—"

"Already in progress," he interrupted.

Come on, at least let me say my line.

With the *Partner*'s appearance, the enemy's formation began to crumble.

***

Gelatt had evacuated from the main vessel to take refuge in one of the principality's other warships. On the bridge, he shouted orders. "What are you doing? Hurry up and sink them!"

The other soldiers refused to obey. "Our own people would be in the crossfire. Besides, the princess is still alive aboard their ship."

Gelatt lifted a hand to his mustache, but his fingers grazed bare skin. He clenched his fist. He'd loved that mustache. He'd taken great care to trim it every single day, and now it was gone.

That rotten knight had taken it from him—that bastard! Gelatt's heart

thirsted for revenge. He would have no peace until he'd killed the miserable boy.

"Why did you have that ship ram them in the first place?" Gelatt demanded.

The soldiers refused to meet his gaze.

These buffoons did it on purpose because they want to save the princess! They sabotaged our ability to freely fire on them. And they know *we have replacements!*

Enraged, Gelatt kicked a nearby piece of equipment. It hurt more than he expected, and he was left hopping around until the pain eased.

"Urgh," he hissed. "This is all that brat's fault. How I loathe that mustache thief!"

"A…a new ship has appeared!" a crew member suddenly cried. "It looks to be approximately seven hundred meters!"

Gelatt scrambled to the window. "Ridiculous! Reinforcements couldn't possibly have made it here this quickly." He snatched binoculars from nearby personnel. In the distance, a single vessel headed straight toward them.

The soldiers were puzzled.

"What an odd shape. Are those *mobile* cannons? But only two of them?"

Typical airships were lined with cannons on their sides, and a ship equipped with more cannons had a natural advantage over its enemies. This enemy aircraft was simply unnatural.

Gelatt stroked his naked upper lip. "Sink it. A crude vessel like that is only an eyesore. All we have to do is take out its Suspension Stone, and it won't trouble us."

Suspension Stones had allowed for considerable development in airship technology. Simply put, they kept vessels airborne. Gelatt's plan, in that regard, was flawless.

"Hurry up and surround it!"

No sooner had Gelatt given the order than the enemy ship opened fire. The

Fanoss warship trembled from the attack. One of its primary engines had taken a hit, and it could no longer move.

“Wh-what in the world is going on?!”

“We took enemy fire!”

“Enemy fire?” Gelatt dropped his jaw. “How could their cannons reach us from that distance?! Augh!”

Another tremor surged through the ship. The enemy was rendering Fanoss’s warships immobile, one after the other.

Gelatt caught a brief glimpse of something launching from the enemy’s vessel, heading toward the listing cruise liner. “Wh-what was that?”

A piece of the ceiling broke loose and smacked Gelatt over the head. Blood poured down his face as he stood there, dumbfounded at this turn of events.

***

A large box landed on the deck of the cruise liner. The moment the other students saw it, their eyes lit up with hope.

Chris wore a taut frown, but even his expression softened with relief. His Armor was practically falling apart. Upon dismounting, he called over to me. “Bartfort, you going out there?”

I balanced Luxion in one hand and glanced back at him. “Who do you think you’re talking to? Also, cheers—victory is mine.”

This battle was as good as won.

“Master,” Luxion cut in, “enemy Armors headed this way. Requesting permission to release the drones.”

I nodded, and instantly, multiple battle drones launched from the *Partner*. Legless robots, they each carried different weapons in their hands.

The box on deck unfolded to reveal my beloved dark-gray suit: Arroganz. I opened the hatch on the chest and slipped inside.

Angie and Livia held onto Princess Hertrude as they watched me.

The princess narrowed her eyes at my Armor. “Don’t tell me that’s a Lost

Item?”

Settling into Arroganz’s pilot’s seat, I replied, “You know your stuff.”

“Now I remember. We received word of a knight who gained infamy for his exploits as an adventurer. You must be him, then.”

Luxion grumbled, something along the lines of, “Being constantly referred to as a mere ‘Lost Item’ is deeply displeasing.”

I ignored him and closed the hatch. The screen in front of me lit up, and I took in all the monsters and enemy knights surrounding us. I grinned as I powered up Arroganz.

“You guys had your fun, pounding on us while we were defenseless. Now it’s my turn to return the favor!”

“Master, you can hardly call us defenseless when you and the others fought back.”

“Look, it’s the sentiment that counts. We’re going to let them know they messed with the wrong guys. By the time I’m finished with those idiots, they’ll be terrified of me!”

The container on Arroganz’s back opened, releasing a number of drones with machine guns. They dispatched the monsters around us in droves.

I turned to Angie. “Evacuate the deck.”

She nodded. “Got it. We’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Leon, you have to come back to us!” Livia called.

Chris stood beside me, back in his Armor. “Let me help you out,” he said. His suit was a wreck, but he still planned to fight?

“Have it your way.” I shrugged. “Just don’t hold me back.”

He chuckled, unaffected. “I’ll be careful not to!”

Okay, hold on a sec, it feels awkward if you acknowledge our power difference. I was kinda expecting you to say something like, “I don’t want to hear that from the likes of you!”

“Luxion, I want the large rifle and sword.”

“Opening container one.”

I took the gun in my right hand and the blade in my left. Arroganz drifted up from the deck, and Chris followed right behind me.

The monsters charged the moment they saw us.

“Resistance is futile,” said Luxion.

Arroganz’s drones took up formation around us and pelted the encroaching beasts with their machine guns. The monsters disappeared in puffs of smoke.

“Now I look silly for fighting them with a sword,” Chris commented.

You sure do. When are you and your bros going to figure out how foolish you are?

The drones Luxion had launched earlier from the *Partner* engaged enemy units everywhere they could, protecting the cruise liner. An enemy Armor approached us, and I turned my rifle on them to blast the head off their suit.

“Okay, time to go destroy the principality’s fighting spirit.”

“You really do perfectly fit the villain role, Master.”

The grin on my face stretched from ear to ear as I gripped the controls.

***

Gelatt stared at the battle from the bridge. “What kind of monster is that?”

The enemy defeated more and more of the principality’s warships and Armors. That gray suit and its thick plates of armored protection differed so greatly from mainstream models.

One of the soldiers standing nearby said, “Earl, I think we should sound the retreat.”

Gelatt imbued his fist with magic before he slammed it into the man’s face. The soldier went reeling.

“Retreat?!” Gelatt scowled. “Don’t be absurd. If we slunk back with our tails between our legs because some students beat us, we’d be laughingstocks! Is that what you want?!”

The man scrambled to his feet, scrubbing away the blood gushing from his lips. “B-but we’ve already taken heavy damage—”

“Go back after losing the princess, the Magic Flute, *and* this battle? We don’t have the luxury of a retreat!” Gelatt’s future would be over if he returned in disgrace. His countrymen would hold him responsible for all of this. No, he had to do whatever it took to sink their enemies.

He chewed his fingernails, eyes bloodshot as he racked his brain. “Who knew the kingdom had a new model like that…?” he mumbled. “I have to at least get rid of that thing.”

A number of knights suddenly entered the bridge, equipped in black, custom-made military uniforms.

Gelatt spotted them and jerked his head up. He grinned at the lead knight. “That’s right. We have you—the most powerful hero of the principality.”

The knight regarded Gelatt with contempt. A balding man with a giant scar on his forehead, his body was brawny and thick with muscle. Unlike the other knights, he wore a full suit of armor rather than a military or knight’s uniform. It made him stand out, but the truth was the man famously considered anywhere he went a potential battlefield. None of the others regarded his apparel as anything out of the ordinary.

“Odd to hear that coming from the man who told us not to deploy,” the knight grumbled. “I heard they took the princess. We’ll deal with you later. For now, we’re going out there.”

Hope lit up the eyes of the soldiers present. Although the enemy had laid waste to them thus far, these knights could turn the tide.

Gelatt nodded. “Yes, I have no qualms with that, Viscount Vandel Him Zenden. I leave this to you and your men.”

The knights promptly left the bridge.

Gelatt snickered. “This solves everything.”

“B-but, my lord,” said the soldier Gelatt had punched, “the principality ordered us *not* to let them onto the battlefield—”

“Zenden made the decision, not me.” Gelatt snorted. “Besides, we’d be fools not to play our strongest card. Surely the Black Knight can defeat that beast. He is the strongest knight in the principality, after all.”

And said knight was about to launch right at Leon.

Chapter 11:
The Black Knight

THE SKY WAS A BATTLEFIELD, and I cursed loudly from the safe confines of Arroganz's cockpit.

"These guys are freakin' annoying!"

The enemy knights attacked in groups, surrounding me from all sides and shooting from a distance. If I turned my back on any of them, they charged me with their swords. If I tried to rush them, they dispersed and fled.

"They have been trained well," Luxion remarked.

My armor deflected their bullets, and even in melee combat, they couldn't land a scratch on me. I hadn't taken any damage, but it was taking an absurdly long time to neutralize them.

"Why do they refuse to retreat?!"

"Odd, isn't it? They have sustained more than enough damage to warrant it. However, I intercepted their command channels, and it seems they believe themselves unable to back down."

According to the information Luxion had intercepted, many soldiers were demanding a retreat. However, the commander in charge kept refusing them.

"Run away already!" I growled. *If you don't back down, I'm going to be the one pulling my hair out!*

I charged forward, driving my blade through a number of enemy Armors. I made sure to avoid any vital areas that might injure the pilots. Withdrawing my weapon, I kicked each of them toward the deck of an enemy ship. "All this resistance is pointless!"

As I raged at the incomprehensibility of it all, Luxion cut in. "The *Partner* has commenced relief efforts."

The *Partner* had taken a defensive position near the cruise liner, and Luxion

was launching a rescue vessel to help the people on board.

"Guess the cruise ship is on its last leg." Black smoke billowed from its warped hull. "Once you have everyone on the *Partner*, withdraw. We can't keep playing with these idiots forever."

"Master!" Luxion shouted, startled. "A new enemy has appeared. They wear a black Armor. I suspect this is an elite unit."

Bitter memories flooded in with the word "black." When I'd played the game in my previous life, the Black Knight had been far and away the strongest enemy. I'd met multiple Game Overs at his ridiculously powerful hands. He overpowered Chris in short-range combat, and even at long-range, Jilk didn't stand a chance against him.

He's basically Fanoss's cheat weapon.

The grief he'd given me was immeasurable. He alone had increased the difficulty of the combat in the game tenfold.

"Seriously," I groaned, "the Black Knight? Now?!"

"He is dodging the *Partner*'s fire," Luxion said. "He is also destroying my drones and continues to advance. At this rate, he will disrupt our rescue efforts."

"You know what? Perfect. I'll take him on!"

I had nothing to fear! I rode Arroganz, and no other cheat could match Luxion. The Black Knight would be child's play.

As I said that, a squadron of black knights came screeching through the air toward me.

Uh, wait—a squadron?

Hold on a sec, that's—there's—five of them? Uh, hello?! What gives!

***

Now safe aboard the *Partner*, Angie retreated to a room alone with Livia and Hertrude. They kept the princess with them for safety reasons, fearful someone might try to take advantage of the chaos to attack her. Plus, keeping her under

surveillance was only prudent.

Through a window, Angie saw that while the battle had thinned, it hadn't yet come to an end. She was growing agitated. "Why won't the principality retreat? The victor is clear."

"I already told you." Hertrude was surprisingly calm for a captured hostage. "They can't be stopped. This is hardly enough to make them back down."

"Will Leon be all right?" Livia put her hands together, evidently praying for his safety.

Angie glanced out the window again. "He won't lose easily, but a battlefield is unpredictable even at the best of times."

Leon zipped through the air past the window in Arroganz, black Armors hot on his tail.

Hertrude panicked at the sight of the black Armors. "Vandel? Why?!"

Angie's heart hammered at the name. "The Black Knight? You can't be serious. He's here?"

"Uh, um…" Livia furrowed her brows, glancing between the two of them. "Who is this Black Knight?"

"A knight who was active in the principality before you and I were ever born," Angie explained. "He took down dozens of kingdom airships entirely on his own—perhaps a hundred, perhaps more. And he destroyed several times more than that when it comes to our Armors."

Angie glanced at Hertrude, but the princess's lips pursed, and her eyes turned toward the floor. She seemed suddenly sad—a marked change from her attitude thus far.

"You don't hear of him much anymore," Angie continued. "His deployments grew less frequent. The kingdom assumed he had grown too old."

"Can Leon defeat such a strong opponent?" Livia asked anxiously.

"Honestly, I can't—"

"Vandel won't lose!" Hertrude snapped. "He's Fanoss's strongest warrior. He

wouldn’t lose to one of the kingdom’s underhanded knights!”

“Leon’s not underhanded!” Livia balled her fists.

“Please, how laughable. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten what the kingdom did to us. Or have you been brainwashed into believing you did nothing wrong?”

Livia glanced at Angie as if pleading for reassurance—hoping that Hertrude misled her—but Angie could only turn away.

“Twenty years ago, before we were born,” Angie said, “the kingdom invaded Fanoss. Not once. Not twice. Multiple offensives, hounding the principality’s forces and people until we backed them into a corner. Each time, they managed to fend us off.”

Livia’s eyes widened. “Th-that can’t be. I’ve never heard anything about us invading—”

“You know nothing.” Hertrude glared coldly at Livia. “You’re oblivious to the suffering we’ve endured at your kingdom’s hands. Angelica, why don’t you tell her the truth?”

Angie’s lips drew into a thin line. Her silence spoke volumes, and Livia’s shoulders sagged in defeat. The sight made Angie grit her teeth. But she knew nothing she said now would touch Hertrude’s anger.

***

Rifle in hand, I charged the Black Knight—uh, knights—and pulled the trigger. They were all experienced enough to dodge out of blast range.

“You cheaters!”

I flew with my back to the sky. The black knights moved with such conviction it gave me chills.

“Their performance outclasses every other Armor we’ve seen,” said Luxion. “I suspect the Principality of Fanoss possesses a higher level of technical know-how than the kingdom. The companies making their airships and Armors are far superior to ours.”

“So they’re a technological superpower, huh? Nice. Reminds me of Japan.”

“I don’t believe your nostalgia matters to them. They seem fairly intent on killing you.”

Thanks, Sherlock. I wouldn’t have realized that without your expert deductive insight.

The intensity of their attacks astounded me. One of them rushed toward Arroganz, swinging their blade down. I caught it with my own sword.

“Kingdom scum!” he snarled. “I’ll have your head!”

I knocked him back with Arroganz’s sheer strength, but by the time I lifted my rifle to shoot, the knights had already dispersed.

“They despise you,” said Luxion.

“They’re buttmad about old history—history that’s got nothing to do with me!”

Fanoss nursed a grudge against the kingdom for that brutal invasion two decades ago. However, even knowing all the details from having played the game, the knights’ persecution complex infuriated me. Honestly, what I really wanted was to sit the devs down and demand to know why they picked such a heavy backstory for an otome game.

I mean, come on, it’s an otome game! Things should be light and fluffy, right?!

“Luxion, stow the blade and rifle.”

“What weapon would you like me to prepare next, then?”

“I’m going in barehanded.”

This move seemed to enrage the knights, but my attention was on the man I assumed to be their captain. He had yet to launch a single attack against me, even though his superior strength was readily apparent to anyone with eyes.

I darted forward, closing the distance between myself and one of the subordinate knights, who I seized. It was time to use my secret weapon—the same attack that had blown Prince Julius’s Armor to pieces.

“This is what you get for being unprepared. Sleep tight!”

When I released the buildup of power in Arroganz’s arm, the blast rippled

through the enemy Armor, and the pilot inside lost consciousness. I released my grip on the suit, and it plummeted toward the water.

“Well? Hurry up, go save your friend,” I taunted the others.

The knights split up; some flew to save their falling comrade, leaving only a few opponents for me to face. I had hoped they’d realize the disadvantage my secret attack put them at and withdraw completely, but alas.

“Master, behind us!”

I whipped around just as an enemy Armor brought their sword swinging down toward me. My drones pelted them with bullets, but they ignored the damage even as it dented their suit, and they launched another attack.

“Tch!”

I raised my left arm to guard, and the knight’s sword snapped upon Arroganz’s thick plating.

A voice boomed from the enemy’s cockpit. “I’ll extinguish you, kingdom beast!”

Luxion sounded an alarm. “Master!”

Again, I whipped around to find the remaining three units pressing the attack. The captain from earlier rose up directly in front of me, his enormous sword careening toward us.

Then my monitor went black—the tip of his blade pierced through it.

***

After defeating another enemy unit, Chris paused to search the air for signs of Leon. “We’ve thinned their number quite a bit. Where is Bartfort?”

He balked when he spotted the Black Knight—whose sword had pierced straight through Arroganz.

“What?! The Black Knight is here?!”

Chris’s family was steeped in the art of sword fighting, and his father held the title of Sword Saint. Yet he knew even a man who held such a coveted title could not hope to best the Black Knight.

At first Chris gritted his teeth at this sight and looked away. Then he lifted his chin.

The other students and crew members had already taken shelter aboard the *Partner*. Chris had known that in the worst-case scenario, he might have to buy them time so they could all return to the kingdom safely. The Black Knight would certainly attack the vessel, if someone didn't stop him.

Chris hardened his resolve. "Marie, I'm sorry. It looks like this will be the end."

He raised his sword and took off toward Leon, only to pause. He sensed something off about this situation.

Abruptly, Arroganz seized one of the subordinate knight Armors hovering in front of him with both hands. Light burst from Arroganz's palms, and the impact rippled through the black suit. Arroganz released the enemy Armor, and it plunged toward the ocean.

Arroganz stretched a hand toward the Black Knight, but the knight yanked his sword away and put distance between them. Another subordinate knight, his suit already in shambles, lunged to intercept Leon's attack.

Arroganz seized the Armor's shoulder and released another shock wave, just as before.

"He's still alive!" Chris gasped. He was glad to see it. "Go for it, Bartfort! If anyone can defeat the Black Knight, it's you!"

***

I shoved my shattered monitor out of the way, and it tumbled into the sky. The Black Knight had destroyed it in his attack, leaving a gaping hole in the middle of Arroganz's chest. Air rushed into the cockpit, an exhilarating feeling. Still, I was vulnerable now—exposed.

Turning my head to the right, I dodged the Black Knight's sword by a hair's breadth. If he'd gone for my stomach, I'd have been dead.

"Haah… Haah…"

The Black Knight lifted his sword for another attack. Seeing such a threat through a screen couldn't compare to seeing it with my naked eye.

“Our performance is down 30 percent,” Luxion said. “This means an increased burden on you as the pilot. I recommend retreating.”

“I thought you told me nothing can pierce Arroganz’s armor.”

“Our enemy wields a special sword forged from adamantius, a fantasy-type of metal.”

“Fantasy, huh? Like you’re any better.”

So the Black Knight, our cheat-tier enemy, was swinging around a super-special magic sword, huh?

“Dammit, I’d like nothing better than to get the hell out of here—but no. What’s with this guy, anyway? He’s way too strong.”

“We wouldn’t be in this predicament if you weren’t so obstinate about keeping enemies alive,” Luxion countered. Annoyingly. “Even if they wanted to run as well, you backed them so far into a corner that they have no choice *but* to fight.”

Just have to rub that salt on the wound, don’t you?

“You’re young,” the Black Knight suddenly called out. “Too young. This is the state of the kingdom’s knights now?”

I didn’t know the fine details about his backstory or anything, but by the sound of his grim voice, he was well past his prime.

“*You* guys attacked *us*,” I said. “What choice did we have?”

“I see. It was the same in my youth. You’ll rue the day you were born into your kingdom, boy.”

My eyes glued to him, I gripped the controls, balling Arroganz’s hands into fists. I was so on edge that my breaths came out in shaky gasps.

Why did I have to push myself to fight a battle this goddamn hard? Normally, I’d run for the hills.

Maybe you’re wondering why I didn’t. Well, I couldn’t exactly hightail it out of there after acting so confident and lecturing the rest of the students unless I wanted to *literally die* from embarrassment.

Besides, the Black Knight wasn't about to let me escape. The minute I turned my back to this man, he would cut me down. There was also the little fact that his sword had pierced Arroganz; that meant he could cut through the *Partner*'s armor as well.

I pictured Livia and Angie's faces in my head. What about everyone else, you ask? Screw them! But I had to stop this knight, or those two would be in danger.

"Grant me approval to deploy the main ship," said Luxion.

"If I do that, you'll kill him. So, no."

"I fail to understand why not," he said irritably. "He's coming!"

Our enemy made his move.

The charm around my neck swayed as we lunged to meet him.

The Black Knight's blade whistled through the air, not an ounce of hesitation in his attack. This man had no compunctions about killing me.

I raised my left arm to block his blow, and the steel of his weapon sank through my plating.

In the background, an alert screamed at me.

I turned toward the knight, but he sensed the danger and ripped his sword free as he leapt overhead. His next blow swept sideways. I charged, slamming Arroganz into his Armor as his sword bit into my right shoulder.

"How the hell are you beating me when my suit is so much more powerful? You cheating bastard!"

"He's simply far more skilled at piloting than you are," Luxion said.

I slammed my fist into the enemy Armor and prepared to release a shock wave, but the Black Knight slammed his foot into my arm and sent me reeling.

We continued chipping away at each other, again and again, for minutes—hours, I don't know—until a moment came when the evening sun glared at his back as I glared at him, the two of us locked in a stare down. Our suits were falling apart; I'd taken his left arm and one of his legs, but I wasn't in much better condition.

“I can’t allow myself to lose to a knight of the kingdom,” he rasped through pain.

The Black Knight charged at the exact moment I dared to squint through the blinding light of the sun. His sword flashed as he cut through the air.

You cheater! That’s one of the oldest tricks in the book!

Once more, he impaled Arroganz with his sword.

Good.

I swung out of the cockpit, threw a grappling hook at the enemy Armor, and threw myself over to the Black Knight’s suit.

The old man laughed in surprise. “Throwing away your chance at victory?”

“Nope, this one’s mine.”

My reckless jump had been so distracting that the Black Knight didn’t notice Arroganz still moved. My Armor locked its arms around his and held him in place.

“What?! How can it be moving?!”

Arroganz ripped the other suit’s head open, and at last, I came face-to-face with the pilot inside. He *was* older, with a large scar running across his forehead. I pulled a handgun from my holster and aimed it at him.

“It’s over. Surrender.”

He gritted his teeth at me, lips locked in a sneer; the intensity of his glare sent a shiver down my spine. “Never. Kill me, you coward!”

Holy crap, he actually refused.

Luxion popped out of Arroganz and darted to my side. “Master, we have suppressed the enemy.”

I chanced a glance over my shoulder, and indeed, the battlefield had gone silent—there was no noise to indicate anyone more fighting. Regardless of whether this guy actually admitted surrender, the principality’s main warship couldn’t move, and all their Armors floated on the surface of the ocean below.

“Hey, we did pretty good!”

We'd managed to stop Fanoss without Luxion using his main body.

"They certainly put up a fight," Luxion said.

"I'm sorry, Princess," the Black Knight muttered bitterly.

As I frowned at him, a streaking light burst out of the principality's main warship—a flare.

I knit my brows. "You guys really don't know when to give up."

***

When Gelatt saw the Black Knight fall, the last bit of his sanity fled. He grinned like a madman. "It's over. I'm finished."

The Black Knight was a living legend. His loss would irreparably damage the principality's morale. The army had already lost the will to fight. Worse, they had suffered defeat at the hands of children riding a civilian vessel.

Gelatt knew he would be called to take responsibility for this failure. He reached into his pocket, taking out what looked like a gun, and approached the window.

He had only one shot. The principality had created this gun while researching the Magic Flute, and it also had the power to call monsters to it. Normally, it was fired to draw in monsters to put under the Flute's control, but its effects were so powerful that its use was heavily restricted.

"N-now that it's come to this, the least I can do is erase our shame. This will change everything! I won't be remembered as a powerless fool on the losing side!"

Gelatt aimed the gun at the glass and pulled the trigger. A flare shot across the darkened sky with an eerie shriek.

Immediately, monsters began to manifest, one after the other—from the sky and from the sea.

"Now, beasts, lay waste to everything!"

That ridiculously strong gray Armor could no longer move, thanks to the Black Knight. The only enemy left was that strange airship. It had just a few cannons,

so Gelatt was sure the monsters would easily overwhelm it.

He cackled, even as other military personnel rushed over to restrain him. It was too late; the creatures continued to multiply, and rapidly.

***

Perched on the Black Knight's suit, Arroganz's arms still wrapped around it, I stared up and sighed at the new wave of monsters.

"Quite the spectacular view," said Luxion blithely.

The Black Knight glared at the ship that had released the flare. "Fool," he spat. "Planning to kill us all? Hey, boy! Get a message to the princess. Tell her to use that flute. I'm sure you'd rather survive this, too."

He wanted me to let her put all these creatures under her control? *Sure, that sounds like a great idea. Let's give the enemy the opportunity to reup their numbers.*

The old man saw my skepticism. "We're not so disillusioned we think we can still put up a fight. Come now, do you want all of us to die here?!"

Like I could put my faith in him after everything he and his countrymen had put me through!

I glanced at my partner. "Well, annihilation doesn't exactly sound appealing to me. Can you handle it, Luxion?"

"So it's finally my turn, hmm?" Luxion's eye turned bright red, gleaming in the dark.

Thin streams of light rained down from one of the clouds above, impaling the monsters all around us. Every creature the light touched disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The Black Knight leaned back in horror. "What in the world was that?!"

It looked kinda like a meteor shower. Each time one of the beasts died, they scattered into black particles, leaving only the beautiful ocean view in their wake.

I turned back to the old man. "You guys aren't the only ones hiding new tricks.

Make sure you let the rest of the principality know that when you go back home."

"What? You're not going to take my head? Are you—are you implying you went easy on me to begin with? You dare humiliate us?!"

"Uh, gross? What would I do with some old geezer's head? Your sword, though, that I'll take. Otherwise, who knows what naughty things you might do with it?"

I'd been sweating bullets through this whole battle because of that blade of his.

"You're too soft, boy," he snarled. "That'll be the death of you one day, mark my words. The next time we meet, I'll—"

"My mercy is the reason you're even going to get a next meeting," I grinned. "Yet here you are, with all this arrogance left to howl at me like a dog. You still don't get it, do you, old man? Your little invasion is over."

The look on his face remained frozen in a grimace—like he didn't grasp what I was saying.

"Not obvious enough? Granted, we were armed, but you guys lost to a *civilian* ship. And the people on board were *students*. You tried taking kids hostage, and they pulverized you. Do you understand what that means?"

His eyes widened and his mouth hung open.

"You guys are withering away!" I laughed. "Your best of the best went all out against a bunch of children, and you still lost! Doesn't matter how good *I* am. You guys underestimated the hell out of us. You really think there'll *be* a real next time? It's time to retire, old man! How does it feel to lose your knightly livelihood? Come on, tell me. I'm dying to know."

His lips twisted in a snarl. "You expect me to live with this disgrace? You don't even have the chivalry to let me die on the battlefield? You sniveling lowlife!"

You'd rather die than live? Your worldview is so stupid I can't even begin to comprehend it. You picked the wrong guy to fight if that's what you want.

I slammed my forehead against his. The sting had me grinding my teeth. Was

his skull made of stone?!

"The loser has to obey the victor, right? Then I say yes, you're going to *live* with that shame! I'm a decent *person*, but as a knight… Well, if people want to call me a 'lowlife' and 'scum,' they can go right ahead."

Hatred etched into every corner of the old knight's face.

"We can't keep playing war with you people," I said.

Silence settled over us, and I noticed then that Luxion had wiped out the last of the monsters.

With that taken care of, I bound the knight's hands, and once we got to the *Partner*, I set to work.

***

It was well into the night before things settled down and I was able to make my way to the *Partner*'s storage room. Inside was the enormous sword that had pierced Arroganz. The black blade had no doubt tasted the blood of countless people. It looked cursed.

I gotta foist this thing off on somebody responsible, but who?

"Master, why did you go out of your way to battle them? With my main body, we could have vanquished the Black Knight in but a moment. Please enlighten me as to why you took such a risk."

Luxion probably thought I'd put myself in harm's way on purpose. Clearly he objected to how I'd handled things. But looking at this awful sword now, I realized something. I could have done as Luxion suggested—wiped the principality's forces out with overwhelming force—but how was that any different from committing mass murder? I couldn't do a thing like that. Absolutely not. I'd definitely regret it, and I had no doubt I'd struggle to make such a call to begin with.

Not to mention, it would only result in even more trouble later.

"I'm sure you could pulverize them, no problem. But what then?" I asked. "What comes after?"

"People would see you as a threat, no doubt. Not just the principality either—

the kingdom might make a move on you as well. Worst-case scenario, they might try to kill you. I certainly wouldn't allow that to happen, of course."

Either way, things wouldn't be able to stay the way they were. I would have to continue fighting or take control of everything—as Holfort Kingdom had once done.

Well, there's always the option to run the hell away, I guess.

"Ugh. Sounds like a pain. After all the trouble I went through to obtain you, I don't need any more problems. I got involved on the ground for my own mental well-being, okay? Because I felt like it."

And to prevent the mass murder. Couldn't forget that.

***

The next day, all the broken enemy airships were docked on the principality's floating island. Luxion's robots took care of disassembling them, which meant I got my hands on a whole heap of Suspension Stones.

Mine, all mine!

"Load up the Armors, too. Any airships in good condition we'll take home with us."

Luxion floated beside me, as he usually did. Apparently, he liked being near my shoulder.

"So you're not just stealing their fruits, you're taking the whole plant, roots and all. You don't have an ounce of empathy, Master. I knew I could expect as much from you."

"Right? Even I'm kinda fond of this side of myself."

Gelatt stood nearby, his arms bound and his upper lip naked. His face was bruised and swollen, but that wasn't my fault. He'd been unconscious when we boarded the principality's ship to apprehend him.

"Baron Bartfort, I must demand that you return those Suspension Stones to us," he said.

I grinned. "Hmm, I don't know. You're the ones who destroyed our cruise

liner. We deserve some compensation for that. Tsk, tsk. If only someone hadn't launched an attack on us."

"I-In that case, I request the commencement of an official negotiation between the principality and—eek!"

I stomped, making him jump. "You're asking me for concessions? I won."

"Yes, but—"

"You agree with that assessment, right?"

"No, I—"

"Right?"

"I, uh…yes." He ground his teeth in frustration.

"Man, I can't believe how benevolent I am. After all you did, I'm letting you off easy. Ah, such kindness is almost sinful."

"Yes, Master," said Luxion, "your mercilessness is awe-inspiring."

I shrugged. "This is better than making all their soldiers our slaves, right?"

"You did sell those pirates to the viscount."

"I sure did. His family struck gold when they found that mine. Now thanks to me, they've got pirates to get it for them. Besides, those pirates were criminals. They knew what would happen if they got caught. I'm sure they don't have any regrets."

"I do believe they begged you for leniency."

"Yep!"

I'd sold those pirates to the same viscounty Jenna had caused all that trouble for by gunning for its heir. Now those criminals were working hard in the viscount's mines, putting their lives on the line to repent. Being a miner was difficult and dangerous. Even adults struggled to keep up with the work and sometimes collapsed from exhaustion. So look at me, a real saint for not sending these soldiers to the same destination.

That said, I was panicking a little on the inside. We had put a huge dent in the principality's military power, but would it be enough to stop a war between

them and the kingdom?

Give me a break. War is the last thing I need.

Although my anxiety about the future continued to mount, I had done enough for now. The rest, as far as I was concerned, was up to the kingdom to deal with.

I examined the literal mountain of Armors piled in front of me. “We’ll have to send these in for repairs before they’re usable again.”

“I don’t mind repairing them, but people might get suspicious if I were to do all of them at once,” said Luxion. “I would suggest putting in a request with a maintenance facility. In the future, we should consider constructing one specifically for this purpose.”

“I can’t put one together right away, but that’s a good idea. For now, we’ll get in touch with someone else.”

“Quite a few scam artists have claimed to be Armor-building specialists lately,” Luxion warned. “When you do reach out, be careful to ensure the facility is legitimate.”

“So we’ve even got scammers in this game now?” I shook my head. “This world really is a cruel one.”

“Master, the salvage work is finished. We can withdraw at any time.”

“Good. We got what we could, so let’s pack up the booty and head back home.”

“Ah, and now you sound just like a pirate.”

We left the principality’s floating island behind, but the majority of the enemy’s airships and Armors came with us.

***

After speaking with the cruise liner’s captain and the teachers, I retired to my room on the *Partner*, exhausted. One of Luxion’s robots waited outside the door as a guard.

“Good work,” I said to it as I reached to open the door.

The robot cut me off.

“Oh, come on. You won’t let me into my own room?”

It stood in my way, unflinching.

“Hurry up and move it! I’m tired!”

Its eyes glimmered as if in protest, but I shoved past and pried it away from the door.

Luxion cut in, “Master, it seems your room is already occu—”

The door finally slid open, and I barged in to find Angie and Livia asleep on my bed. They were facing one another and holding hands, their chests slowly rising and falling. A blanket was spread over them, but they definitely weren’t in their uniforms anymore. A robot floating nearby ironed the girls’ outfits.

Wait, does that mean they’re in their underwear?

They both had the most adorable expressions on their faces. It was a precious sight to behold.

I retreated a few steps and quietly closed the door. Once I was in the hall, I pressed my back to the door and slid down to the floor.

“Tell me earlier next time. Angie’s daddy is going to have my head on a platter!” I wrapped my arms around my legs and glared up at Luxion for an explanation.

“Apparently, they fell asleep waiting for you. They must have been exhausted.”

They were ridiculously cute. If I hadn’t been as mature as I am, I might have chanced a peek under that blanket.

Be glad I’m a goddamn grown-up. But either way, you girls should be more careful. Men are wolves!

“Now where should *I* sleep?”

With all the students and staff stuffed onto the *Partner*, I had to stop and think as to whether we even had any empty rooms left.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, growing louder and louder before

stopping altogether. When I lifted my head, Chris stood before me.

"What is it?"

"Bartfort, I need an answer from you. You—the reason you don't want to duel me with swords is because you think I don't have a chance of beating you, right?"

What in the world is he talking about? You think I could beat someone as gifted with the blade as you?

"Is this a joke?" I snorted. "Sorry, I don't get it."

Chris shook his head. "No, you beat the Black Knight. You don't even see me or my friends as competition, do you? I completely misjudged your abilities. I'm ashamed of myself."

You should be more ashamed of your misunderstanding. The only reason I won anything was Arroganz. "Look, you've got the wrong idea—"

But Chris wore a look of renewed determination. "I swear I'll catch up to you! I'll get stronger. Strong enough that you'll have to recognize me as an equal. That's what I wanted to tell you. You're my objective now."

With that declaration, he left.

I thought about chasing after him to clarify in what way exactly he was wrong as hell, but it was too big of a pain. And anyway, he and the other love interests were a little late to reform themselves.

But as I watched his back recede down the corridor, a thought occurred to me.

"I've got it! I'll pin the success of this mission on him."

"Back to your sinister schemes, Master?"

Please, this hardly qualifies as sinister. Besides, Chris would be way happier to receive the credit than I would.

I fell asleep leaning against the door, satisfied with my decision.

***

"The principality was a strong opponent."

I was back in my dorm at the academy, happily nestled in my bed, chatting with Luxion.

“It certainly was,” he agreed.

We’d undergone all kinds of investigations since returning from our school trip. When I handed over the Black Knight’s enormous sword, I’d taken great care to tell the official, “This was all thanks to Chris’s hard work!” I went on to explain how much effort everyone else had put in as well. “I was so moved,” I told them, insisting that I’d done little more than support the rest of the students.

I wasn’t sure if it was due to my report, but all the students who’d helped to repel the principality would be receiving a reward from the kingdom. Everyone was getting a medal.

“Are you sure it was wise to give the kingdom the Black Knight’s weapon?” Luxion asked.

“That thing is cursed. I don’t want it. Besides, if I ever need a weapon like that, you can make me one, right?”

“I did analyze its composition, so yes, that would be possible. I do question whether it was necessary to hand over so many airships and Armors, however.”

I’d done *that* to butter up the kingdom. Also, I kinda felt like I owed Angie’s daddy after getting a glimpse of her sleeping face.

“Eh, who cares. I still have some left over. Besides, I kept the Suspension Stones—that’s the good stuff.”

I was just happy I wasn’t getting a promotion this time. Instead, everyone else would walk away with the award.

“Hm. If you’re certain. Far be it from me to argue.”

So much had happened in this latest incident. I’d figured out a lot of things I needed to reflect on. I would have to put some real effort in soon. But for now, I’d recovered Livia’s Holy Necklace and put an end to the battle between the kingdom and the principality. That was enough.

Also, I’d finally plucked up the determination to do what I wanted.

Background character or not, I wanted to stay beside Livia and Angie. In order to do so, I needed to prepare a few things in advance.

Chapter 12:
Rematch

REMEMBER HOW I TOLD YOU that the kingdom expected nobility to do labor in equal proportion to their title and court ranking? Well, currently I was lower-fifth court ranking and a full-fledged baron.

How the hell did this even happen again?

This was basically the kingdom's way of telling me they expected work in proportion to the honors they'd bestowed on me. In addition to my daily contributions, they would also expect me to assist if war broke out. It was a suffocating position to be in. Moving your way up in the world was hardly sunshine and roses.

If there ever were such a conflict and they requested my participation, it would be hard to refuse them, even while I was still a student. As such, I decided to make a few strategic moves.

First, I gathered up the other low-ranking noblemen at the school and hosted a banquet of sorts at a pub.

"Leon, is it true you got your hands on some airships?"

"I'm so jealous. They're warships too, aren't they?"

"Who cares what type they are, I'm envious he has any airships at all. My family has none."

All the men I'd gathered were heirs of countryside noble houses. Their voices brimmed with longing, just as I had expected.

"I've already had them repaired," I said. "But to tell you the truth, I've got too many. I don't know what to do with them all."

Their gazes turned sharp. Daniel even gulped.

"You guys want 'em?"

Raymond stood up. As the heir to a noble house, he wanted few things in the

world more than he wanted an airship. The difference between the nobles who had one and the nobles that didn't could only be called huge. But airships were expensive, and upkeep was costly. Most baronies bought cheap, used junkers.

"Wh-what do you want in exchange?" Raymond asked.

They all stared at me. Fanoss airships were of exceptional quality, and these boys knew their value. But they also knew there was no such thing as a free lunch—there had to be a catch. Honestly, I liked them even more because they didn't expect me to hand them over for free.

I coolly reached for my glass and took a drink. "I've decided to start a maintenance facility back home, mostly for my own ships. If you promise to leave all of your tune-up and repairs to me, then I'll give you the ships for free."

Their eyes went blank with shock.

"Th-there's no way. That deal's too good to be true."

"Are they defective or something?"

I could hardly blame them for second-guessing me. "Rest assured," I answered sincerely, "I still plan to make money. But I promise I'll take a fair fee—I won't be squeezing every last penny out of you."

They still seemed hesitant.

I sighed. "Fine, you got me. I'll give you four Armors with each ship, how's that? Armors from the principality. I guarantee their quality."

Raymond looked about to break, but Daniel grabbed his shoulder. "Hold it! This is Leon we're talking about. He's the type to suck a person dry."

"Wait! You're right!"

Those cruel accusations shattered my poor, fragile heart.

With my friends so suspicious of me, everyone else turned distrustful as well. It was a bit depressing to be treated so coldly when I'd come to them with such a great deal.

"Too bad, then," I said. "I thought giving you those ships would be great advertisement for my business, but if you're not interested, I won't force you.

I'll find some other guys who want them."

Daniel jumped on that. "Wait! Y-you really meant it when you said they'd be free? You're not going to charge us afterward or give us defective ships, right?"

"Have a little faith. I don't lie."

"Yes, you do," they all responded in chorus.

Come on, you guys are going to make me cry.

I hadn't lied once today. I really did plan to make this a legit business. I already had a facility back home prepared, and I was listed as the owner. It would bring in money for me in the future, and I could use that to make contributions to the kingdom. Being a high-ranking noble was rough. You had to keep generating income.

What about all the money I'd received so far, you ask? It wasn't enough! The kingdom required annual tribute. In less than ten years, the fortune I had now would all but dry up. I *had* to make more money. The floating island I lived on only had the potential to generate an income equivalent to a baronet's holdings. I'd considered transforming it into a tourist attraction, but this world had all those pirates and monsters, which made traveling for fun difficult, i.e., I wouldn't get many guests. A maintenance facility like this one was my best bet for the future.

"You really think I'd sell you faulty airships?" I said. "I'm running a business here. I'd only lose people's trust. I just built this place. I don't even have any customers yet! So I have to go out of my way to draw people in. Conveniently, I have a number of ships I captured from the principality that I can use to do just that."

Increasingly desperate, I appealed to them with the type of marketing I'd learned in my previous world. "Right now, airships and Armors are absolutely free! Get yours for zero dia! No need to worry about maintenance. We'll look after you! We guarantee a fair price for all your repair needs!"

The boys started throwing their hands up into the air, one after the other.

"I want one!"

“M-me too!”

“And me!”

Smiling, I whipped out the contracts I’d prepared and handed them over. “Great, just send these back home and have your parents sign where I’ve indicated. Make sure you explain the situation to them, too. Oh, and if you have any old airships, I’ll be happy to buy them off of you.”

They excitedly accepted the paperwork.

“We’ll all be friends for life!” I crowed.

Thanks for being so easily lured in by some free airships, guys. We’ll be the best of buddies for a long time to come.

Especially since I had exclusive maintenance rights to their ships—they wouldn’t be able to betray me so easily.

I watched them all sign, grinning from ear to ear.

***

Although it was Angie’s day off, she responded to a summons at her older brother’s estate in the capital.

“What is it?” she asked as soon as she arrived.

Gilbert wore a troubled expression as he set some documents on his desk, sliding them over so Angie could see.

“What’s this? A sales contract for an airship?”

“That’s right,” her brother said. “Leon prepared a number of these and distributed them among the other baronies.”

“Leon did?” Angie had a bad feeling about this. She worried that her house wouldn’t look favorably on such actions. “I’m terribly sorry. I’ll have him stop this immediately.”

“No, that’s not necessary. There’s nothing wrong with selling airships.”

Her shoulders sagged in relief. “Then what’s the matter?”

“Apparently, he’s set up a maintenance facility on his island. He’s in a rush,

doing maintenance and offering ships for free to baronies he's acquainted with. I suspect it's a marketing move, but it's a bit too hasty, don't you think? He practically drove off the principality by himself. What in the world could he be thinking? It's been weighing on me."

Gilbert stroked his chin, contemplating. "Now the kingdom is in danger of underestimating the principality because they were defeated by a ship full of students. The punishment they plan to exact is awfully lax. And yet the man responsible for defeating them has grown even warier. How should we interpret that?" He looked at Angie expectantly.

"I don't know anything," Angie demurred. "Except…"

"Except?"

"Except that Leon suddenly became terribly active. Ever since we returned, he's been training and frequenting dungeons."

I lost a lot of confidence after that Black Knight kicked the crap outta me, Leon had told her, *so now I'm going to work hard*.

But when Angie thought about what might happen in the future… *Does he fear the principality? Even though the palace is relatively unconcerned?*

Gilbert was right; as far as Angie knew, the kingdom seemed inclined to dismiss the rise of the principality. When they'd heard the Black Knight had lost in battle, they'd declared that old age had caught up with him.

Gilbert drummed his fingers on the desk, looking irritated. "Should we assume he's planning for more to come?" he wondered aloud. "I'm sure the nobles will meet soon to hear the full report on the matter, but Redgrave House has little sway now. I can only hope they take this as a valuable lesson—an indication that we're falling behind and need to think ahead."

Suddenly, Angie remembered the enemy princess. "Oh, do you know how they plan to deal with Princess Hertrude?"

"'Deal with' is a stretch. They're naive. There's talk of having her study abroad here in the kingdom. I heard Father was opposed to the idea, but the marquess wouldn't budge on the issue."

Angie's eyes widened. *Father's influence has suffered that greatly? I heard a marquess was gaining prominence, but this really is a troubling development.*

"The marquess said Hertrude should study at the academy; that way, she'll see the strength of the kingdom firsthand. He plans to use the opportunity to curry favor with the princess and bring the principality back under the kingdom's rule, I'm sure. We tried to discredit the plan by bringing up the incident with Earl Offrey, but the earl is no longer associated with the marquess's faction."

Due to the incident with the pirates, Offrey House had been penalized: The government had confiscated their titles, fortune, and even their land. The Offrey girl, who had started the whole mess by going after Leon, had lost everything. Her family had since saddled her with a deplorable job.

I actually feel bad for her. That girl's future would be anything but easy.

"On another note," said Gilbert, "I hear you're getting along quite well with the scholarship student?"

Angie's gaze dropped to her feet.

"There's no need to be that close to her," he went on.

Angie lifted her head, burning with resolve. "Sh-she's my friend! Our relationship has nothing to do with you."

Gilbert stared at her quietly, but the moment he realized Angie wouldn't budge, he relented. "Do as you like."

"Y-you mean it?"

"If you're that intent, I won't say anything. Father and I have reason to be indebted to her after everything she did during that mess with Fanoss. However, if she's that precious to you, you'd better protect her."

"I-I will!"

"It also seems like we'll need to pick a new entourage for you now."

Angie hesitated before asking, "What will happen to the girls who…who betrayed us?"

Angie knew two of her followers had been confined for betraying the cruise liner's position to the principality. She had heard nothing of them since.

Gilbert offered a grim smile. "You really know want to know?"

"No. It was a foolish question."

Angie had been close with the girls since childhood, but she knew they couldn't weasel their way out of this. Still, her feelings on the matter were complex. Her gratitude for new friends like Livia and Leon, who put their lives on the line to save her, exceeded the pain she felt from betrayal by the old. The Offrey girl had used threats and intimidation to command the people around her—and Angie doubted those relationships would last into the girl's coming hardships. It made Angie all the more grateful to have such loyal friends.

Maybe I really am blessed.

"Now that that's settled," Gilbert went on, "What do you think of Leon?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I haven't heard anything about him securing a fiancée yet. A great deal has happened, and he's really moved up in the world. It wouldn't bode well for us if he hooked up with the wrong sort."

Angie knew her older brother was trying to draw Leon into their faction. It would be a great boon for them if they could cement his place among their allies. He also seemed easy to manage; he'd handed over the principality's latest airships and Armors without even being asked, after all.

Of course, it would have been dangerous for Leon to insist on keeping that wealth in order to increase his own power, as it would have put the court and Redgrave House on edge. It didn't matter that Leon was the baron of a border region—if he had a fleet on hand, he would be a threat. In the blink of an eye, he could use that power to take over neighboring islands and bolster his influence. Multiple country nobles in the past had absorbed neighboring territories before turning their sights on the kingdom itself.

Gilbert and Angie's father must have appreciated that Leon knew his place enough to avoid such things.

I planned to caution him if he got carried away, but if he's handed all those ships over, then even my brother shouldn't consider him a threat.

By this generosity, Leon was strengthening his ties with others of his rank, of course, but that alone couldn't inspire concern in the upper ranks. In fact, he had been so generous with his gifts that it almost made Angie want to grab him by the shoulders and demand, *Are you sure about this?!*

Indeed, Leon seemed like a knight who had forsaken personal profit in favor of selfless devotion. People had begun to sneer and whisper about how he was a loyal dog of Redgrave House.

"He's been so busy lately. I haven't seen him involved with anyone, really," Angie answered honestly. "Also, um, the other girls hate him a bit."

Gilbert cupped his hand over his forehead. "That's what I don't understand. Why in the world aren't they interested in him? By his own efforts, he's climbed to upper-fifth court ranking, and he's already been knighted. What's not to like?"

Angie furrowed her brow. "I thought he was lower-fifth rank? From what I heard, he wouldn't be elevated further until after graduating."

Gilbert scratched his cheek, embarrassed. "Apologies. I meant to tell you. The truth is…"

***

The end of the second term approached. The award ceremony for the students who'd participated in the Fanoss conflict—or maybe "incident" was a better term—would be held on the first day of winter break. The recipients at the academy anxiously looked forward to the occasion. Awards weren't given freely, and this would give students bragging rights and prestige. Those who'd missed out were sour about the lost opportunity, but there was nothing to be done.

My friends and I basked in the warmth of my bedroom, sipping tea, the windows fogged from the wintery chill outside. Master had gifted me some new tea leaves, and I'd also treated myself to a new tea set, so I was on cloud nine. I'd gone first thing this morning to a famous sweets shop to fetch high-quality

hors d'oeuvres for the occasion.

"Aah. This is the life."

Livia looked guilty as she nibbled away at the snacks, but the sweet flavor soon coaxed a smile from her. I would have expected no less from a famous sweets store. In fact, I'd underestimated how addictive they would be.

"This is delicious," Livia declared.

In contrast, Angie took small, regal bites, seemingly accustomed to the flavor. "You like chocolate? I should send for some samples from one of my favorite chocolateries."

She really is a high-class noble lady! I wanna know where she shops.

Livia smiled bitterly. "I shouldn't get used to eating such expensive treats."

"Ah… All right, then…"

I lifted my hand. "Angie, would you tell me the name of this place? The really top-quality joints have months-long waiting lists. I'd love to get an introduction letter from your house."

As one would expect from an otome game world, it had a wide variety of popular sweets. Painful as it was to live in this matriarchal society, at least I could indulge in sugary goodness for a delightful reprieve.

"I think no, Mr. Tea Freak. The other clientele would grow frustrated if I let you buy up all their stock."

I wasn't the only guy who liked tea parties, and some of the more unscrupulous types monopolized the most popular shops for the express purpose of inviting girls to their parties. But you know what? Angie wasn't mistaken; those men and I were comrades in arms!

"Oh, come on, I wouldn't do that," I insisted. "I just want to taunt girls by eating the most popular sweets right in front of them. Or, you know, passing a chocolate to one of those haughty girls trying to diet."

There was nothing quite as satisfying as lording a win over someone you hated. I wanted to laugh in a horrid girl's face for once.

“That’s awfully cruel,” Livia said, exasperated.

Things had been peaceful here lately. Ever since we returned, Luxion had been performing maintenance on the *Partner*, Arroganz, and Schwert. That left me with no means to go anywhere, so I’d been inviting Daniel and Raymond to go dungeoning. Of course, now that I had beaten the most difficult enemies in the game, monsters were hardly any trouble. But it was still worth gathering what resources I could.

I couldn’t shake the fear that Fanoss still meant to go to war with us, though we had their secret weapon now. I shouldn’t have had any reason to worry, yet my heart squeezed with a strange unease. I couldn’t seem to calm my nerves.

Angie changed the topic. “More importantly, Leon, I heard you gave credit to Chris for defeating the Black Knight.”

I glanced upward, which caught Livia’s attention.

“Why would you do that? You’re the one who beat him, Leon.”

Angie had finished her tea, so I tried to butter her up by pouring her another cup. “My lady, that decision was made based on highly complex political ramifications.”

Okay, that was a big, fat lie.

Nonetheless, Angie nodded as if she saw my point. “True, it wasn’t a bad move.”

“Right?!” Not that I had actually thought it through, but I was genuinely happy to receive a compliment from her.

“Um, okay, but why?” Livia’s face clouded with confusion.

Angie began to explain, so I quietly listened—I needed this answer too. “It’s simple. Arclight House viewed Leon as an enemy. But by relinquishing credit to Chris for this exploit—and defeating a foe they had never bested, an incredible feat in itself—Leon gave them no choice but to cease any plans to aggress against him. Chris may soon be reinstated as the heir to his house.”

Livia smiled at me. “I knew you were a kind person!”

“Uh, yeah! O-of course I am.”

I'd figured Arclight House wasn't very fond of me, but I hadn't realized they actively viewed me as an enemy. That was the house of the Sword Saint! Even if I were a cat with nine lives, I'd lose every one of them if he decided to come for me.

Wait… I'm pretty sure Miss Mylene—uh, I mean, Queen Mylene said something to that effect before. Enemies at the palace and whatever.

Luxion peered at me. He no longer needed to hide in the girls' presence, since they'd already seen him. "It turned out well for you, didn't it, Master?"

What he meant was, *Good thing they didn't realize the truth—that you only pushed this off on him because you didn't want to get any more courtly attention*.

He was getting easier and easier to read.

"How does it feel," I asked him, "having a master who can make such sophisticated calculations? Delights you, doesn't it?"

"The way you let such things go to your head is almost a talent in and of itself. Most people would act more modest. If you have a guilty conscience at all, consider humbling yourself."

I waved my hand dismissively. "I have no idea what you're talking about. My selling point is my loyalty and my kindness. I'm just a good ol' ordinary guy."

"Shall I look up the definitions of *kind* and *loyal* for you? It seems to me that you missed the connotation in your new language."

Angie and Livia, meanwhile, leaned forward to study Luxion. Angie reached out tentatively to poke him. "It's amazing how this one-eyed creature can speak."

"That's not very nice, Angie," Livia scolded. "Lux has a name. It's Luxion."

Luxion stared at Livia. "'Lux'? Do you mean to refer to me?"

I grinned at him. "Good for you, Lux. You've got a cute nickname now."

He went suddenly quiet, and Livia furrowed her brow, as if worried she'd upset him.

“Don’t you worry about him. Anyway, the real reason I gave Chris the credit was because…well, you know. Chris and the other guys aren’t *all* bad. Uh, probably.”

So they were a little—okay, no, *very*—stupid, but they weren’t bad *people*.

Angie smiled tightly. “That’s true. The person we must be wary of is the one who threw their lives into such disarray—Marie.”

The atmosphere in the room suddenly turned heavy.

“Um, so, actually, about those five boys,” Livia said, trying to lighten the mood. “I heard they’ve been hanging around a storehouse. It seems they’re up to something.”

“Up to what?” I asked.

Livia breathed a small sigh, possibly of relief that I’d expressed interest, and continued, “It seems like they’re making something.”

What in the world would the five of *them* be making together?

***

“Honestly, what have you boys been up to?” Marie asked.

She had come to see them at a storehouse on school campus. The five had told her they wanted to show her something, and naturally, this excited her. It had to be a present.

A jewel, perhaps? Maybe a dress? They’ve been working so hard lately. Ah, surprises are the best!

A sheet lay draped over something enormous in the middle of the storehouse. Marie tilted her head.

Kyle, standing beside her, mimicked the motion. “What is that thing?”

Greg rubbed a knuckle across the tip of his nose. “It’s a surprise.”

“We made you wait an awfully long time for this,” Brad said, flipping his bangs out of his eyes.

Their words only heightened her anticipation. “Thank you both so much!”

Embarrassed, Chris removed his glasses. “I-I worked hard, too.”

“Yes, thank you, Chris.”

“Miss Marie,” Jilk cut in, clearing his throat, “please don’t forget His Highness and myself. Go on, Your Highness.”

Julius stepped in front of her. “Marie, this is a representation of our feelings for you.”

The five boys took hold of the sheet and pulled—revealing an Armor, sitting on its knees.

Marie’s smile froze. *What?*

Julius gazed upon their creation, pleased. “Finally, we can challenge Bartfort again. He ripped us apart, but now we can beat him and move forward.”

“You said it, Your Highness!” Greg gave him a thumbs-up. “Uh, I mean, Julius!”

Brad put his hands on his hips and puffed up his chest. “We won’t be able to move on until we best him. That’s why we prepared this Armor, as a testament to our determination.”

Marie stood still as a statue.

Determination? Do you have any idea how much it costs to construct a suit like this?! Not to mention you’ve pulled together a bunch of different-colored parts! Did you salvage them from the Armors you used during your last duel? You really plan to fight him in this thing?!

Chris, moved by the culmination of their efforts, wiped away the tears welling up in his eyes. “It’s a bit unshapely, but I’ve never seen a more stunning Armor.”

Jilk smiled. “We just gathered salvageable parts, but we still poured our hearts into it. In fact, this suit looks even more impressive than the ones we piloted before. It’s a worthy unit.”

Marie shook her head before glancing awkwardly over at Julius. “H-how much was this thing? The repair costs and stuff?”

“Marie…” His face fell, disappointed. “Money is no object here. This is the

product of our feelings.”

“N-no! I mean, I’m just worried. You guys must have really pushed yourselves to gather the funds, right?”

His shoulders relaxed. “Oh, that’s what you meant? Actually, the guys received quite a substantial reward for their recent accomplishments.”

True. Brad and Greg had received remuneration for dispatching the pirates, as had Chris for his involvement in the conflict with Fanoss.

“S-so you used all of that to finance the repairs, then.”

Although Marie couldn’t understand why they would waste so much of their reward on something so silly, it gladdened her to know they hadn’t dipped into their shared funds.

A short-lived relief.

“We didn’t think that would be enough, so we used some of our group savings,” Jilk went on, clearly ignorant that his words came like a blow straight to Marie’s gut. “A man who claimed to be a famous Armor designer offered to do the work at a significant discount.”

Marie’s legs wobbled beneath her.

“We managed to cover it using all of our reward money and the fifty thousand dia we shared between us. You wouldn’t believe this designer—he really pushed the Armor’s performance to the limit. With this new level of technical capability, I’m sure we can demolish Bartfort and his Arroganz.”

Marie’s vision spun. Kyle moved to support her so she didn’t collapse on the floor, but inside, she couldn’t stop screaming. She knew spoiled noblemen had a warped sense of monetary value, but this served as a cruel reminder that these five were particularly dreadful.

Fifty thousand dia! In Japan, that would be like fifty million yen! They paid all that? Out of our joint finances?! For this useless thing?!

Although the group shared a joint fund, Marie mostly managed their daily expenses on her own. She had ensured everyone busted their butts making a killing at the school festival, then clawed their way through multiple dungeon

runs in order to raise enough to cover their daily costs for the next year or so.

And these boys had used all of her hard-won earnings to cobble together this piece-of-junk patchwork robot.

Marie sobbed inside her heart.

Every one of you needs a new brain! Why would you use all of our money? You should have consulted me first! How will we pay for tuition?! For food*?!*

She wobbled, about to faint, and the five boys rushed over, concerned.

"Wh-why didn't you talk to me about it first?" Marie asked, trembling. She suspected she already knew the answer.

Julius beamed. "We wanted to surprise you! Sorry, I didn't know it would be such a shock. Just a little bit longer, Marie, and we'll beat Bartfort—with that, we'll be rid of the last obstruction between us."

I'd rather be rid of the money problem!

***

That day, a letter of challenge arrived in my room.

"They really are idiots, aren't they?"

The sender was clearly labeled: Julius and his idiot squad. Our duel would follow the end-of-term ceremony.

"'If we win, you will no longer interfere in our relationship with Marie,' huh? Do these guys understand the sanctity of a duel? Do they not get that they lost?"

"This is ridiculous," Luxion said coldly as he floated beside me. "I believe it best you reject their demands."

I mulled it over for a moment. Were they really that desperate to be with Marie? "No, I'll accept."

"You will?"

"If they're that desperate, I'll let them win. Their obsession with Marie just proves they don't deserve someone like Livia. Frankly, I feel sorry for her. I mean, Prince Julius is the biggest idiot who ever lived—he threw away Angie,

for crying out loud.”

“You’re just now realizing this?”

Isn’t he kinda cold to his master for an AI built to serve?

“At any rate,” I said, “Whatever, let them do as they please. Honestly, I don’t have the energy to get involved with Marie any more than I already have.”

I had plenty else to keep me occupied. Namely, the Saint and Fanoss. If I let the boys win, I hoped they’d leave me alone.

“There’s no guarantee Marie won’t interfere in the future,” Luxion warned. “Don’t you think you’re being a little blasé about this?”

“She reincarnated here just like me, and it’s obvious she knows the game. I’m sure she understands that the kingdom will sink if Livia doesn’t become the Saint. I doubt she’ll meddle any more than she already has.”

“If you’re certain.”

I had already defeated the Black Knight, our strongest enemy. Fanoss’s ultimate weapon was the Magic Flute, which Holfort Kingdom now possessed. I would stay alert, sure, but I had every reason to believe we had nothing else to worry about.

So why did I feel so on edge?

“Won’t Angelica be upset?” Luxion asked.

“I’ll convince her that we should leave them to their own devices. Although if she’s still mad about Julius, I guess I’ll just have to beat them again.”

“You really are flippant.”

I shrugged. “Angie’s feelings outweigh theirs. I can’t help it.”

With that, I stepped out to find Prince Julius and his gang to deliver my reply.

***

Enthusiasm gripped the academy in the wake of the end-of-term ceremony. Students and teachers alike gathered in the arena. The circular stadium filled with girls cheering for Prince Julius and the other high lords.

“Prince Julius and his friends worked hard to beat that scumbag!”

“Yeah, I heard they met up night after night to work on their Armor for this match.”

“N-night after night?” Livia turned to Angie, worried her friend might act out in anger. “Um, Angie…”

“Hm?” Strangely, Angie seemed perfectly composed. “Oh, don’t worry. Leon already explained the circumstances to me. I understand why he plans to lose to them. I have no complaints.”

“Really?”

“I *would* like to give His Highness a piece of my mind, though to be honest… I know this sounds mean, but my feelings for him have faded—perhaps completely. In any case, Leon’s far more wrapped up in their mess than he ever needed to be, and I feel guilty for having played a part in involving him.”

“Will Leon be able to attend the award ceremony tomorrow after this? I just hope he doesn’t get hurt…”

The students in the audience grew ever more heated with excitement. Everyone loved this comeback story: even after Leon trounced the four high lords and the prince in their last duel, the five friends had come together for the sole purpose of fashioning an armor for a rematch. The romance of it all had everyone on the edge of their seats.

“It’s amazing they decided to challenge him again after that loss.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ll win this time!”

“I’m cheering for the prince and his friends!”

In the students’ eyes, Julius and the high lords were heroes. When Leon—the villain—appeared in the sky and dropped down into the arena, he was met by a chorus of boos.

Angie smiled bitterly. “A bit ironic that they all hate this knight who will carve his name into history.”

“History? Really? Why do you say that?” Livia asked over the din.

Angie only laughed and shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. Come on, we should cheer for him, even if no one else will.”

“Okay!”

And so, though alone, the two girls applauded and whistled for Leon.

***

Just as Arroganz landed in the ring, Greg clambered inside the cockpit of the Armor they’d collectively constructed. He turned to his friends for a final check.

“You guys sure you want me at the helm?”

Brad nodded, his expression earnest. “I hate to admit it, but I couldn’t beat him. I have faith in your abilities.”

Greg grinned.

“Sword fighting is all I’ve ever known, and yet I still wouldn’t stand a chance,” said Chris. “Greg, I leave this in your hands.”

Jilk, hand outstretched, ghosted his fingers over the green portion of the suit. “You carry all our emotions with you.”

Julius nodded. “You have the best chance of winning, Greg. Now go out there and beat Bartfort!”

“Roger that!”

Applause rained down from the crowd, moved by their show of friendship.

Greg closed the hatch to the cockpit. His friends’ emotions welled in his chest. In fact, those emotions seemed to reach the Armor itself—the entire thing heated up as if fueled by the fervor of their feelings.

“You must be excited, too. We’re going to show them our determination. Come on, partner!” Greg turned to face Arroganz. “Bartfort, here we go! This is the true power of friendship!”

***

Meanwhile, I sat inside Arroganz, stroking my chin. “How best to lose? Hmm…”

The way I heard it, the five love interests had performed maintenance on that Armor of theirs night after night. However, for all they'd come together to fund its repairs and pitched in to do the work themselves… Well, to put it nicely, the flaws in the suit were readily apparent.

Supposedly, they had hired a professional to finish the work and bring it all together, as well as to increase its performance. All for the purpose of beating me.

They've done well. Nothing wrong with that kind of youthful optimism. They had really put on a show for the fangirls in the crowd.

"What a refreshing show of friendship," said Luxion. "Meanwhile, you bound your friends to you with contractual obligation. You really are a scoundrel."

"The bozo brigade sure does like showing off. Anyway, I got Angie's approval, so I guess it's time to lose."

The referee came out to announce the start of the match, and we were off.

Greg flew toward me, and I parried his spear with my blade. His speed and power far surpassed the last time we'd fought. This patchwork Armor's performance beat out any of their individual suits.

"Spear in his right hand and a rifle in the left—he really is thinking better." The show of force impressed me, I admit.

Slowly, as we continued to clash, Greg managed to push back Arroganz.

I switched the microphone on. "You guys really pushed yourselves to the limit."

"If it means beatin' you, this is nothing! Come at me, Bartfort! Don't hold back!"

"Ahh, this passion. So this is true zeal, huh?" I cackled.

In truth, I envied how earnestly they'd gone about all this. I switched the microphone off, mumbling to myself. Their fervor almost blinded me.

Suddenly, Luxion sounded the alarm. "Master, tell Greg to exit that suit immediately. His Armor is on the brink of exploding."

“What? You’re kidding me!”

“I’m afraid not. The suit’s temperature is unusually high, likely due to haphazard construction. Honestly, it’s a miracle the thing moves at all. Its performance hasn’t truly improved—it’s simply going berserk.”

“Hey, Greg,” I shouted, hurriedly flipping communications back on, “something’s wrong with your Armor! You gotta eject! Now!”

“Ha! Playing tricks again, Bartfort? Well, it won’t work! As if I’d let you fool me. You must realize you’re about to lose!” Greg crowed.

His Armor moved with incredible speed and dexterity. I couldn’t believe the level of performance, but it terrified me now that I realized it was out of control.

“You have to stop this match!” I howled at the referee. “His Armor’s malfunctioning!”

“Bartfort, shame on you.” The ref shook their head. “Take their sincerity seriously. Be a man and fight.”

“Cut the crap! Who cares about sincerity? Why don’t you start taking *me* seriously, huh?!”

Maybe the ref thought I was blowing smoke up their ass because they’d noticed I wasn’t in it to win it. Either way, now it just looked like I’d been backed into a corner. My own plan to lose was biting me in the butt.

But I’m not lying!

Luxion switched off the microphone so our conversation couldn’t be heard outside of the cockpit. “You dug your own grave, as they say,” he said. “It seems the role of loathsome villain has had some consequences. I finished analyzing his suit, by the way. If we act quickly, we can destroy it before it explodes.”

“You must be joking.”

Demolish the culmination of all their efforts? Even I had too much conscience to do something like that!

“I-I can’t. I mean, they put so much work into that thing. I’d have to be some kind of demon to ruin it!”

It was a labor of love—like if five friends had taken their summer break to build a human-powered aircraft. They had stayed up late into the night to work on it, fighting amongst themselves and making memories. It didn't matter if the outcome was clumsy and amateur, or how little fundamental value it had. To Julius and his friends, this Armor was a treasure. Even I, when told to trash the thing, lacked the perversion to say, *Woo-hoo, let's do it!*

"Then would you prefer to watch as Greg dies in a fiery explosion?" Luxion countered.

I'd told Greg to go die numerous times in my head. But come on, I didn't *actually* want him to kick the bucket!

I latched onto Greg's Armor with Arroganz's left hand. He flailed, trying to escape me.

"Get out of there now!" I shouted. "I'm begging you!"

"You're still going on about that?! No! I haven't lost to you yet!"

"I'm serious! It really is dangerous!"

"You aren't gonna fool me anymore! I remember you're a cheat, you know!"

Ugh—I'd told Greg and Brad that I'd cheated them at cards that time on the *Partner.* Evidently that was coming back to haunt me, too. They had no reason to trust my word.

"Grow up a little!" I barked. "You got conned!"

The "pro" they had hired to fix their Armor was obviously a scammer who'd thrown their salvage together willy-nilly without regard for safety. This was the problem with spoiled rich kids! They knew nothing about the world! Everyone else had always looked out for them.

You need a healthy dose of skepticism to survive out here!

"Get away from him!" Prince Julius continued to cheer Greg on. "That arm of his is dangerous!"

Even Jilk dropped his usual composure to raise his voice. "Shed some of your armor plating if you have to! Either way, get out of there!"

“He can’t,” said Brad. “We removed the mechanism that allows you to purge individual parts. Greg, just do whatever you can to get away!”

“Greeeeeg!” Chris cupped his hands around his mouth to shout. “Show us what you’re made of!”

Oh, come on! You’re supposed to be the cool, quiet character! Cool your jets and cheer in silence!

“Well, if Chris is being that obnoxious, I better give this all I’ve got. Here goes nothin’!” Encouraged by his friends’ support, Greg tried to rip himself out of Arroganz’s grip. His berserk suit was only getting stronger, but fortunately, my Armor was powerful enough to keep him locked in place—for now.

“Master, we haven’t much time left.”

“Every last one of you sucks for making me do this!” I dropped my gaze, fingers trembling as I pulled the trigger on a control.

“Impact,” Luxion said—in an uncomfortably casual tone, might I add.

The plating on Arroganz’s left arm expanded, and light poured out. The blast shot through Greg’s Armor, sending the pieces scattering. Greg lost consciousness, falling to the ground amid the rubble—safe, thankfully.

Good thing Arroganz had the ability to destroy Armor. Otherwise I might have been looking down at an oven-roasted Greg.

“I hate this,” I mumbled.

“Good work, Master. Those five truly are formidable in their own way.”

The arena fell silent.

I may have been the one to pull the trigger, but I definitely hadn’t pulled the crowd’s heartstrings. They were all disgusted with me.

After a long pause, I heard Marie shriek.

***

“Nooo! My dia! My entire savings!” Marie screamed in despair, both hands on her head. Kyle stood beside her, hands over his ears to block out her shrill screech.

Marie couldn't keep quiet even if she'd wanted to. The boys' Armor was in tiny pieces. Nothing of any discernible form remained; all possibility of salvaging the scraps had disappeared in a puff of smoke. It really had been a ridiculously expensive piece of junk.

"Tsk, tsk." Kyle shook his head. "Bartfort really blew that thing to smithereens. It's probably beyond repair, right?"

Marie, pale as a sheet, slumped to the floor, her body twitching occasionally.

Panicked, Kyle dropped down beside her. "Mistress, are you all right?!"

"This is a dream," she mumbled, continuing to tremble. "That's right. In reality, I'm surrounded by the boys, and we're celebrating for no apparent reason. They say something corny and sweet like, 'We're commemorating your smile today!' and shower me with presents. They don't brag about any stupid Armor or anything of the sort. That dumb background character, Leon, doesn't actually destroy it. Because if he did, we couldn't sell it. My fifty thousand dia—my livelihood… I don't want to be in debt… Yes, it's a dream. It has to be. I'm still in bed, having a nightmare."

"No, this is definitely reality," Kyle said. "Stop with the daydreams and open your eyes, please."

Leon had effectively wiped out every last drop of Marie's savings. How could she possibly bring herself to face reality again?

In a way, the duel emotionally destroyed both Leon and Marie.

***

Nobles from Redgrave House's rival faction gathered in a meeting room at the palace. The nobles gossiped among themselves.

"Did you hear? The prince and the other lordlings lost to that upstart again."

"Thank goodness Julius isn't the crown prince anymore."

"That upstart is still an eyesore. I heard rumor that the queen took a liking to him—tell me that isn't true."

The marquess—the man who led this faction—scrutinized the gathered nobles. He alone refused to gossip about the results of the second duel. *Every*

last one of you underestimates that boy.

As he kept silent, someone said, “Shouldn’t we just leave the upstart to his own devices? Seems to me he’s only a guard dog desperate to brownnose Redgrave House. Or perhaps he’s a mad dog that picks fights without need or care. We should be more concerned with the principality. For all their talk, they lost to a bunch of students—how pathetic. Perhaps we should cut them off?”

Everyone else chuckled in agreement, but the marquess slammed his fist on the table. The nobles jumped in surprise, swiveling to face him.

“We need to get rid of that brat,” the marquess announced. “I don’t care how.”

The people who had laughed were inclined to disagree.

“I-I don’t see why we should bother with him. The principality is far more troubling, and the queen—”

“We must crush him—by whatever means necessary! The queen’s affection for the boy is irrelevant. Right now, that brat’s threat to our kingdom outweighs any the principality could bring to bear!”

The marquess’s intensity silenced the room.

We have to deal with him, the marquess thought. *He defeated the principality’s vanguard by himself—with a single ship! We can’t leave a Lost Item of such power in his hands. I cannot understand why the king and queen—and even Duke Redgrave—don’t see it. We are in danger!*

“Contact the principality and bring Princess Hertrude here.”

A knight quickly slipped out of the room to retrieve her.

To the marquess, there would be no rest, no peace, until Leon had been dealt with.

Epilogue

THE DAY AFTER THE DUEL, I found myself sitting on my bed in the boys' dormitory with my arms looped around my knees.

"I didn't want to destroy it either, you know. But Luxion told me that if I didn't, Greg would die. Anyone would pull the trigger if they thought they'd have to watch someone get incinerated right in front of them. You wouldn't be human if you didn't. And yet everyone's acting all disgusted with me… 'I can't believe you did that.' Am I really in the wrong here? Is it all my fault?"

My room normally felt pretty spacious, but I had guests today, making it comparatively cramped.

Luxion was there, of course, and Angie and Livia, and my parents. Everyone had come to attend the award ceremony, along with Nicks and Jenna, who had recently failed to secure an engagement with that rich viscount's heir. Her mangy, cat-eared servant, Miauler, stood on standby outside the door.

Angie frowned at me. "He's been like this since yesterday. Baron, I'm so sorry. We did at least manage to get him changed into a suit."

"A lot of people blamed him for the way things turned out yesterday," Livia explained apologetically.

All the people at the academy kept saying the same thing to me: "What you did was inexcusable!"

The only person who didn't blame me for the outcome of the duel was Master—the world's greatest gentleman. He'd kindly said, "I'm sure you had your reasons."

I couldn't stop myself from sobbing at the memory of his compassion.

"Oh no, there he goes again. Come on, Leon, use this towel to dry your tears. Don't want to get your suit dirty," said Clarice.

She was here, too—something about Atlee House being involved. She'd explained, but I had been completely spaced out at the time, so it had gone in one ear and out the other.

Another woman stood off to the side with her arms folded—Her Majesty?—nope, Deirdre. Why the heck was she here?

"How pathetic," she huffed. "You were so stunning in our fight against the principality, but at this rate, you'll ruin that image."

"You are such a troublemaker!" my father said. "At least pull yourself together for today! And who are all these young noble ladies I've never seen before? What in the world have you done this time?" He looked completely out of place, with his impressive mustache and his ceremonial knight's suit.

"Beats me." I moaned. "I'd like to ask the same question."

My mother, wearing an ordinary dress, seemed just as curious. "Th-that's right, listen to your father. They're giving you a medal today. You need to keep a good head on your shoulders for it. B-but please do explain…what kind of relationship you have with these girls?"

Deirdre flipped her curled hair. "He's the only boy who ever insulted me to my face."

Why did she sound so happy about that? Was she some kind of simpleton?

"Please don't make it sound weird," I cut in. "And why are you all glaring at me? It's not like I insult people all the time—jeez, thanks for doubting me."

Having regained my composure a bit, I sighed. "Why do I have to wear a suit for today's ceremony anyway? Everyone else is going in school uniform."

This was the ceremony where all the students who had fought against Fanoss would be given their awards. We would all be publicly thanked for our service during the morning assembly. Big whoop.

Actually, why were my parents even here?

Nicks shot me an exhausted look. "Did you really not hear?"

I shook my head, confused.

Angie glared at me—quite terrifyingly, I might add. In fact, she'd been glowering at me ever since Deirdre had spoken a moment ago. Had I done something wrong?

“Oh? I took all that time to explain it to you yesterday in detail, and you’re going to tell me you didn’t hear a word I said?” Angie asked.

“Hold on a minute,” Livia said, stepping in to defend me. “He was really hurt after the duel. He had every intention of losing, but he ended up winning. So, please…forgive him!”

Thanks for the assist, Livia! I’ll give you a really incredible necklace later. I mean, it was supposed to be yours to begin with, but still!

Wait, what excuse *was* I going to use to pass it along to her?

“You’re the one with the most achievements to recognize, Leon,” Angie said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Huh?” I had no idea what she was talking about. “Aren’t you talking about Chris?”

“Yes, yes, the official story credits Chris with driving off the Black Knight, but you’re still known to be the one who took Princess Hertrude captive. You also seized a fleet’s worth of the enemy’s latest airships and Armors, *and* you offered them all to the kingdom. This was a substantially meritorious deed. Finally, you organized the rescue of the crew and students. Altogether, that makes you *and* Chris quite extraordinary. You’ll each receive a real medal.”

“Yeah! And you dove in there all by yourself to rescue Angie.” Livia clapped her hands together in delight. “Her family publicly declared you to be a true knight among knights!”

Wait, seriously? Those qualify as achievements? Hold the phone! I never heard anything about this!

“Atlee House recommended raising your rank before, but we were told to wait,” Clarice explained. “Thankfully, they have now acknowledged our request. Chris’s house also put in a good word for you, and Field House and Seberg House wrote letters of recommendation as well. Roseblade House has also backed you.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

Deirdre chuckled. “If you hadn’t the abilities to back up all your brash talk, I

would have done everything in my power to crush you. But you are what you claim—a true noble and a great knight. If we failed to recognize as much, it would tarnish the name of Roseblade."

What the hell have you all done?! I never wanted this!

"Pretty incredible, isn't it, Leon?" Livia grinned at me as I sat frozen in place. "Starting today, you'll be lower-fourth ranking and a viscount. Word of you has spread throughout the capital. They're treating you like a hero now."

I couldn't digest her words. My brain refused to process anything.

V-viscount? Hero? Something wasn't right. This was impossible! It couldn't be happening! I tried desperately to quiet my mind.

That's right, if I cool down, I can handle this, right?

Jenna shrank into a corner of the room, clearly depressed at the very mention of "viscount." The word probably reminded her of the boy she'd failed to marry, if the way she cursed under her breath was any indication.

"What was his problem?" She clicked her tongue. "I said I'd be nice and marry him, but he turned me *and* my best friend down. 'Thanks, but I'll pass,' hah! The nerve!"

Actually, the viscount heir she'd been so hungry to hook up with was an upperclassman and an acquaintance of mine. After I'd handed off those pirates to his family for their mine, I'd asked him about the situation with my sister, only to learn that she and her best friend were being entirely one-sided about the whole thing. He was already pursuing another girl. So I'd smiled, told him not to even worry about Jenna, and given him the pirates free-of-charge as an apology for my annoying pest of a sister.

Man, what a good little brother I am.

In the aftermath, Jenna had made up with her friend. The two bonded over complaining about the boy they both failed to land.

Who was *the idiot who said female friendship is fleeting? Their bond is way stronger than it was before!*

I flopped back onto my bed, lying on my side.

“This is just a dream,” I mumbled, letting all my desires run free. “When I wake up, it’ll be the day of the opening ceremony. Daniel, Raymond, and I will complain about how much bride-hunting sucks. Master will train me in the art of tea, and I’ll go dungeon diving to earn money to buy a new tea set. Then I’ll find a nice girl with big boobs who needs saving, I’ll swoop in to rescue her, and the two of us will fall in love. After three uneventful years, I’ll marry those boobs, and we’ll go back home together. We’ll soak in my hot spring, savor the flavor of delicious Japanese food, and live our lives peacefully. Viscount, you say? You’ve got the wrong guy.”

Jenna scoffed. “Men really are useless. What do you think women are? Objects? You scumbag.”

“You do realize you said you were marrying boobs and not a person at the end there, right?” Nicks asked.

You’re horrible.

“What’s really important is the butt,” said Father. “You want a nice little round one like your mother—ouch!”

You’re awful, too.

“Dear, that’s inappropriate!” my mother said, as if smacking him wasn’t enough.

Good, hit him some more.

“Oh? You have a hot spring?” Clarice seemed genuinely interested. “That sounds excellent.”

Angie glowered at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Clarice raised a brow. “Oh? Am I bothering you?”

I did think Clarice was a bit cute, but Angie’s glare was no joke. I averted my gaze.

“I like it,” Deirdre declared with a smile. “I’ll buy the whole island from you.”

Livia’s face fell. “What? Y-you can’t buy his island, can you?”

“Of course I can. Roseblade House certainly has the means.”

Angie's voice fell to a growl. "Oh, you're going to buy his land, are you? Leon is connected to my house. You know what that means, don't you, Deirdre?"

"Why, Angelica, that expression on your face excites me."

Yep, that girl's a pervert. Ugh, I just wanna run the hell away from this ceremony, so could you all go home?

Livia, fed up with my behavior, roused me out of bed. "Come on, Leon, we need to hurry. The ceremony is about to start. I mean it, get up—please."

Sending one last scowl at Deirdre, Angie joined Livia, grabbing my other arm to pull me off my mattress. "You heard her. We're leaving. My father and brother are both attending as well. They want to put on a good show of recognizing your accomplishments."

This whole thing is a mistake!

***

The academy hosted the grand award ceremony on the first day of winter break. Starting with the baron who had accomplished numerous feats during the conflict, each of the young students were praised and awarded medals for their actions. A number of the male students were officially knighted, and most of the women were given similar awards, as well as a small yearly pension.

The fact that the men didn't receive the same financial compensation spoke volumes to the cruelties of this world.

Finally, the kingdom awarded Leon Fou Bartfort the title of viscount and raised his court ranking to lower-fourth—a tremendous shift in his social standing. In the long history of Holfort Kingdom, only he had risen so far so fast. His role in the conflict with Fanoss, along with letters of recommendation from Houses Field, Seberg, and Arclight, among others, secured this unprecedented promotion.

That day, Leon's name was carved into the kingdom's history.

***

Once the ceremony ended, I loosened my collar and retreated to the corner behind one of the school buildings, where the shadows grew chilly. My head

hurt thinking about the party I'd just escaped and the future that lay ahead.

"Why did things turn out this way?"

"You would have been better off doing nothing," Luxion said from his place by my ear. Unnecessary commentary, as always.

"I was an idiot for expecting anything better from them. I'm never getting involved with anyone ever again." Was it stepping up to challenge Prince Julius and the others that had screwed me? I tried to calm myself but only ended up cradling my head in my hands. "Viscount, are you serious? Lower-fourth ranking? What in the world do they want from me?!"

No way could I could live up to their expectations!

As I moped, Livia darted around the corner. I *had* kind of taken over her brooding spot. "Oh, there you are, Leon."

"Livia…"

I was suddenly embarrassed. We hadn't been alone since the fight with the principality. Somehow, Angie had always been with us, and we'd gone everywhere as a group. It wasn't like I'd purposefully been avoiding being with Livia alone. But now that we *were*, I couldn't help remembering her confession during the battle. The one where she'd said she—uh—that she— Livia seemed to suddenly remember, too, because her cheeks turned red. "Uh, um…!"

"Y-yeah?!" I squeaked.

She took a deep breath, then smiled. "I know my feelings might be a nuisance to you, but I wasn't lying back then."

"It's not a nuisance. I just…don't know what to do."

Her lips thinned. "You've been avoiding me, haven't you?"

"I didn't know what to say." My shoulders slumped.

Beside me, Luxion sniffed. "What a pathetic master I have."

You jerk, I'm gonna slam dunk you for that.

Livia reached out and took my hand in hers. "Well. Please let me hear your answer eventually. I'll wait for you."

“Livia…”

“Now, come on. Everyone is waiting.”

With that, she pulled me along, dragging me out of the shadows.

***

When I returned home for winter break, I found a brand-new manor awaiting me. The clean, refreshing air of the countryside felt like a special welcome present.

The countryside is amazing. It almost makes you think everything that happened in the capital was a bad dream.

“That is one huge manor,” I said.

Father held his head high even as his cheeks colored with embarrassment. If the grin was any indication, he was extremely pleased with himself. “I’ve got more visitors coming to see me now, you know. Figured I needed to do my best to welcome them properly. This is all thanks to you.”

I had my own fortune, but I had sent a portion of it to my parents. Apparently, they’d used the funds to rebuild their estate. Before, the place had been, well, let’s just say it had charm and leave it at that.

Nicks seemed conflicted when he learned we had our own rooms now, inside the actual manor. “When I graduate, I won’t be coming back here much anymore, but I’m still kinda happy to hear that.”

And of course, who else would disrupt this peaceful atmosphere with their entitled attitude but my useless sister?

“Where is Miauler’s room?”

“What?” Father knitted his brows, taken aback by her tone. “The servants have their own room.”

“Are you seriously telling me to put him in the same room as our house servants?” Jenna huffed. “If you were going to rebuild the place, you should have said something. If I’d known there were extra rooms, I would have brought Miauler back with me.”

In other words, she'd left him at the academy. So why was she still complaining?

"But this was supposed to be a surprise," Father said.

"Be more considerate." Jenna crossed her arms. "Besides that, you guys touched my things?"

"I took care of the things in your room, so don't worry," Mother said.

"Why did *you* touch my things without asking?! Ugh, you really should have told me you were doing all this—I'd have made Leon send me back sooner!"

I spat on the ground at that nonsense.

"You idiot," Nicks snapped, "you're only going to make things worse."

"No one would care if I smacked her, right?"

"I get where you're coming from, but rein it in. You know she's upset about getting rejected by that guy."

I suppose she did give me some laughs with that whole incident. I guess I can overlook her entitlement this time—especially if I take pains to remind her the viscount kid wanted nothing to do with her as often as possible.

Jenna stomped off to her room, steam practically rising from her head.

In her wake, our father seemed depressed. Nicks and I each put a hand on his shoulder and complimented him on his hard work.

I meant it, too. It had been a while since I'd last seen our family's lands, but they'd developed nicely. In another two years, this place would be a proud barony.

***

By the time Greg opened his eyes, it was the day after the duel. Julius and the others were gathered around him as he blinked and adjusted to the light.

"Greg! Come on, wake up!" Brad urged.

Once he realized where he was, Greg knew what had happened. "Sorry, everyone… It's my fault we lost."

Jilk smiled at him. “We entrusted the duel to you. If you lost, then we all did. Besides, we all underestimated our opponent’s strength.”

After all, that renowned professional had made improvements to their Armor, and it still hadn’t been enough.

As Greg sulked, Julius said, “Don’t let it get to you. There’s always next time.”

“Your Highness?”

“Call me Julius. Greg, we’ll challenge Bartfort again, and we need you to join us.”

Greg lifted himself up and smiled faintly. “If you guys are raring to go again, there’s no way I’m backin’ down. I’m with you no matter how many times it takes, Julius!”

Chris removed his glasses, wiping away a few tears. He’d really broken out of the mold of a cool and collected character.

Greg glanced around. “Marie’s not with you?”

“It seems like she’s been busy.” Brad shrugged. “She was talking to Kyle about something. Also…” He narrowed his eyes at Greg. “Say, do you remember that pirate leader Bartfort defeated before?”

“’Course. How could I forget?”

“Did you see Bartfort take some kind of necklace from the enemy’s Armor?”

Greg did remember that—it had been the last thing Leon did as he beat the pirate boss. “A necklace? Maybe. I remember Bartfort saying something. That pirate boss acted like he’d be in trouble without it. Anyway, what’s that got to do with anything?”

Brad went quiet, mulling it over. “No, it’s nothing. Marie just asked me about it. When I told her we had defeated the Winged Sharks, she turned suddenly serious. It seemed to really bother her.”

Greg stroked his chin. “A necklace, huh? The item Marie showed us before was a bracelet, right? She acted pretty serious about that, too. Maybe they have something to do with each other.”

“Yes, she said she found that bracelet in the capital’s dungeon,” Chris said with a nod. “Are those two things connected?”

“I just don’t want her to overdo it,” Julius said, ever-concerned about Marie’s well-being. “But this seems really important to her.” He frowned at Jilk’s pensive expression. “What is it?”

“I just remembered. Lately, Marie has been going to the temple. Almost like she’s hiding something from us. No, surely I’m overthinking things.”

The conversation meandered on as the boys excitedly discussed preparing a new present for Marie.

***

Zola, my father’s legal wife, came charging onto my father’s newly built estate out of nowhere, acting even more haughty than usual. This time, a high-ranking priestess from the temple, wearing round spectacles on the bridge of her nose, accompanied her. The two seemed close.

They stationed armed temple knights outside the room they set up in, which put my parents on edge. Jenna and our other sister holed up in their rooms and showed no signs of coming out. Meanwhile, Nicks was off in the fields, so there was no one else around when Zola summoned me to her.

“You insolent fool! Return the temple’s treasure!”

She was treating me like I was some kind of common thief!

“What are you talking about?” I’d just returned from fieldwork, and mud clung to the bottom of my shoes. I started peeling it off.

The priestess wrinkled her nose. “He reeks.”

She must have been raised in the capital. Given her closeness with Zola, her personality probably sucked, too.

The priestess cleared her throat. “Viscount Bartfort, you disposed of some pirates last season, yes?”

“I did. And what of it?”

Her face reddened with anger. “Those pirates made off with one of the

temple's treasures! You must have it! It's a necklace decorated with the emblem of the temple. When we asked those pirates, they testified that you stole it from them!"

Maybe I should have done something to silence the pirates then? Ugh, probably not.

More importantly: "And why do I deserve to be treated like a thief for that? I defeated them, so I had every right to take whatever they had in their possession. That's the law of the kingdom."

Zola wanted to play it like I was the bad guy here, but my actions were justified, legally speaking.

"If an object is inscribed with the emblem of the temple, it only makes sense for you to return it to us!" the priestess snapped.

What you seem to think is common sense sounds absolutely illogical to me.

I considered driving them off by force, but I didn't have any weapons on me at the moment. In addition to their armed knights, they had an airship hovering in the distance.

Luxion chimed in through my earpiece. "Master, unfortunately, I think you had better give in."

I paused, waiting for him to explain.

"It would be easy enough to cut our way out of this situation. But if you treasure your peaceful existence here, resistance now would likely end in serious repercussions later. Given your persistent policy of nonviolence when possible, handing it over is the best course of action."

The temple had its own military force, but an airship was outside of their usual budget, to my understanding. In other words, they'd sent an abnormally large force to deal with a mere barony, as if they were poised to attack if the situation required.

I turned away from the priestess, who continued to splutter, and focused on Luxion's analysis.

"I imagine you don't want trouble with the temple specifically either. They're

the ones who will, in the future, recognize Livia as the Saint, correct?”

Religions sure are a pain, but he’s right. Making enemies out of these guys wouldn’t pan out well.

“Could we give them a fake?” I asked at a whisper.

“I suspect they would see through a replica,” Luxion said.

I swallowed back the urge to click my tongue in frustration and glared at Zola. Her triumphant grin really made me see red.

“Fine, I’ll bring it. Just wait right here.”

Before I could turn to leave, the priestess said, “I hear you have also amassed quite the fortune, Viscount. Give the temple a donation as well.” She lifted her chin condescendingly.

Zola nodded. “You should do what she says. You can’t defy the temple.”

“*That* request you can refuse,” Luxion said. “Donations are unrelated to official temple business. I suspect she decided to demand one on her own.”

But also, they had gathered all these knights simply because I had the temple’s treasure in my possession. As far as they were concerned, I was some heinous monster for hiding it from them. Clearly, they were on edge.

Okay, yeah, but heinous? A monster? I’m not that *bad.*

“I’ll give it some thought,” I said finally.

The two women turned to each other with matching grins and began whispering, most likely discussing how to split whatever money I gave them.

Morons, who said I was actually going to give you anything?

I did briefly consider it, but I didn’t want to hand them a single coin. They were free to fantasize if they wanted, though.

Leaving the two behind, I reunited with Luxion, grabbed the necklace, and headed back to the wicked witches.

Kidding! I went to the docks, where I intended to hand it off to someone else affiliated with the temple.

***

The general of the forces Zola and her priestess pal had brought was a man in his forties who seemed awfully tense. He was on edge from the moment I approached. Guess he'd heard the rumors about me.

"Are you the one in charge?" I asked.

"I command this warship," he responded. "Viscount Bartfort, if possible, I'd prefer to avoid any violence. Would you be willing to return the temple's treasure peacefully?"

That was all anyone had to say to begin with.

I flashed the necklace at him, and he widened his eyes before calling someone over to have it appraised.

"Yes, there's no doubt." The inspector nodded his head vigorously. "It's just as the legends say!"

The general trembled. "Th-then this really is our lost treasure?!"

If it's really that important to you, you should take better care of it.

"Anyway," I said, "please take the people who visited our estate back with you. They seem to have their eye on more than just the treasure. Namely my money. They demanded a donation, and it's put me in an awkward position."

He flinched. "I-I'm terribly sorry to hear that. We only came to retrieve the necklace. I'll have them brought out, and we'll leave immediately."

At least the temple knights had no intention of fighting me.

Luxion sure is convenient. We managed to get through that without any real conflict.

Anyway, now that I'd given them the necklace, it was about time for me to collect the Holy Bracelet.

The general relaxed as he admired the necklace in his hands. "You're quite different than the rumors led me to believe."

"That so?"

"I heard you were arrogant and insolent—in which case, I could understand

why the Saint was angry. But you're far more collected than she implied."

Wait a minute. What did he just say? "Hold on, Saint?"

"Ah…" The general had leaked that information without thinking. The other temple staff slapped their hands over their faces in exasperation.

"So you found the Saint?" I pressed. *Maybe Livia—*

My hope was short-lived.

"Yes, I believe you know her already. Lady Marie Fou Lafan. She appeared at the temple with another lost holy item—the bracelet."

No—what? There's no way.

Why in the world did *she* have the bracelet? If she'd just gone and turned it in to the temple herself, that was one thing. As long as the bracelet made its way to Livia, everything would be fine. But Marie was claiming to be the Saint? Absurd! She was a reincarnated background character, just like me.

While I hated her for the sneaky way she'd ensnared all five of the love interests, I understood that, kind of. But pretending to be the Saint? That was beyond reason—and beyond salvation.

How could she be this stupid? Hadn't she played the game? She had to know that the important thing about Livia becoming the Saint wasn't that Sainthood gave her extra power—it was that her Sainthood best positioned her to use all the power naturally harbored within her.

"*Marie's* the Saint?" I said, still struggling to accept his words.

"Yes. She can cast healing magic, and she's already outmatched everyone's abilities at the temple. The staff also reacted when she—"

Someone nearby hushed the general.

"My apologies," he said. "At any rate, we will take our leave. I'll send someone to retrieve the priestess from your estate."

I stood there in a daze on the docks and watched them go until their ship disappeared across the horizon. Once they vanished, I contacted Luxion via transmission.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Marie’s gone and declared herself the Saint. I’m never going to forgive that frothing wench.”

***

Meanwhile, at the stable of Redgrave House’s territorial estate, Angie taught Livia to ride. The prospect of horses terrified Livia generally, though Angie tried to soothe her.

“See? There’s no reason to be scared.”

“I’m so high up. Even higher up than I thought!”

“You can hardly call that ‘high up.’”

Angie had invited Livia to her family’s estate for winter break for the express purpose of riding lessons.

“Once we become second-years, we’ll be judged on more than academics. We’ll have more practical tests, like this. You should get used to it now while you still have a chance.”

Livia’s entire body trembled. She had no problem with academics. Rather, she seemed to have a problem with everything *else*. However, since she insisted on her need for self-improvement, Angie was instructing her.

At first, the two had considered visiting Leon’s home, but they decided against it since he seemed busy starting up his maintenance facility.

“Sit up straight,” Angie said. “You’re slouching.”

Snow began to drift down outside as the lesson continued with her quivering friend.

It’s come awfully early this year, Angie thought. She missed the warm temperatures in Leon’s region. She couldn’t stop thinking of all the fuss he’d kicked up just before the award ceremony.

My father and brother are intent on bringing him to our faction, but Clarice and Deirdre seem to be up to something, too. We’d better find a partner for him soon. If they’re going to select the daughter of someone in our faction, I wonder

who they're thinking of now?

Regarding Leon's marriage, his options had expanded with his new title. As a baron, his only choice had been girls of similar status. At best, he might have been able to wed a viscount's daughter. Now, however, he could marry as high as an earl's daughter. The daughter of a duke's house was still too high, surely, but he still had plenty left to choose from.

At the same time, Angie expected girls to flock to him in droves with his new position. A full third of the student body had witnessed his performance during the conflict with the Principality of Fanoss. Even if no one had seen him drive off the Black Knight, it didn't require much thought to realize how much he had to offer. In addition, he now held lower-fourth court ranking, not to mention the enormous airship *Partner,* as well as Arroganz, the Armor that had defeated the Black Knight.

What was going through the minds of the girls who had seen these achievements unfold firsthand? What of the girls who only heard the rumors?

Angie's head throbbed.

Are Clarice and Deirdre after his hand? It would make sense; their statuses do align with his. But there's no way I can hand Leon over to them…

As envy welled up inside Angie, she quickly shook her head.

"Oh, Angie," Livia pleaded, "my legs are about to cramp."

That broke her out of her spell. "Could it be that you're…out of shape?"

Livia was an indoor-type to begin with, and since coming to the academy, she'd had less need to move about now that she didn't have to help her family with chores. As a result, her stamina had decreased.

"Well, this is bothersome," Angie said. "At this rate, it's going to be difficult for you to clear a dungeon before we graduate."

"Clear a dungeon? Uh, um, I thought if we cleared the dungeon in the capital it would disappear?"

Angie helped Livia dismount. "I say clear, but really you just have to make it to the thirtieth level. You're considered an adult once you can make it down that

far. On the other hand, if you can't accomplish that much, you're seen as little more than a child in an adult's body. Hiring bodyguards to make your way there is one way to pass, but you'd be in big trouble if you didn't have the stamina to make it there and back on your own two feet."

Unless by some special exemption, clearing the dungeon was an essential condition to warrant graduation.

Livia shoulders slumped. "I-I'll try my best."

Her knees practically knocked together as Angie supported her, giggling. "Your whole body is shaking. Although, you know, you're really warm."

"Angie, don't hold me so tight."

The two fussed and fawned over each other on the way back to the house, heedless of the bodyguards and maids who watched.

***

Marie was seated in the temple's VIP room, lounging back against the cushions with her legs folded over one another. She glanced down at the coffee table and smiled at the necklace lying in front of her.

"He he, it's finally mine."

Now that the necklace was in her possession, she wasted no time fastening it around her neck. The Holy Necklace dangled across her chest, matching the gleam of the Holy Bracelet on her wrist. The Saint's Staff leaned against the wall behind her. Every single one of these items showed a reaction to her, softly glowing in her presence.

"I may have stolen my role, but there's nothing wrong with me being the Saint as well. I'm skilled at healing magic, after all. I worked hard at it."



Marie had poured her blood, sweat, and tears into training her healing abilities so she could one day break free of her miserable family in this otome game world. She'd made great use of her knowledge of the game to accomplish all this.

"In the animated event scenes, all the Saint had to do was pray," she said to herself. "I've suffered all these years, but now things are going to change. If anything crops up, I'll handle it in your place, Olivia. In exchange, you just have to surrender all this to me."

Marie did have to admit that her knowledge came primarily from the animated event scenes and CGs. The online walk-throughs had been pretty mediocre and often incomplete. Beating the game had been so difficult, she'd given up halfway. She owed her collection of scenes to her past life's older brother.

"Regardless, it was tough even getting this far. I went through so much to get the bracelet, and it was so difficult convincing the people at the temple." She scowled, thinking of all the obstacles she'd faced. "I can't believe that useless background character defeated the pirates who had the necklace. Does that guy actually know something about this game?"

Marie had never heard of Bartfort House before Leon. No one with that name had ever appeared in the game.

"It was so strange for him to save Angelica the way he did. Plus, he's got that really strong Armor. Hold on a minute, could it be…? Is he the same as me? Is that why he's getting in my way all the time? Urgh! I won't let him get away with it!"

Marie raged for a bit, then contemplated how best to exact her revenge.

"Right now, my social position outranks his. We may both be reincarnated souls climbing the social ladder—but I won't let him beat me. I'll have Julius reinstated as crown prince so I can become the queen no matter what it takes! An opulent, extravagant life in the city of dreams awaits me! I'll have beautiful men serving me while I live in luxury. I really suffered in my previous life—the world owes me this much. And if that background character wants the protagonist, he can keep her. They suit each other perfectly."

She paused. “Hmm? Wait a minute, is it really safe for me to leave those two together? No… I can’t do that. I won’t get over this until I do something about them.”

Her thoughts drifted back to her life in Japan. “Ahh, life was so tough back then. I was so popular at the nightclub where I worked, but then I landed a piece of crap for a boyfriend. Oh, why did I have to end up so unhappy?”

Still, her experience at the club served her well here. She’d honed her ability to seduce men in her previous life, and those skills reeled boys in no matter what you looked like.

Marie sat up straight and smiled. “I *will* become happy in this life, though, no matter what it takes!”

Bonus Chapter:
Luxion's Report 2

LUXION SURVEYED LEON as he slept the night away in his room at his parents' estate. He looked genuinely happy, flopped across a mattress in his newly constructed quarters. He'd hurled a stream of curses at Marie while awake, but if his peaceful expression now was any indication, he would forget his anger by morning and start playing around again.

"And after he swore to me that Marie wouldn't become the Saint… I'm blessed to have a master that defies all expectation," Luxion said sarcastically, even though Leon couldn't hear him.

The AI paused to reflect on the second term. "So much has happened…"

Leon had been especially busy during the school festival. Part of that was his own doing, but Luxion doubted Leon realized that.

The incident with those pirates and the conflict with Fanoss had been a mess as well. Leon's biggest mistake this time had been trying to push his achievements off on others. He'd given credit for everything to Brad, Greg, and Chris, then sent financial gifts to encourage their families to reinstate them as heirs.

It had been quite the sum. The fortune he'd amassed from dispatching those pirates was largely gone, though from Leon's perspective, it was nothing to bat an eye at. He had Luxion on his side, and Luxion could supply most any resource he would ever need. If they required money, it would be a simple matter to produce more.

The people around Leon, however, didn't know this. As far as those people were concerned, Leon had selflessly given credit to other children and provided an honorable means of reconciliation. It had been only natural for them to treat him with hostility after his extreme actions in the initial duel, but following such a demonstration of humility and loyalty, the love interests' houses were put in an awkward position. As much as it may have infuriated them, they were

compelled to publicly forgive Leon. So, they had written letters recommending his advancement to show the rest of noble society that bad blood no longer festered between them. It wasn't as if they'd done it out of any honest appreciation.

"After everything that happened, he surely never dreamed he would be awarded another title," Luxion mused.

Before Leon had realized it, he was a viscount with a lower-fourth court ranking, one on a very short list of heroes in Holfort Kingdom's history who had made such leaps in a single generation.

As Leon snoozed away peacefully in bed, Luxion worried as to whether his master understood the gravity of his accomplishments.

"Oh, well, there's just one more—no, two more problems."

By becoming a viscount, Leon's list of marriageable candidates had expanded, and two women in particular were at the top of that list.

"Clarice and Deirdre, hm? Making girls fall for you when you have no interest in them… I'm not sure whether he's clever or an idiot."

Leon had won over Clarice by helping her resolve her issues with Jilk and comforting her. Luxion was stumped when it came to Deirdre, however. All he could say was the girl didn't hate Leon. Or perhaps she wanted Leon at her side, serving her, precisely because she hated him?

Luxion opted not to think too deeply about it.

"Master will be even busier from here on out. The kingdom has averted crisis for now, albeit barely, but I look forward to seeing how things will play out in the future."

Although he surmised their days would be packed with more activity after this, Luxion had no intention of making a move on his own. He didn't care if the kingdom fell to pieces. If the worst came to pass, he would collect Leon—and anyone connected to his master—and run.

After all…

"If he would only order me to do it, I would destroy this entire kingdom and

the principality in an instant. It would resolve every last one of his worries. Yet he won't give me the order."

As a Lost Item created by the old human race, Luxion hated the new ones. He would gladly annihilate their world, if only asked. Ah, well.

Luxion floated in the air, his red eye glancing out the window and peering up at the moon hanging in the night sky.

Afterword

THANK YOU ALL for your support! I'm the writer, Yomu Mishima. Every time I have to write an afterword, I agonize over what to say, but this time, I think I'd like to discuss the protagonist of the series.

As you may know, *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs* was originally posted on the *Let's Be Novelists* website. Those who have read the web version probably already know this, but the course of the story remains largely unchanged. However, the opening is entirely different in the light novel. Also, I've revised the scenes where Leon goads the other academy students quite a bit.

In the web version, Miss Deirdre had lines but was never given a name. I gave her one for the second volume of the novel and had her interact more with Leon. I suppose the other big difference is Livia's hard work. I added a number of scenes to the novel that show her actively participating in events.

At any rate, I could keep listing small differences forever, so I'll leave it there. Suffice to say, I put a lot of effort into the light novel. It's not all copy-paste, I promise! It'd be easier to just correct typos and mistakes, then put it up for sale, but that wouldn't be very enjoyable for those who've already read the web version. So I put a lot of effort into polishing this story for you!

I think what I struggled with the most was Leon and how he's always fanning the flames of people's anger. I read the comments for the web version and reviews for the light novel on sales sites, and I think one reason I received such high reviews was because of Leon's ability to agitate people (lol). Therefore, I put a lot of effort into writing a scene where he fires up the other students.

I'm really glad so many of you enjoy the way he gets under people's skin. I realize Leon is the real protagonist, but I think Luxion is essential as well. I think by having a nasty mouth himself and pointing out all of Leon's flaws, he makes it easier for people to appreciate Leon's personality. Leon's not the type to reflect on what he says, so without Luxion, I think people might just dismiss our protagonist as a jerk.

Luxion also provides Leon with immense power. After all, he's a cheat item. However, as the writer, I think of Luxion as a necessary element that breathes life into Leon—which is more important (to me) than his functionality as a cheat item.

When I first started writing this story, I just churned out words full blast. But before I started writing, I put a lot of thought into the protagonist. For an otome game world where women are treated favorably and men are treated harshly, I thought someone with a bit of a twisted personality would work best for the protagonist who goes berserk when he reincarnates there.

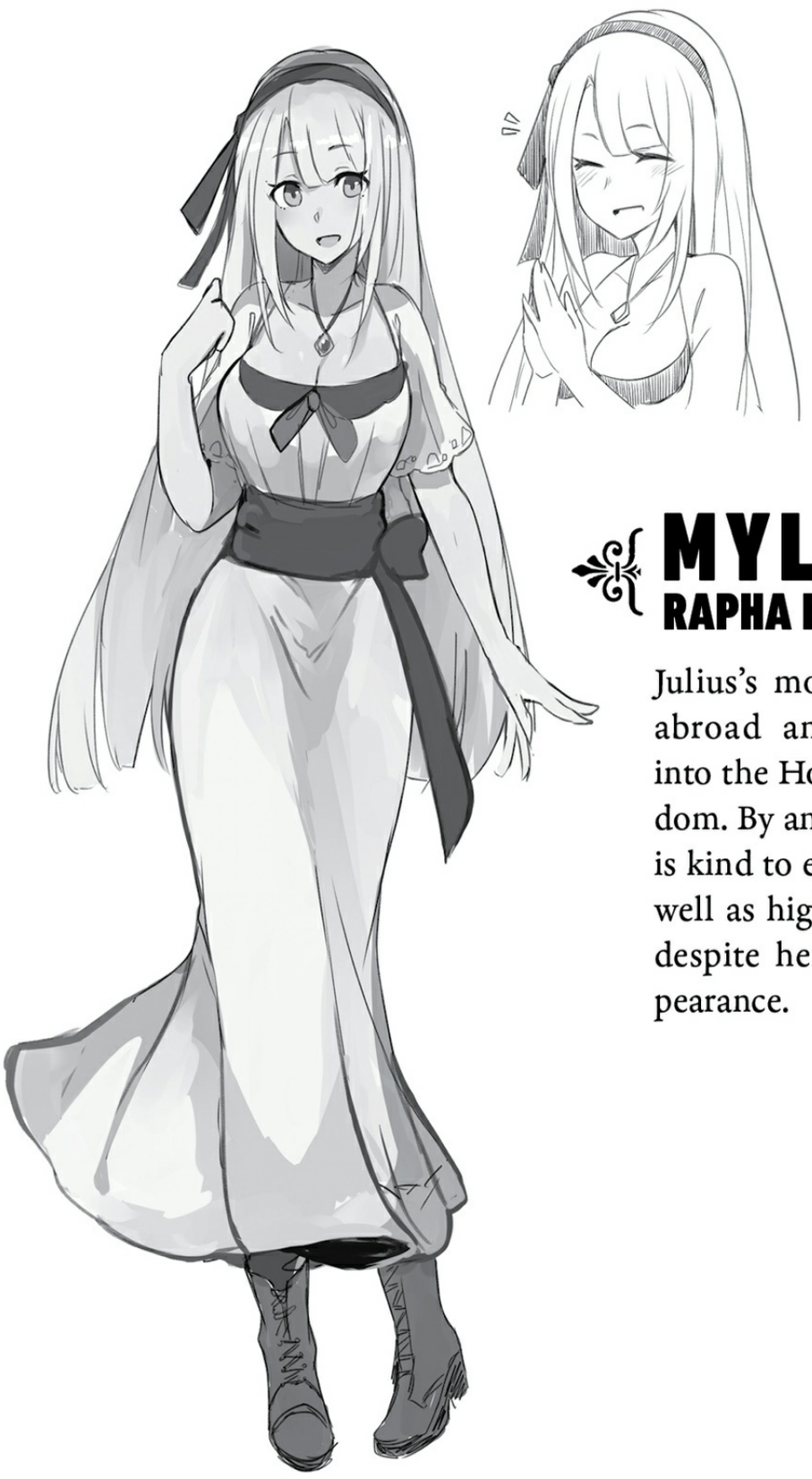
However, I also thought that readers might not be receptive to Leon if he was by himself. They might not understand him. So I thought it'd be good to insert someone with some more common sense just to point out how crass and shallow the protagonist can be. With Luxion beside him, I felt like Leon could become a popular character.

Actually, when we did a survey where people could vote for their favorite characters, Leon took first place. He actually beat out Angie and Livia. I was shocked!

I'll do my best to make sure Leon continues pissing people off, so I hope you will continue supporting me in future volumes as well!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

HOLFORT KINGDOM



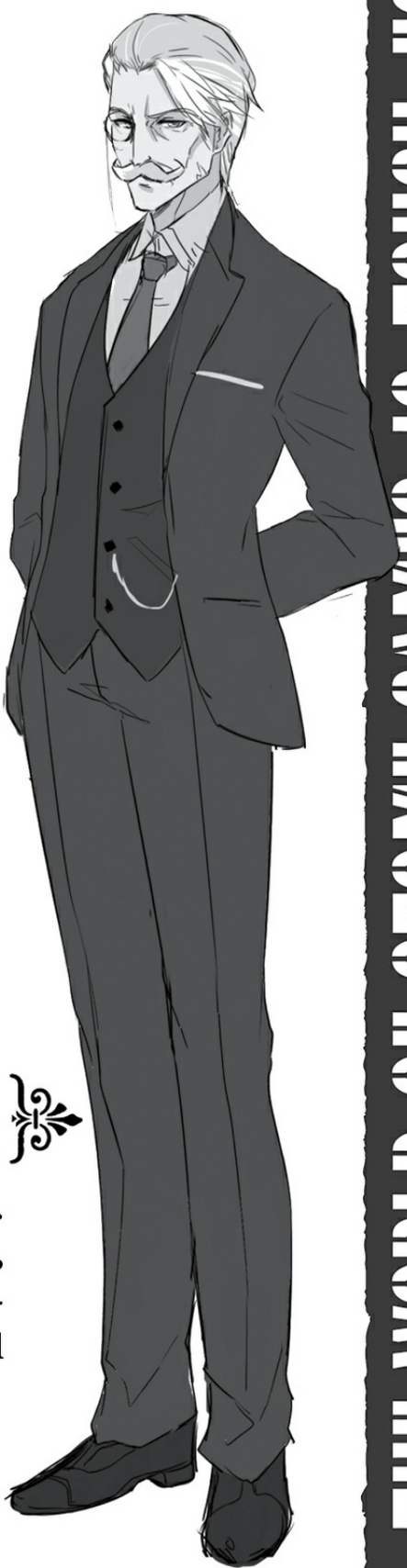
MYLENE
RAPHA HOLFORT

Julius's mother. Born abroad and married into the Holfort Kingdom. By and large, she is kind to everyone, as well as highly capable despite her naive appearance.



CLARICE FIA ATLEE

Jilk's former fiancée. Was once very kind but went berserk after their engagement was annulled. Now resembles a delinquent in her disheveled uniform.



MASTER

Leon's tea master. According to Leon, he is the perfect gentleman and the ideal man.

THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

PRINCIPALITY OF FANOSS





HERTRUDE SERA FANOSS

Manipulates monsters via her Magic Flute. Was raised to resent the kingdom and thinks all the kingdom's people are barbarians. A kind person at heart, despite her extreme views.

VANDEL
HIM ZENDEN

A hero of the principality known as the Black Knight. Feared throughout the kingdom. Well acquainted with Hertrude since her childhood and dotes on her. A fearless fighter with a long military history and a scar on his forehead.



THE WORLD OF GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.



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