

Heroine? Saint?

NO, I'M AN **All-Works Maid** ✨
(And Proud of It)!



Written by
ATEKICHI

Illustrated by
YUKIKO

NOVEL
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WRITTEN BY
Atekichi

ILLUSTRATED BY
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Story by Atekichi

Illustrations by Yukiko

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TRANSLATION: Matthew Jackson

ADAPTATION: Michelle McGuinness

LOGO DESIGN: Mariel Dágá

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner

PROOFREADER: Amanda Eyer

EDITOR: Laurel Ashgrove

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

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Prologue

“OUR MOST HUMBLE WELCOME.”

Back straight and knees bent at just the right angle, the black-haired maid greeted the two visitors with a perfect curtsy, if ever there was one. Yet the visitors were too flabbergasted to appreciate it.

“This *is* Luciana’s estate, isn’t it?” one of the visitors breathed, eyes darting around.

The other visitor was just as astonished. “When last we visited, it was practically—”

“A haunted house?”

The visitors’ heads jerked up. “Luciana!” they called out in unison.

A woman stood at the top of the stairs opposite the front door, the lady of the manor herself and their host, Lady Luciana, daughter of Count Rudleberg.

“Welcome, Beatrice, Milliaria.” Lady Luciana descended the stairs with graceful, deliberate steps. She wore the sort of smile others of her station could only aspire to. “I’m so glad you could come. You grace us with your presence.”

“L-Luciana, is that you?” stammered the girl with the long chestnut braid—the Honorable Beatrice, daughter of Viscount Lillertcruz.

“You look...simply stunning,” said the starstruck girl with violet hair—the Honorable Milliaria, daughter of Baron Faronkalt.

Lady Luciana’s guests blinked up at her like they could not believe the girl standing before them was truly their oldest friend. She neither looked nor acted like the Luciana they remembered growing up with, so how could this be?

The Rudlebergs were by no means second class, only outranked by such esteemed individuals as marquesses or dukes, but theirs was not a successful countship. Generations of incompetence had drained their finances; they could not even afford a proper upbringing for their own daughter. Yet Luciana looked

every bit the lady she was meant to be.

Green gems shone on her dress, a garment so fine and vibrant it must have been new. Her hair flowed down her back like water reflecting the sun. Flawless skin; full, peach-colored lips; aquamarine eyes—she bestowed upon her guests the very image of beauty as she dipped into a curtsy.

“Once again, I welcome you. Please, do make yourselves at home.”

The girls let out enraptured sighs. They stood in the presence of perfection given human form.

“Melody,” this vision of beauty said in a lilting cadence, “would you be so kind as to prepare us some tea? We’ll be out on the terrace.”

“Yes, my lady,” the maid replied with a bow.

The women promptly made their way outside. The Rudlebergs’ secondary residence, situated conveniently in Theolas’s capital, looked brand new—at least it did to guests who remembered its previous state.

Not so haunted anymore, they thought in unbeknownst unison. They had come for tea just two weeks ago, but at that time this residence seemed better suited to spirits than the living, much less living nobility. It was practically falling apart.

“What in the world has happened here?” Beatrice wondered aloud. “What do you think, Milliaria?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “We’ll have to ask once we get to the terrace.”

“I suppose we have to. Reluctant as I am...”

“Likewise. The interior is lovely, but, well...”

Memories best forgotten sprang to mind: a dead and dilapidated garden. A lopsided table, held upright only by creeping vines. Weeds. Weeds everywhere and no gardener to pull them. And the spiders... Oh, the spiders.

“My goodness!” Beatrice cried. “It’s like something out of a fairy tale!”

“It’s so beautiful. Somehow, it feels even bigger than my garden back home,”

Milliaria gasped.

The forest of nightmares had vanished, replaced by a work of art. Trees stood at deliberate points, manipulating perspective to enlarge the entire space. A tasteful dollop of sunlight trickled through the well-kept branches. Shrubbery masterfully sheared into the shapes of various animals enlivened the spectacle.

Beatrice took a sip of the tea the maid had brought, its subtle aroma tickling her nose. She smiled. “Lovely.”

“It tastes wonderful,” Milliaria agreed. “The leaves weren’t too expensive, I hope.”

Nobility and tea went together like clouds and the sky, but such a fine brew could prove to be an expensive luxury. On their last visit, they had been served the lowest of low-quality tea, and no amount of friendship or good manners could persuade them to take more than a single sip. Yet another puzzling discrepancy.

Luciana giggled, a hint of pride in her tone. “Oh, it’s the same old variety we always use.”

The girls’ jaws fell open. It couldn’t be. It wasn’t. The fullness of the aroma, the oh-so-delectable taste, the way it lingered in the throat—this wasn’t the lowest of the low. It didn’t make sense!

“But how? If I didn’t know better, I’d call you a liar,” Beatrice said.

“I don’t begrudge your doubts,” said Luciana. “As it turns out, one doesn’t need high-quality ingredients to make high-quality tea. Isn’t that right, Melody?”

The lady turned to the spectator observing all of this with an unwavering, placid smile.

“Precisely, my lady,” the maid replied. “Money can buy the best tea leaves, but it can’t buy technique, and only one of those is crucial to a perfect brew. It’s what separates a maid from the masses.”

Beatrice and Milliaria gaped in amazement at the maid Melody. They didn’t recall seeing her here during their last visit; she must have been new to the

estate.

“Okay, it’s time you explained!” Milliardia blurted.

“Agreed. I can hardly recognize this place. How can *so much* have changed in just two weeks?” Beatrice demanded.

What was going on here? The estate was brand new, the tea was incredible, and Luciana was practically glowing.

The latter simply grinned and held a finger up to her lips. “My secret.”

“You are the *worst!*” the girls cried.

Nobles and their secrets. It came with the job, in a sense. Even among friends, the upper class was ever fond of its secrets, so they could not complain if this was one Luciana preferred to keep close to the chest.

“Have it your way,” Beatrice said. “The least you could do is drop the act, though.”

“Please,” Milliardia agreed. “You’re very ladylike, yes, we can all see that. Now what did you do with the *real* Luciana?”

Luciana turned to her maid, who smiled and nodded, and then she heaved a sigh. “Okay, but I had the prim-and-proper thing down. You have to give me that.”

Her regal and subdued smile gave way to a toothy grin.

“There she is,” Beatrice laughed. “I was starting to suspect someone had kidnapped you and stolen your identity.”

“It was an excellent act, but I do like *this* you much better,” Milliardia said.

“Yeah? Heh! Thanks!” Luciana beamed. “I’ll stash Fancy Luciana away for the Spring Ball.”

The lady stood, bent at the knees, and curtsied in her typical, idiosyncratic way—that is to say, with the grace of a flamingo.

The tea cups stood empty, and Luciana’s guests were preparing to take their leave.

“I suppose we won’t see each other again until the opening ceremony at Royal Academy, will we?” Beatrice said. “Until then, Luciana.”

“And then after that, the Spring Ball. We’ll officially be out there with the rest of high society,” Milliaria said excitedly.

Luciana grinned. “See you guys at the ceremony.”

After escorting her friends to their carriage, Luciana let out a held breath. At last, it was over. She’d survived.

From inside the manor, Melody awaited her lady’s return.

“Your hair could use some freshening up before dinner,” the maid said. “Shall we detour to your room?”

“Oh, Melody...”

Luciana’s hair was a bird’s nest of flyaways and frazzled bangs mussed by an impudent breeze with no respect at all for hair styling. Melody’s request was perfectly normal and reasonable, a common duty among maids, but she was the first in Luciana’s experience to actually take up the task. Most maids were far too busy with their other concerns to see to the personal care of their masters, so could anyone really blame Luciana for being startled and delighted at the unexpected suggestion?

No, Luciana decided, they couldn’t.

“You’re the *best!*”



Melody shrieked. “Heavens, that is *not* proper etiquette, my lady! Nobles do not throw themselves at their maids!”

“Well, this one just can’t help herself! Today’s tea party was perfect, and it’s all thanks to you!”

Two weeks prior, Luciana had been nothing more than a “could-have-been” — a young lady living in a haunted house who *could* have been quite exceptional. She still would be a “could-have-been” were it not for Melody.

“That’s all well and good, now let go!” Melody pleaded. “This is so unbecoming!”

Her mistress only giggled. “Oh, don’t be such a stick-in-the-mud. Who’s gonna yell at us?”

“I will! And who in the world taught you to speak like that?!” Words failed the poor maid. She had only one recourse. In a flash, her panic turned to cold stoicism. “Very well. I see it’s back to square one with your lessons, then.”

It was the lady’s turn to shriek. “Message received! Have mercy, please! Anything but that!” Luciana released Melody, her hands raised in defeat. Cold sweat beaded on her forehead as though Melody were holding a knife to her throat. “I-I can be good in public! You saw! Honest! Please, not again!”

“Do I have your word?”

Luciana nodded furiously. The lessons came back in flashes. She couldn’t relive those terrors. It was ghoulish. Out of the question!

“Very well.” Melody surrendered. “Now, let’s see to your hair.”

“Yes! A lovely idea!” Luciana agreed immediately, grateful to have escaped the ordeal with her life. It was a miracle she would not forget.

Luciana returned to her room, and Melody started to brush out her hair. In the silence, a question popped into Luciana’s mind.

“Say, Melody? What brought you here in the first place?” she asked. “You could have gotten a job anywhere you wanted.”

The Rudlebergs’ residence in the capital had but one helper: Melody. The

work she did—nay, the feats she accomplished—would normally require dozens upon dozens of maids, yet she did it all alone. Luciana certainly wasn't complaining, but it did raise the question of why Melody had chosen *this* as her place of employment.

The maid giggled. "I came here because you needed me." Luciana tilted her head in confusion, and Melody smiled. "I love all aspects of my work. Most estates would divide the responsibilities among the staff. Here, my hands touch everything, and that's just how I like it."

"That's...a good thing?"

"It's perfect! I love what I do, and this way I get to keep all the fun for myself! It's a dream job, I tell you. After all, the best maids are skilled at every aspect of this job!"

"O-oh. They are?" Melody was swooning over her work like a girl in love, and Luciana could not hope to understand. Heaven knew she tried, but in the end, she decided this was a good time to practice the "smile and nod" technique.

Meanwhile, Melody continued to burn with the fire of a hundred domestic servants. *I've got a second chance at life, and I'm not gonna squander it!* she thought. *Watch over me, Mom. I'm gonna be the most perfect maid this world has ever seen!*

For now, those flames smoldered in silence. But smolder they would, because this was not the tale of a fallen lady's rise from the ashes—this was the tale of the maid who rekindled the fire!

Chapter 1:

The Girl Who Wanted to Become a Maid

ONCE UPON A TIME, MIZUNAMI RITSUKO'S world was colorless. Born into fortune and raised by well-meaning parents, she knew no suffering and wanted for nothing. She was gifted and, by the age of six, outwitted most adults. Lest one assume she therefore lacked in matters of culture, be assured she did not. Her paintings, published under a pseudonym, fetched exorbitant prices at galleries. The first instrument she picked up, she mastered within the hour. When she sang, birds flocked to her dulcet tones.

Programming was child's play, first aid a flick of the wrist. And as for self-defense? Grown men trembled in her presence. Mizunami Ritsuko was, quite simply, the greatest prodigy who ever lived.

But then again, did she truly live?

Nothing she ever did was worthwhile. Nothing demanded more than minimal effort from her. Everything she touched turned to gold. And when everything was gold, it began to lose its luster. When you'd been granted every possible accolade, what was left to strive for? What victory was there in a race without competition?

This was not to say that Ritsuko had no betters. She did, but none were her peers. When she lost, it was always to someone older, someone who had dedicated their life to a field, someone whom *anyone* would have lost to.

She felt nothing.

Cynical pragmatism seeded itself in the young girl's heart. She did away with the extremes of emotion—the joy and sadness, the pleasure and discomfort, the doubts and certainties of life—and so her world lost its color. Everything passed through this unfeeling filter and came out gray and hueless. Dull and boring to a child's eyes.

Life was a sad prison to Ritsuko, its bars erected from the conceit she herself

had built.

To be human is to judge and be judged. And those geniuses among us all too often recognized their talents but lacked the humility to temper such instincts. Talent bred arrogance, and arrogance bred contempt.

Such was the fate of Ritsuko. She, too, judged the world, although subconsciously in her young mind, and deemed it insufficient, its spectrum too limited.

So said the frog in the well. Gifted though she was, Ritsuko was but six. She knew little of the vastness of the world's tapestry, nor of its profound depths.

But she would soon learn.

One day, Ritsuko's parents dragged her to a company function hosted by a handsome English gentleman her father knew from his work—a baron, though “life peer” would have been more accurate. The title was not hereditary.

His villa sat upon a small, picturesque hill. The gentleman chose the garden of this serene estate for his grand tea party. It was here that Ritsuko met her destiny.

Among the dreary blacks and whites of Ritsuko's monochromatic world appeared a strange anomaly to contradict her perspective.

“Our most humble welcome. Please, do make yourselves at home.”

A beautiful woman pushed a trolley up to Ritsuko's table. She wore a pitch-black dress with a sheet-white apron. A cap of the same sterile hue rested on top of a head of foreign, bright blonde hair, yet she spoke perfect Japanese. Back straight and knees bent at just the right angle, the woman offered what Ritsuko knew to be a “curtsy.”

The woman went through the offerings of tea and milk with sagacious brevity, then proceeded to meet each and every request flawlessly before leaving to repeat the ritual with other guests.

Ritsuko stared after her. “Mother, who's that pretty lady?”

“Pretty lady? Ah, that's just a maid.”

“A maid...”

For all the girl’s knowledge, this was the first she had heard of such a thing; a fault of her selective studies. Though she had learned much of England—its important dates and histories—the minutiae of everyday life had escaped her.

Ritsuko’s father proceeded to explain that this particular woman was a parlormaid, one specializing in waiting on guests, whom the English gentleman had summoned from abroad specifically for today’s event. Ritsuko listened without once taking her eyes off the woman.

The maid eventually noticed. Their eyes met, but before the embarrassment could flush into Ritsuko’s face, the woman smiled at her. And what a perfect smile it was.

Everything changed then.

For the briefest of moments, color returned to a gray world. Or perhaps it didn’t. Perhaps it was an illusion brought on by the vibrant black and white of the maid’s dress that Ritsuko was fixated on. Whichever one it was, she did not care. Ritsuko was feeling something real at last.

“She’s so pretty,” the young girl breathed.

“Yes, I suppose she is,” said her mother. “Getting a good look, dear?”

“What?” her father babbled. “Sweetie, no. I, uh, promise?”

“You’ll do more than that when we get home.”

“Honest! I’ve only got eyes for you, my sweet, beautiful, forgiving wife!”

One smile from a single woman in a black-and-white dress. So trivial. But black and white were the first colors Ritsuko had seen in a long time.

“Maids. Female domestic servants. Popularized in the latter half of 19th century England, the Victorian era. An estate will typically divide work among several types of maids, including kitchen maids, housemaids, parlormaids...”

Ritsuko tore through every scrap of information she could find about her new fascination, all her prodigious talents now laser-focused. She had to learn more.

Their history. Their evolution as a profession. She even took it upon herself to learn the tricks of the trade and sew her own uniform, both tasks made easier thanks to her inherent ingenuity and dexterity. Then she went so far as to play maid all around the house.

Her parents never admonished her—they supported her, even. They were overjoyed to see their daughter so passionate about something. Anything was an improvement over the lifeless apathy she usually displayed.

One day, Ritsuko saw a movie called *The Glass Princess*. The film was about a young noble girl in feudal England, raised with a silver spoon in her mouth and secluded from the world. It was a sad story about an impossible love between her and a commoner boy that ended in their tragic double suicide. The audience cried when the credits rolled, Ritsuko among them. Her parents concluded that their daughter's intelligence extended to the emotional spectrum as well.

They could not have been further from the truth.

The princess went through so much, but it was her maids who stood by her every step of the way.

Though the princess was the main heroine and the film showed little of her ladies in waiting, Ritsuko knew. She had studied, and she knew the lengths those maids had surely gone to for the mistress they so respected.

Mizunami Ritsuko grew. She matured into a woman, one of function over form, duty over pleasure, apron over dress.

Still, her wit never dulled. Ritsuko applied her superior intellect to anything and everything related to maids and their work. Architecture. Engineering. Astronomy. Biology. Was anything and everything she dabbled in actually relevant to maids and their work? Maybe. Debatably. Ritsuko didn't stop long enough to answer that question.

Her fixation would only deepen in college. There, she glimpsed an opportunity to make her dream a reality and become that which she idolized.

But how would she do it? Issues arose almost immediately. There was no market for servants in modern day Japan. Few places in the world still used

noble titles, for that matter, effectively making the age-old profession (at least in its historic form) extinct. At best, she could maybe find work with a housekeeping business.

She remembered the English gentleman and the blonde woman. Maybe the United Kingdom? Perhaps there Ritsuko would find what she craved.

It was settled. She was going to study abroad.

“Mother! Father! I’m going to England to become a maid!”

“Take pictures of Big Ben for me,” said her father.

“You and your maids,” teased her mother. “You have fun while you’re there.”

As quickly as Ritsuko had made her decision, perhaps even quicker, her parents made theirs.

It was a choice they would come to regret.

At last, when she was twenty, Ritsuko journeyed overseas. She’d done it. And with her own two hands, without help from her family’s wealth.

With a final farewell to her mom and dad, Ritsuko boarded the plane that would take her to England. She took her seat by the window and waited for takeoff, when a couple paused at her aisle.

“I’m next to you, I think,” the girl said.

“Oh, yeah, steal the seat next to the hottie,” said the boy. “Hey there!”

“Shut it. Ignore him, please.”

They were Japanese. About Ritsuko’s age, maybe younger.

Ritsuko giggled. “I don’t mind. Please sit.”

Moments later, the plane took off and they climbed into the sky. In roughly twelve hours, they would reach England. It was a long time in such a tight space, and Ritsuko found herself chatting with her seatmates.

“You’re high schoolers?” Ritsuko said. “And traveling abroad all by yourselves. I’m surprised your parents trust you that much. Do they know you’re dating?”

“We are *not* dating!” both blurted out in perfect unison.

Ritsuko chuckled. “You certainly could have fooled me.”

The girl—Asakura Anna was her name—scowled. “I would literally rather die than be paired up with this doofus.”

“Well, the feeling’s mutual!” the boy, Kurita Hideki, shot back. “I won’t settle for anything less than Ritsuko-san here. Now *she’s* a woman.”

Their protests weren’t fooling Ritsuko. As far as she could tell, they were made for each other.

“So tell me, then. Why are you on this trip together?” she asked.

“It’s not just us. We’re on a tour. Look.” Anna produced some kind of computer game. The cover depicted a silver-haired girl surrounded by five men, sparkles, and other fantastical flourishes. “All my girlfriends at school are obsessed with this, and they’re doing this special promotion where they take ten lucky people on a tour of England if you buy the special edition, if you can believe it. I managed to get a spot somehow, so we’re headed to England with a few other fans we sorta know. They’re scattered around the plane.”

“I’m here to keep an eye on her,” Hideki said. “My little sister wanted to go, but I’m just one guy and my hands are full enough with this one. Only reason it’s me and not her parents is ’cause they had work stuff those days.” He scoffed at himself. “They figure I can’t do any harm since we’re always at each other’s throats.”

“You’re Anna-san’s personal knight in shining armor then, are you?” Ritsuko teased.

“No way!” the pair blurted, again in unison. They even had the same expressions and made the same gestures.

Ritsuko couldn’t help but laugh. Whatever nuance there was to their relationship, it went over her head. She had abandoned romance for the apron long ago. At the very least, she could appreciate that whatever they had, it warmed her heart.

Some hours later, the lights in the cabin dimmed, they threw on their

blankets, and all three passengers drifted off to sleep. When they awoke, they would officially be over British soil. Excitement swelled in their chests, and thoughts of the adventures to come filled their dreams.

But dreams they would remain, forever out of reach.

For that plane went missing; and six years later, it had yet to be found.

Chapter 2:

A New World in Black and White

“**M**OTHER, WHO’S THAT PRETTY LADY?”

Little Celesty pointed at a young girl in a pitch-black dress with a sheet-white apron. A cap of the same sterile hue rested on top of her head.

Selena thought her daughter’s question strange. She wasn’t all *that* pretty.

“Pretty lady? Ah, that’s just a maid.”

“A maid... Huh?”

It all came rushing back. Images. Knowledge. Memories.

Maids... Plane... I... My name is...Mizunami Ritsuko.

Celesty’s past life flooded into her mind. Her love for those uniformed servants. Studying abroad in England. The plane she’d boarded. The turbulence. They’d hit water. Then it all went black.

Mizunami Ritsuko died that day. Her last words to her parents had been an innocent “Be back soon!”

“Celesty? Does your tummy hurt, sweetie?”

“Huh?” She was crying. She hastily scrubbed at her tears. “No. I’m okay. Something in my eye.”

“Okay, well, what do you say we start heading home?”

“Mm-hmm!”

Selena led her daughter by the hand, and Celesty let her new mother take her—though not without a great deal of guilt toward the one she’d lost.

Celesty McMarden was her new name. She was six and had no father, only Selena. Celesty had her mother’s eyes—a brilliant lapis lazuli—but not her hair. Selena was a brunette, but Celesty’s hair was a tumble of striking silver that

must have come from her father.

Somehow, this child had become Mizunami Ritsuko. Or perhaps it happened the other way around.

Either way, this was certainly not her world, and she had several reasons to come to that conclusion. First was the land she apparently called home: a small village named Anavalez in the Avarenton March, a borderland in the western reaches of the Kingdom of Theolas. Ritsuko could recall no such territory existing on Earth.

Second, there was Anavalez itself. The architecture was reminiscent of medieval Europe, and yet they had...functioning toilets. The kind with the lever and the flush and the swirls. That was to say, Anavalez was far more sanitary than the period its aesthetic stylings suggested. No one was defecating or urinating in the streets as far as Celesty could see.

She shuddered.

What confused her, though, was the seeming lack of plumbing: The people still got their water from a well. She couldn't make sense of it.

When she finally figured it out, it became the crux of her "other world" theory.

"Lamplight. *Luce*."

A small light appeared at Selena's fingertips, and she set it atop a candlestick. It didn't light the candlestick—not by a flame at least—rather it emanated light without burning at all.

Magic. Ritsuko didn't believe it at first, brushed it off as sleight of hand, but there was no trickery in what she witnessed. It explained the toilets. Apparently, their invention dated to before Theolas itself, originating from a mage with particularly good ideas. To these people, a toilet that didn't flush was as alien as a cloud that didn't rain.

In this world, magic was something you were born with; at least, that was Ritsuko's understanding. At the age of five, a local church would measure your aptitude to see if you possessed a spark. Celesty had not been so blessed.

“I can sense power, but not the *switch* with which to access it,” she had been told.

She remembered being upset at first, but she’d long since put that behind her.

I don’t need magic to be a maid!

And as luck would have it, maids were in abundance here. Amid this tragedy shined an opportunity, and she would seize it. Hence, color returned to her world.

“You’re in an awfully good mood today, Celesty. Does Mommy get to know why?”

“I am! And it’s a secret. I’ll tell you one day, though!”

“Oh, I’m already dying to know.”

Childlike glee lightened Ritsuko’s steps. Of course, it helped that she literally *was* a child again. Still, she retained enough intelligence to know she couldn’t achieve her dream as a six-year-old. Fifteen marked the age of maturity in this culture, so she would have to hold out until then.

Celesty would tell her mother when the time came about Ritsuko’s dream. She had not learned her lesson about the suddenness of goodbyes.

“Mother! Oh, Mother!”

“I’m sorry, Celesty... I left a letter for you. Read it, sweetie... It will explain... everything.”

“Mother!”

When Celesty was just fourteen, Selena fell victim to the plague ravaging their village.

There was a modest funeral. Celesty didn’t remember much of it, racked with grief as she was. The loss of not just one mother but two nearly broke her. So unyielding were the waves of misery that she almost forgot both her dream and the letter.

The latter would have been lost to her forever were it not for pure chance. A postman happened to pass in front of her home six months later, jogging her memory. Celesty flew to her mother's room and threw open the chest by her bed. There it was.

My sweet Celesty,

Words do no justice to the pain I feel leaving you so soon. I only hope you find it in your heart to forgive me. Would that I could see you blossom into a woman, to celebrate with you when you finally become a maid. Oh, yes. I knew your secret all along. I saw you practicing your curtsy when you thought I wasn't looking. I wish I could have told you how beautiful you were.

You'll make a fine maid, my darling. To tell a secret of my own, I used to be one myself—which is why I must warn you. A life in service to others may sound idyllic and charming, but it comes with dangers, and those dangers only increase the higher in society you climb.

Your father's name is Cloud Leginbarth. When I knew him, he was the son of a count. I imagine he's inherited his father's title by now. We truly loved each other. That, I promise you. But it wasn't meant to be. We lived in different worlds, he and I. Society would never allow it. When his father, who was lord at the time, discovered us, he dismissed me, and I never saw Cloud again. It wasn't until later that I learned I was pregnant with you.

He does not know you exist. Please do not begrudge him that.

Read these next few words carefully, Celesty. You have two paths before you.

You can go to your father and tell him who you are—an easy task, I should think. You both have silver hair. Not many do. Know, however, that if you do this, you yourself will become a noble. A lady. And ladies do not become maids.

Your second path is quite the opposite: Become a maid.

In truth, I do wish he could know you as I have. If I had one wish, it would be that, but it is your decision to make. Whatever you choose, I know you'll do what's right for you. Follow your heart.

Actually, perhaps I'll amend that last statement. Should your heart guide you to follow in my footsteps, my one wish would be that you do so with every fiber of your being. If becoming a maid is your dream, you had better become the most perfect maid this world has ever seen. I'll be watching, just to make sure you do.

I love you, Celesty. We'll meet again, but hopefully not for some time. If you're not old and gray the next time I see you, we are going to have words.

Sincerely,

Tears blurred the ink on the page. Upon finishing the letter, Celesty made a promise.

“Thank you, Mother. I’ll follow my heart. I will. I do want to meet my father, it’s true, but I also want to be a maid. I always have, for as long as I’ve lived twice over. So that’s what I’ll do, Mother. I’m going to be the best maid. The most perfect maid this world has ever seen! I swear to you!”

It was more than a promise—it was an oath born of love for the woman who had raised her, for her undying passion, and for herself. A declaration to no one, every word emblazoned with singular intent.

She would become a maid. The most perfect maid this world had ever seen. She’d make her mother proud. She’d make herself proud.

“Blessings upon thee, o maiden of silver,” a voice boomed. *“The pact is made, thy soul laid bare, thy heart proven true.”*

Celesty whipped her head around but found no one in the room with her. Her gaze landed on the candlestick Selena would always light with her magic. Something called to her, but she could not say what exactly, nor what it said.

“Lamplight,” she whispered, reaching for the candle. *“Luce.”*

In an instant, light flooded the room, and Celesty tumbled back. She had never accomplished even a flicker of magic in the past, much less such an explosive burst of it.

When she collected herself, she felt something stirring inside her. A current. It was like feeling her own blood moving through her veins, strange and turbulent and not entirely comfortable.

Power surged within her, an overwhelming flood, and its ebb and flow washed against her awareness. She knew it almost instinctively. “Mana...”

Selena had only ever had the capacity to cast *Luce* once per day. Celesty had cast the spell at a *hundred times* the typical intensity, and still she hardly sensed a disturbance in the arcane energies that flowed through her.

For all the power that magic promised, it carried an equal amount of risk. Many a practitioner had lost their life walking that treacherous line, and even the kingdom's greatest casters could attest to struggling to control their magic in their youth. And yet Celesty overshadowed each and every one of them to an astronomical degree. The sheer volume of her mana versus a master's was like an ocean to a puddle.

But Celesty did not know any of that, having no proper frame of reference. What she did know, however, was that this power she wielded was dangerous. One lapse of concentration and all that radiant light could bloom into a flame that consumed Anavalez whole.

Quite frankly, such power was not the sort of thing that belonged to a fourteen-year-old girl. A gift that should have been earned through a lifetime of careful training had become Celesty's in the blink of an eye. If you left the gas on, it was not a matter of *if* it blew, it was a matter of *when*.

"I'd better put a lid on this," Celesty said, sensing and fearing the strength yearning to break free.

Thus, she calmed the swirling and crashing of her arcane ocean with an ease that would have enraged the masters who'd studied for their entire lives to reach such a level of control. As quickly as she had obtained her powers, Celesty had mastered them. Truly, her genius transcended lifetimes.

"Lamplight. *Luce*."

This time, she called forth only enough light for a lamp. It radiated from her fingertips, steady and perfect.

Celesty could not resist testing her talents further. She conjured droplets of water, flickering flames, and gusts of wind—all at once, of course—as she sent an elemental feather duster to seek out filth and grime.

"Incredible," she gasped. "It's as easy as breathing."

An egregious misconception. The simultaneous manipulation of *multiple elements* to such a fine degree was most certainly *not* "as easy as breathing" to most people.

Thus was born the greatest mage who ever lived. All of creation lay at her

beck and call.

“With this kind of power, I could...I could...”

She could amass an army and conquer the nations, ruling with an iron fist. She could build a harem. She could set herself up as the unprincipled, boorish protagonist most of us fantasize of becoming if gifted with such might. The devil perched on Celesty’s shoulder, ready to whisper in her ear, to combine her new gifts with her old intellect and bring about a new world order unlike any—

“I could become the most perfect maid this world has ever seen!”

Ahem. As the devil was saying—

“What am I waiting for? It’s time to cook up some maid magic, by maids, for maids! Well, for my master or mistress technically, but the point stands! Oh boy, things are about to get busy!”

The devil gave up. The machinations of her host’s mind were clearly beyond her reckoning, as was often the case with young savants, especially ones with an obsession. Maids, in this case.

Like they always say, genius and insanity are two sides of the same coin. But that’s neither here nor there.

Celesty was happier than she’d been in months.

“Thank you, everyone! For everything!”

One month later, Celesty bid farewell to Anavalez and its people—her home. Those who understood how hard Selena’s death had been on Celesty were reluctant to see the girl off, but she needed this. She needed to march off to the foreign lands of the west on a journey of self-discovery.

Or so the townsfolk believed.

Celesty debated it but eventually decided she could not reveal her true destination or objective. She *would* become a maid! And though she figured it was far too late for her father to suddenly go searching for his lost lover, she wasn’t going to take any chances on that front. The last thing she needed was a trail leading back to her and an impromptu family reunion squandering her

career plans.

In truth, she was headed to the east, to the Theolan royal capital of Paltescia—heading directly opposite of where she said she was going. But even Celesty was hesitant to leave the only home she had ever known *and* her country all in one impulsive swoop.

The first leg of the journey would take her to Trendivalez, where a stagecoach regularly carried passengers along the route connecting the capital with the kingdom's western neighbor.

After her goodbyes, she left town and crossed into the forest, but promptly hid behind trees and shrubbery so she could change into a green dress no one back home had ever seen—she'd made it herself, after all.

"Blacken. *Annerire*." As the incantation left her lips, her lustrous silver locks and her shimmering azure eyes darkened to a midnight pitch. "Perfect. Now *that's* maid magic."

The world appears to us as it does due to the way light interacts with pigments. Certain materials absorb certain wavelengths, and the color they take on is simply a combination of any unabsorbed wavelengths as interpreted by the human eye. An apple, for example, absorbs all wavelengths except for red, and thus it appears red.

What Celesty had done was essentially manipulate those same properties, altering the wavelengths absorbed by her hair and eyes so they would appear darker. How had she managed to account for every single particle of light regardless of intensity, source, or perspective? It was a mystery even to her. A complication that would have stumped any normal mage wasn't even a passing consideration for Celesty.

Truly, she was the working mage's worst enemy.

With eyes, hair, and clothes all changed, Celesty was reborn once again. She subdued the silver and blue that rendered her alluring and mysterious. Her new black locks hung docilely past her shoulders; her dark eyes conveyed maturity. The green of her dress suggested a dryadic tranquility.

"No one will recognize me now."

Celesty could not appear in the capital while what was left of her community thought she'd ventured in the opposite direction. However, in a world without cameras or photos, no one outside this town would suspect her. Plus, she'd seen enough black-haired and black-eyed people to know she wouldn't stand out this way. Admittedly, she did also find the quiet colors comfortingly reminiscent of her Japanese self.

"I believe the coach to the capital leaves two days from now. I should check when I make it to town."

Celesty heaved her pack onto her shoulders and set off.

Incidentally, while black hair and dark eyes were indeed common, the presence of both at the same time was decidedly *uncommon*. Poor Celesty would have never learned that in her quiet little village, however.

Chapter 3:

The Girl with Black Hair

TWO DAYS AFTER CELESTY'S DEPARTURE, the mayor of Anavalez hosted two guests. Their quaint traveling attire did not fool the man; the way they carried themselves betrayed their status all too well.

One, who seemed caught in a perpetual scowl, had long dark blue hair. His companion's hair was shorter and red, and his golden, half-lidded eyes churned the mayor's stomach. The red-haired one sneered at everything around him, perpetually judging.

"Pardon our unannounced arrival," the blue-haired one said. "I am Sable, and this is my companion, Lect."

They identified themselves as knights in the service of Count Leginbarth.

The mayor gulped.

Count Leginbarth's reputation preceded him. He was one of the king's most trusted vassals, his vice-chancellor, and quite young for his rank. As such, his knights carried with them a great deal of authority that the mayor desperately hoped would not be leveraged against his small village.

"We come to you regarding a matter of great secrecy. His Lordship has tasked us with tracking down a certain individual." Sable produced a small framed portrait of a beautiful brunette woman from his breast pocket.

The mayor gasped. "Selena?"

"You know her?!"

"Y-yes, Sir Knight. I presume that portrait was done when she was younger, but yes. I'm certain."

"Hail, at long last, our search has ended!" Sable leaped to his feet, pure joy erasing his scowl. "His Lordship will be most pleased!"

Count Leginbarth's lands sat quite close to the capital. Their journey would

have been a long and arduous one indeed. It made the news the mayor had to deliver that much more difficult.

“Does something ail you, Mayor?” Lect asked.

Sable regained his composure. “Mayor?”

“G-good sirs, I’m... I’m sorry to say you’ve just missed her. Selena has passed.”

“Ye gods,” Sable breathed.

“Just two seasons ago,” the mayor continued. “There was a plague. It took her.” Sable collapsed onto the settee beneath him. “If it’s not impertinent of me, might I ask what Lord Leginbarth’s interest in her is?”

“I trust you understand this is not public information,” Lect answered for his companion. Sable had not yet recovered from his shock. “She was His Lordship’s lover, but their stations would not allow them to be together. So it goes. They were separated, but five years ago, His Lordship’s father passed, thus conferring the countship to his son, and so our search for his lady began. Too late, it seems.”

The mayor’s jaw dropped, and his eyes widened—but not at the knowledge of Selena’s secret, tragic love story. “Heaven strike me down. That would make Celesty...”

“Celesty? Who is this Celesty?”

“Selena’s daughter, sir.”

“*Daughter?!* ” the knights exclaimed as one.

“Lady Selena was married, then?” Sable asked. The mayor shook his head. “She never took a spouse? Then her daughter... Could it be?!”

“She first came here thirteen years ago, a little babe in her arms. When I met her, Celesty had already been born,” said the mayor.

“How old is she? What does she look like? Tell us everything you know!”

“She’ll be fifteen this year. She has her mother’s eyes, bluer than the ocean and even prettier. And her hair...such a brilliant silver it shines in the sun. Truly, it was a sight to behold, good sirs.”

“Silver hair!” the knights blurted in unison again.

Selena’s hair was brown. The knights knew Celesty must have inherited that exceptionally rare hair from her father, a certain count.

“You said ‘was.’ Has she gone away? Where?! We must see her at once!” Sable pressed.

“I’m afraid her mother’s death shook the poor girl deeply. She’s gone on a pilgrimage across the border to the west.”

“Dear lord, alone?! It’s damned good luck we’re allied with our western neighbor, but no highway is safe for *any* maiden to travel alone!”

“I tried to stop her, sir, I did. Stubborn as a mountain, she was. She left just two days ago for a stagecoach that would carry her the rest of the way. I assume it’s departed Trendivalez by now.”

Sable and Lect set off at once in search of the girl called Celesty.

“I will go west and give chase. Lect, you report the news to His Lordship.”

“I suppose one of us must make the blighted trip back. Consider it done. Go with luck, friend.”

“You as well!” Sable swung onto the saddle of his steed and galloped westward.

Lect pulled his mount the opposite direction, toward the capital. Along the way, he came upon a girl carrying a bag—a girl with black hair.

She wore a clean (freshly sewn?) green dress and seemed wary of her surroundings, clearly unaccustomed to life on the road.

Out of concern for the girl, or perhaps due to some whimsy of fate, he hailed her. “Are you lost, young...lady?”

Words failed the chevalier as the girl turned to him. He had never witnessed such beauty. Her hair fluttered in the wind like raven’s wings, her eyes were obsidian gems, and her features were youthful yet womanly. Lect’s heart raced.

“I was, um, trying to find where the coach to the capital arrives,” she said.

“Th-that way, madam.” Lect pointed to a sign that marked the stage station.

“Oh, goodness, you’re right! Thank you so much.” The girl’s polite smile stunned the knight as she headed off in the direction he’d indicated.

“Traveling alone,” he muttered as she vanished into the crowd. “The kingdom finances the safety of these roads. She’ll get along fine.” He had to shake his head to dislodge the image of her smile. Duty came before personal concerns. “Come,” he told his steed. “To the capital.”

Lectias Froude, a knight of only twenty-one, departed before the stagecoach, though not without one last glance in its direction. He did not see the girl.

Lect scoffed at himself and continued on his way.

Regular staging services were a relatively recent invention in Theolas. Starting just seven years ago, the system allowed for unprecedented long-distance public transportation. Celesty was quite grateful to her country for establishing such a system. It had preset operating schedules, stable fares, nightly hours, coaching inns along the way, and even an armed escort.

“I’d be walking the whole way otherwise, and lord knows I don’t have the money for my own carriage. I suppose this was the crown prince’s idea?”

“He proposed it eight years ago. Took a full year for it to get implemented, though.”

“His Highness is the same age as me, so he would have been...goodness, *six*! The world is truly vast, and its people vaster.”

“That it is, and that they are.”

“I very much appreciate you keeping me company, Max.”

“Likewise, Melody. You’re a great conversation partner.”

Celesty had found a friend to pass the time with on her journey to Paltescia: a young man named Max.

She had introduced herself as Melody Wave, a hand-me-down from her past life as Mizunami Ritsuko. From “ritsu,” meaning rhythm, she extrapolated

“Melody.” “Wave” came from “nami,” a more literal translation.

So Melody Wave she became.

The journey would take ten days, and Melody was currently on the third. Once she’d managed to find the stagecoach, the rest proved easy. She offered her silent thanks to the red-haired man who’d shown her the way.

“My compliments to the driver,” Max muttered. “Honestly.”

The other women on the carriage snuck frequent glances at Max. He was sixteen, just over a year older than Melody, and already quite the lady-killer thanks to his mix of androgynous beauty and masculine handsomeness. His hair shone as golden as honey, and his soft, emerald green eyes entranced all they beheld.

“Pardon?” said Melody.

“The trip has been remarkably steady. I’ve hardly felt a jostle since we departed, and we’re still on undeveloped roads.”

This far out, the highway was less a highway and more a trodden dirt path laid by heavy traffic. Indeed, the ruts of innumerable wagons crisscrossed it, speaking to its history. Max was genuinely impressed that they had not felt every bump detailing the road’s annals.



“Gods above, ‘undeveloped’ is one way of putting it,” Melody sighed under her breath. “Once more, just to be safe—steady. *Orizzontale*.”

Suspension was one of those marvels of engineering that one often took for granted. The unsung hero of automobile transportation, suspension systems helped nullify or otherwise ease the wobbling that would typically accompany high-speed travel. Without it, you would feel every bump in the road, the lurch of every brake, and the sway of every turn.

Medieval Europe had horse-drawn carriages, not suspension. They did not even know what suspension *was*.

That had been fine for the first day of the journey. The Avarenton March was a well-maintained area, being a borderland that needed to be ever vigilant for a military emergency. They quickly left that paradise behind, however, and on the second day, the descent into hell began.

To call the experience “culture shock” would be an understatement.

The roads beyond the march were unpaved, unmaintained, and unlike anything Melody was used to. It was not long before her stomach lurched in protest, leaving her queasy.

In an effort to spare her dignity, and her lunch, Melody had begun to soften the ride through spells. Force magic, which controlled physical phenomena such as gravity, to be specific. In effect, Melody could imitate a suspension system, virtually eliminating all the swaying and jostling. While the exterior of the coach shook like the earth upon the coming of the horsemen of the apocalypse, the interior may as well have been gliding over open ocean.

Truthfully, Melody had no idea how she was doing it, but she didn’t rightly care. She wasn’t dry heaving, and that was good enough for her.

In ten days’ time, right on schedule, the stagecoach arrived in the royal capital—Paltescia.

“Hats off to you, good sir. Absolutely *incredible* work. My heartfelt thanks for the smoothest journey I’ve ever had the privilege to go on!”

“Th-thank you kindly?” The box seat had not benefited from the effects of Melody’s magic, unfortunately, and the coachman was thus most confused by the praise levied upon him by his passengers. His staging career, however, would surely flourish under his newly inflated reputation.

Meanwhile, Melody was bidding farewell to her travel companion.

“You’re off to become a maid, yes?” Max said. “In that case, you should make your way to the Commerce Guild. I believe they offer employment with some common folks’ homes without the need for a referral. It would be a good place to start.”

“Thank you for the suggestion. I think I’ll do just that.”

“It was a pleasure, Melody. My thanks for the memorable journey.”

“Likewise. I hope we meet again someday!” Melody waved to the young man, beaming as she did.

Max watched her trot away, a smile of his own on his lips. “If only Father wasn’t so particular about the help we hire.” When the girl was gone, he turned away. “Apologies for the delay.”

“Your father will be glad of your safe return, Lord Maxwell.” A man that might as well have emerged from Max’s shadow stood behind him, garbed in a footman’s uniform. He bowed and gestured to a lavish carriage. “It went well, I hope?”

“As well as it could have. Let’s be off. I’m rather homesick, and the longer we prattle on, the longer His Highness must wait until he hears my report on the western highways.”

“Might I suggest appeasing your father first? He wishes to know whom you intend to escort to the Spring Ball.”

“No one,” Max said flatly.

“You are the lord chancellor’s son and heir, Lord Maxwell. Understand that he only worries for what society might think of one such as yourself arriving without a companion.”

“I understand well enough. Let *him* understand that I will escort the right

woman when she appears to me and not a moment sooner.”

Max—better known to his footman as Maxwell Reclentos, eldest son of the Kingdom of Theolas’s lord chancellor—boarded the carriage.

The stagecoach had been more to his liking.

Chapter 4:

Melody, at Your Service

THE COMMERCE GUILD WAS FAIRLY SELF-explanatory: a guild for the support and facilitation of commerce throughout the kingdom. It provided access to information and could even dispense loans to its members, though it required an annual fee. Consequently, such services were something of a luxury.

However, six years ago, it began offering limited resources for nonmembers, employment assistance among them. In the simplest sense, the guild could act as a central hub for contractual work offers for those without the connections for a consistent, self-sustaining supply. It was one of their most utilized services.

“His Highness started all this, you say? The crown prince’s ideas never cease to amaze me. I’m sure everyone here’s eager for the next coronation.”

“Careful now, we wouldn’t want His Majesty to hear you say such things,” the receptionist jested.

Melody giggled. “Pardon me.”

The guild receptionist returned to the matter at hand. “So you’re looking for maid work and have no referrals. Do I have that right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then please take a look at the board over there. That’s where you’ll find all our domestic offers.”

“Thank you! I’ll check it out.”

Melody went straight to the board and scanned the listings. But the longer she looked, the more her heart sank.

“Nothing long-term,” she muttered. “And not quite what I’m looking for.”

Requests for laundry maids and other housemaids dominated the board. While Melody was interested in such work, those positions would leave her frustratingly limited in her duties. She wanted to be the most perfect maid in

the world, and that meant dabbling in everything. If she could be allowed a bit of selfish honesty, she simply wanted all the fun to herself.

I want to cook, I want to clean, I want to groom and do makeup and wait on guests and sew new outfits, she thought. Oh, and I'd really love to build an arbor in a garden! And craft my own cosmetics and furnish rooms and, and... Gosh, I could go on and on!

Melody's idea of "fun" (and what a maid even *was*, for that matter) was questionable at best.

She frowned at the board, going over each listing a dozen times in the vain hope that perhaps her dream job would materialize on the thirteenth pass—in the middle of which one of the guild staff came to add several new offers.

"New offers! One of these could be it!" Melody scanned them with renewed hope. There were five in all. "And they're all for men..." The word "maid" didn't appear once—they were all jobs for male professions, like chefs or adjuncts for educators. "Oh. Wait, there's one more. This one's asking for a woman, but it... it's for a noble house?"

Nobles did not hire help without a referral to vouch for them. It simply did not happen. Aristocracy came with delicate responsibilities, some of which involved the royal family. Therefore, they had to hire sensible and trustworthy servants, and both those traits required reliable referrals. So it confused Melody to find a posting here, on the board specifically for work that did *not* require referrals, for a "House Rudleberg."

"Place of employment, their capital estate... Seeking one all-works maid?!"

The maid of all work was perhaps the most menial of domestic servants, employed only by petty nobility or common folk well off enough to afford help but not a full retinue. Typically, a great many servants all working in tandem would handle the care of a large, sweeping estate. Kitchen maids assisted in culinary duties, laundry maids saw to laundry, chambermaids attended the chambers, parlormaids tended to reception areas, and so on.

Not so for the humble maid of all work. She saw to everything. Of course, this meant that large, sweeping estates typically weren't her domain, but that did not make the scope of her duties any less daunting. Maids of all work broke

their backs in modest households for half the prestige.

This was the position offered by the Rudlebergs, a land-owning family.

Any sane person would scoff at the idea. It was a parade of red flags. The implications of being a gofer for a noble's manor were hellish, to say the least, and the low barrier to entry (namely, the lack of a referral requirement) spoke to a deficit of care for the individual or the sensibilities one in service to a lord's family ought to have. Any *sane* person would have considered all of this.

"This is... This is it! This is exactly what I wanted!"

Melody was not any sane person.

She darted over to reception, the listing clutched in her hand and a smile plastered on her face. "I'll take this one, please!"

"Found something worthwhile? We don't get much, this time of... Is this a noble house?" The woman at the counter tilted her head. "And they're looking for a maid...without a referral?"

Melody knew that already. "Could we proceed with the formalities? I'm anxious to get started."

"Oh, um, yes. Of course."

Despite the nagging feeling in the back of her mind, the receptionist handed Melody the relevant address. Strange as the situation was, there was nothing *technically* wrong with the offer.

"Thank you!"

"Good lu—oh. There she goes. Sweet girl, but lord have mercy. I hope the Rudlebergs' housekeeper is a patient woman. Wait, where have I heard that name?" She could not for the life of her remember why alarm bells rang in her head at that name. The receptionist turned to ask her coworker, who managed the postings. "Hey, did you put up an offer from House Rudleberg?"

"Ah, that I did. Their last maid's hip finally gave out, poor old thing. Never seen nobility hire without a referral, but I suppose the count's hands are tied. Expect it won't be easy finding a replacement under those conditions."

"Rudleberg... Rudleberg... I remember now! They're the Ignobles! The ones

who are so poor they can only afford a single maid...”

“Something the matter? You look like you’ve seen death itself.”

The receptionist had made a grave error: She had just doomed that poor girl.

Said poor girl, none the wiser, skipped over to the district of the highborns.

At the heart of Paltescia stood the royal palace. Flowing off of it like arteries stretched the streets of the Upper District, the world of nobility, which gradually let out into the sprawling capillaries of the Lower District’s byways where the commoners lived, forming a physical stratification of status within the towering city walls.

The manor Melody was to attend to was the Rudlebergs’ capital estate, a secondary residence away from their lands, located about halfway up the Upper District. Melody passed many opulent displays of wealth and rank along the way, but there was no missing the Rudleberg estate, for better or worse. Mostly worse.

“Is...this place haunted?”

The gate was rusted beyond recognition. The walkway’s cobblestones were either missing or cracked, and where they were missing, weeds and overgrown shrubbery dominated. Untrimmed trees cast ominous shadows over the grounds.

The facade, too, stood in a hideous state of disrepair, with one wall seeming just moments away from crumbling. All over, paint peeled off the buildings. The brass knocker was black with oxidation.

This place clearly had not been properly maintained in well over a decade. Any sane maid would have about-faced then and there, walked away, and never looked back.

“Goodness, so much work for me to do! Oh, I’m itching to get started!”

Melody was not any sane maid.

“I *must* convince them to hire me,” she ranted. “Oh, but this is the front door.”

Only the master and his family or invited guests were allowed to enter through the front door of a noble's residence. Servants made use of a separate entrance explicitly for them.

Melody stepped back and was about to circle around when the door swung open. A young lady stood behind it. "Got to go shopping, and then... Oh. Can I help you?"

She appeared to be about Melody's age and wore a horrid myrtle dress. Melody's first impression was regret for how pretty she could have been. Her blonde hair flowed past her shoulders, and her aquamarine eyes were set in a face that *could* have been gorgeous were it not for the neglect, leaving her ragged and unnaturally aged.

Such a sad waste of beauty.

Focus, Melody. She said she was going shopping, so she must be another maid. In which case, I can't believe she has the audacity to use the front door! I'd better tell her off later. After I introduce myself, I suppose.

"My name is Melody Wave, madam. I've come regarding a job offer I saw at the Commerce Guild."

"Already? Wow, that was fast! Thanks so much!" The girl snatched Melody's hand.

"Wha—m-madam?!"

The girl dragged her into the estate. "Let's talk in the dining hall."

"M-madam, servants aren't supposed to use the front door! Where is the other entrance? I'll re-enter through there. Please, I insist."

"Don't worry about that. I insist, and if I'm okay with it there's no harm done, right?"

"You... I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"Oh, sorry. Not very obvious, is it?" She beamed. "I'm Luciana Rudleberg, proud noblewoman and daughter of Count Rudleberg. Welcome to the estate!"

"I'm *sorry*?!" Melody blurted in horror.

Luciana didn't stop until they had arrived at the servants' dining hall. "Sit. I'll make some tea."

"Goodness, no, my lady! That's not your job!"

"Don't worry, I'm used to it. Always brewed my own back home."

Reluctantly, Melody took a seat at the servants' table. She watched Luciana pull down a canister of tea from a cupboard, pop open the lid, and start dumping leaves into a pot.

"Stop, stop, *stop!*" the maid shrieked.

"Hm? What for?"

"Please, my lady, allow me! I *insist!*"

"B-but I wanted to—"

"I will prepare for you the best cup of tea you've ever had, if you'll allow me!"

"The best ever? Okay, well now I'm interested. You insist?"

"I insist!"

Gods above, that was close. She hasn't even pre-warmed the teapot.

Melody fished around the shelves for a tea set, then inspected a jar of water.

"My lady, when was this water fetched?" she asked.

"Only yesterday," Luciana answered. "It's still good."

"Hm. It may be, but it's not fit for quality tea. Oh well. Stream. *Fare Acqua.*"

Melody gestured to the copper pot on the cookstove, filling it with fresh water.

"You can cast spells? Wow, I've never seen magic before."

"One moment, my lady. I won't be long."

The best way to prepare tea was to use fresh, highly oxygenated water. That air would create a convection effect when boiled, causing the water to swirl as hot water ascended and cold water descended, thus allowing the tea leaves to "jump" about inside the teapot. More movement meant infusing it with more flavor, leading to a better tasting tea.

"Here you are, my lady. Please, have a taste."

“It already smells amazing. These are those same tea leaves?” Luciana took a sip and gasped. “It *is* amazing!”

She could hardly believe her taste buds. Everything about it spoke of high quality, yet she knew for certain her leaves were anything but. Nobility and tea went together like clouds and the sky. For the Ignoble Rudlebergs, however, it was a costly luxury—one they could only afford by purchasing the lowest of the lowest quality. It had certainly never tasted this good.

“I had no idea technique could alter the flavor so much. That was delicious,” the lady breathed. “Melody, you said your name was?”

“Correct, my lady.”

“And you...*are* interested in working here? You’d be an all-works maid, you know.”

“I am, and I do!”

“Oh, perfect! In that case, glad to have you, Melody!”

“I am at your service, my lady.” Melody skillfully reined in the excitement threatening to overwhelm her. “Before I get settled in, may I speak with your housekeeper?”

Luciana shifted nervously. “You, um, didn’t know?”

“Know what?”

Luciana blanched. Melody could not discern why.

“Melody, it’s... It’s just you,” she confessed.

“Oh, yes, I’m aware the listing was only for one maid. There’s not someone competing with me, is there?”

“No, I... How do I explain this?” Luciana stammered. “It’s *just* you, Melody. There are no other servants. In the entire estate.”

“Just...me?”

It *was* a fairly modest estate as far as manors went, but even so, it wasn’t a job for one girl alone. Combined with the care of Luciana, her new mistress, Melody’s hands would be more than full. No sane maid could handle such a

workload.

“Just to ensure I’m understanding correctly,” said Melody. “I am a maid of all work. I would see to *everything* myself, my lady?”

“I’d never expect you to do that. Do however much you can manage, and I’ll help where I can. I promise! I’ll...!”

Luciana stopped short. She was asking the world and had nothing to offer in return. Whatever the maid could handle in this estate would still be a far larger burden than what she’d have to do in a commoner household. Luciana braced for rejection, already plotting how she’d get by in the coming days.

“Oh my goodness, you’re too kind, my lady!” Melody cheered. “I’ll start right this second!”

Luciana couldn’t believe her ears. “You mean it? You’ll be doing everything alone, and I do mean everything.”

“Of course! I wouldn’t want it any other way! Oh, you honor me, my lady!”

I-is her head on straight? Luciana caught herself thinking.

Meanwhile, Melody’s thoughts veered a very different direction: *I was already counting my blessings getting to be a maid of all work, but this? I get everything! All to myself! Someone pinch me, I must be dreaming!*

Someone needed to do more than pinch this madwoman.

“Once again, Lady Luciana, I am humbly at your service!”

“O-okay. Um. Welcome!”

So began the career of Melody Wave, House Rudleberg’s newest maid.

Chapter 5:

Let the Maidness Begin

THE PALTESCIAN ROYAL ACADEMY FOR Higher Learning—*the* premier institute in Theolas for up-and-coming aristocrats to educate themselves about the ways of the world. The crown required that all noble children attend for three years starting at age fifteen.

This included, of course, Luciana Rudleberg.

This year would be her first at Royal Academy, an occasion normally celebrated by one's family, but her parents had returned home to address trouble in the country. Little did the lady know she would spend her solitary days in the capital living in a haunted mansion.

The estate had been left to the care of a single old maid. It was a wonder she'd kept the place from collapsing, but she was gone now, largely on account of Luciana. She'd invited friends to tea without first assessing the condition of her new home, forcing the veteran maid to quite literally break her back (or hip, rather) rushing to put the manor in a state fit for guests. The lack of said guests spoke to the results of those efforts.

That maid subsequently retired from service.

"And that pretty much covers everything. Any other questions?"

"Not at the moment. Thank you, my lady."

The lady and her maid were still in the dining hall, but not for the delicious tea. They had just concluded all the necessary explanations to get Melody ready to officially begin working for the Rudlebergs.

"I'll begin right...after I make my uniform, of course!"

"Uniform?" Luciana said. "You're making one? How long do you think that'll take?"

The Rudlebergs had no maid uniform, much to Melody's dismay. That wasn't

a problem, though: Melody knew just the trick!

Melody stood, gave herself some space, and raised her hand. “Rethread—*Ricucitura*.”

Luciana watched in awe as Melody’s dress fell apart at the seams before her eyes—quite literally. Each individual thread, thousands of them, rearranged themselves around the maid. Melody twirled among the strands in a sort of dance.

In reality, what Luciana saw as a dance was Melody manipulating the threads as they reformed around her body. Luciana was captivated. As the spectacle unfolded, she said, stunned, “Wow. I can’t even see anything.”



Oh, she could see the spectacle itself well enough, but she couldn't discern anything more salacious. Melody's clothing was nothing more than floating strings now, very considerate floating strings. No matter how Luciana tried—and she was not ashamed to admit she tried—they seemed to obscure her vision in the name of modesty.

The threads began to coalesce into a coherent shape. In quick bursts of light, a black dress billowed forth, followed by an apron, and then a cap for Melody's head that appeared with a *pop*. It was like a magical girl transformation, complete with the conveniently concealing beams of light and obstructing flourishes.

But Melody was no pop culture magical girl. Rather, she'd become the very picture of a 19th century British Victorian maid. The dress and apron reached down to her ankles, the white cap topping off the look. It was tasteful, refined, and domesticated.

When the maid was done transform—changing, that is, she offered her lady a most perfect curtsy. “Do I please you, my lady?”

“I-it's cute,” was all she could manage.

“Thank you, my lady. I'm quite fond of the look as well. Excuse me for speaking out of turn, but it's my personal belief that any maid with a skirt short enough to show visible thigh is no maid at all.”

“I don't know what that means, but the show was impressive! I had no idea magic was so versatile.”

“And the uniform is too. I've applied a measure of protection to it, so it should hold even better than armor.”

Luciana giggled, assuming she was joking. “Assuming” being the operative word.

The Rudlebergs were not a magically gifted house. As such, their knowledge of those arts was limited at best. Add to that a lack of education due to destitution, and it was no wonder the count's daughter failed to truly grasp what she had just witnessed: the skill it took to re sew an entire outfit via arcane means, to alter the dress's color from green to black and white, to somehow

conjure extra fabric from nothing for the apron and cap...

How little she knew.

“Anywho, that was a perfect curtsy,” Luciana said. “Could you maybe teach me how to do stuff like that? There’s a ball coming up, and I don’t have the foggiest idea what sort of etiquette I need to know.”

Melody’s eyes lit up. “You want a governess to teach you proper manners, then. Rest assured, you’re in good hands.”

“The way you’re looking at me makes me wonder. Let’s, er, start slow, okay?”

“Oh, my lady, I cannot thank you enough for taking me into your employ. I can’t imagine a better estate at which to apply my talents.”

“G-glad you’re here, Melody.”

“As am I, my lady.”

Luciana retired to her room to study. Meanwhile, Melody wasted no time getting to work.

She eyed the foyer like a predator sizing up her prey. “First things first: We need to get this place into a livable state. Time for some maintenance.”

The estate needed more than a bit of sprucing up. It was, in a very literal sense, falling apart. Melody knew at a glance that she couldn’t tackle this job alone.

“An easy enough problem to fix. One become many—*Alter Ego*.”

A number of spheres of light sprang from her palm and dispersed around the foyer. They morphed in midair into humanoid forms, eventually creating fifty clones of Melody. Ridiculous? Don’t be absurd.

“You all have your tasks,” said Boss Melody.

“Yes, madam!” replied the lesser Melodys.

Quite conveniently, each copy carried with it the memories of its source, so each knew exactly what to do. They conjured cleaning implements and construction tools and got to mending the dilapidated manor at once. Naturally,

Melody counted DIY repairs among her many skillsets—the magic just made it go faster.

“All right,” Boss Melody said. “I’m going out to get things for dinner.”

“Yes, madam!”

Melody’s trip to the marketplace was but a brief affair. The state of the Ignoble Rudlebergs’ finances was downright pitiful, and the cost of living in the royal capital was simply not manageable on their budget.

This didn’t dampen Melody’s spirits, however. Oh, no. Whatever the market sold, why, she could go out and gather it herself!

“Hide—*Trasparenza*. Flight—*Ali da Angelo*.”

Basket in hand, Melody vanished from view, then floated into the air toward a nearby forest. Outlandish? It’s par for the course.

She alighted near the middle of the forest. Life abounded, from mushrooms nestled between roots to fruits hanging from branches and herbs sprouting from the earth. The wood was flourishing with more than enough to eat.

“Perfect. That was easy. Now for some meat. Where might I find a beast to hunt?” Just then, a shriek pierced the air. Melody looked up to find a bird circling overhead. “What luck! That’ll do nice...ly?” The creature struck. “*Eek!*”

A thunderbird! These magical creatures hunted via vicious ambushes. Suddenly, lightning crashed as the beast targeted Melody. The bolt zipped straight for her, sure to strike her down. Or, rather, it should have.

“Goodness, that was rude.”

The stalwart maid was completely unharmed. Her uniform truly *was* quite versatile if the protections she had cast on it could defend against a lightning strike. Perhaps it really *was* sturdier than armor.

“Have it your way,” Melody grumbled. “Homing shot—*Missile Guidato!*” She fired a hyper-condensed ball of magic at the beast, locking on with the homing functionality she herself had devised.

It struck home. The bird screeched as it plummeted out of the sky.

“Got it! Wait, oh no!”

Melody scurried out of the way as this true monster—in every sense of the word—crashed before her. The thunderbird sported a wingspan easily three times the height of a man. In hindsight, Melody probably should have realized how large it was when it circled overhead, but she’d somehow overlooked the sheer enormity of the creature until it lay before her.

“That’s enough scares for one day, I think. Birds in this world sure are big, and magic sure is incredible if it can take out a beast like that so easily.”

Another misconception. Melody’s naivete continued to skew her perceptions of the arcane. If she’d only considered her own mother, who could hardly use enough magic to cast a simple light spell once a day, she might have recalibrated her expectations. Alas, one could only hope reality would sink in eventually. Someday.

Melody carved up the beast—with the help of magic of course—and stowed the meat in her basket. The basket hardly appeared large enough for three baguettes, and yet it was able to hold the entire thunderbird.

A peek inside would reveal its secret, for the basket had no visible bottom. Instead, it was connected to a magically conjured pocket dimension of infinite space where time did not flow. An entrance to it could theoretically be opened anywhere and on anything, but currently it was attached to the basket because Melody had decided this was the most fitting use for it. In case it was not abundantly evident by her fastidiously crafted, maidly aesthetic, Melody was a woman who took pains with her appearance.

“That should do it for food, I think. Back to the estate—and I’d better hurry. That took longer than expected. I’ll just make a connection to the servants’ hall, I suppose. Gateway—*Ovunque Porta*.”

A door appeared in front of Melody. On the other side stood the impossible: the servants’ hall of the Rudleberg estate. Almost like an Anywhere D... Everywhere. A legally-distinct-from—*Doraemon* Everywhere Door.

“Now I have an easy shortcut for tomorrow!”

Melody sauntered through, quite pleased with herself.

“I’ve brought tea, my lady.”

After two hours of study, Luciana’s focus began to waver—and Melody appeared just in the nick of time with refreshments.

“Thank you, Melody, but you didn’t have to do that. I’m sure you’re busy enough as is.”

Luciana had not considered the very real possibility that her maid had cloned herself to do several times the work at once.

“I’m never too busy for my mistress,” Melody said. “Please, have some tea and rest a while, my lady.”

“I guess I *was* just getting thirsty.”

She savored the break, and when it was done, Melody collected her lady’s cup and took her leave.

“Okay, back to it,” Luciana sighed. “But first: bathroom.”

She exited her room only to find Melody outside it, cleaning. But wasn’t she carrying the tea set back to the kitchen? Was she already on to her next task?

“Something the matter, my lady?” the maid asked.

“Oh, no. Just going to the bathroom.”

“By all means. It’s almost done being cleaned.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

Luciana continued on her way. As she did, she couldn’t help but admire the state of the corridor. *Wow. Melody works fast, without cutting corners, even. I’ve never seen this place so spotless.*

Not a single speck of dust marred the hallway leading to the bathroom. Even the ceiling looked brand new. For that matter, Luciana seemed to recall there being a lot more cracks in the walls and windows. Had Melody fixed those too?

“Melody?” There she was again, in front of the bathroom. How had she

gotten here first?

“Perfect timing, my lady. I’ve just finished cleaning. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Th-thank you.” Luciana’s brain hurt.

After concluding her business, she recalled something rather urgent.

Is she making dinner?

Surely not, given she seemed to be everywhere at once taking care of the estate. It was highly likely she’d forgotten all about dinner in all the hustle and bustle. Luciana headed for the kitchen, determined to make herself useful.

“Soup Me, pass the salt.”

“Entrée Me, share some of that meat. We’ll have extra, and I want to use it in the soup.”

“Dishes Me, are you done washing up yet?”

“Just finished; they’re ready and waiting.”

Melody was already there and hard at work. Three of her, actually.

Luciana shrieked.

“My lady!” the Melodys harmonized in glorious stereo sound.

Luciana shrieked again.

“My lady, are you okay?!” more Melodys melodized.

A wild Broom Melody appeared. And then a wild Feather Duster Melody appeared. And then a wild Dust Cloth Melody appeared. And then another Melody. And then another. And another. And another.

Before long, all fifty Melodys crowded into the kitchen.

There was another shriek, followed by a dainty sigh, and Luciana promptly fainted.

“My lady!” every single Melody cried at once.

In that moment, the Rudleberg capital estate was the closest to a haunted house it had ever been in its desolate history.

Luciana awoke a short time later. When she regained consciousness, she finally took a good look at how much the manor had changed while she'd studied in her room. This produced another shriek (the good kind). Dinner produced a similar shriek (the "oh, this is yummy" kind). She was about fifty-fifty on shrieks that day.

"Thank you for dinner. It was delicious," Luciana said.

"It was my pleasure to serve," Melody replied with a smile.

"I especially loved the herb-grilled poultry. It's been so long since I had good meat. I'm surprised you could afford it."

"Oh, that came from a bird I hunted in the forest outside the city, my lady."

"You *hunted* it?!" Luciana blurted. "With magic? Like the kind I saw earlier?"

"Yes, my lady. As it happens, I *couldn't* afford it, or much of anything. So I gathered it all myself. Everything you ate this evening came from the same forest where I found that bird. I was very lucky to discover such an abundant wood."

"I didn't even know such a place existed. The only forest I know of near the capital is the blightland, the Great Vanargand Wood. Good to know that's not all that's out there."

"Oh? I've never heard that name."

"It's dangerous. Very dangerous. So keep your distance, okay?"

"I'll take caution," Melody promised. "The forest I found was perfectly safe, though, I assure you."

"All forests are dangerous to some extent, blightland or not. Be careful out there."

"Of course, my lady."

"Melody," Luciana said, "thank you so much. I'm so glad you came here."

"Your words are wasted on me, my lady. One moment, and I'll prepare some after-dinner tea."

Melody bowed deeply before excusing herself. Her first day as maid, all told,

had been a roaring success.

That night, chaos erupted in His Majesty's office in the royal palace.

"An intruder in Vanargand?! Surely you jest, Sven!"

"I'm afraid not, sire. My detection field did indeed identify a trespasser in the blightland."

Sven Shaykrode, archmage of the Theolan royal court, was not thrilled to be disturbing the king in his study. His Majesty Garnard von Theolas was even less thrilled than Sven when he received the news.

Blightlands, the natural habitats of the magical beasts commonly known as monsters, dotted the world. They were treacherous, inhospitable places, though more due to the monsters than anything the Blight itself might do to humans—contrary to the name.

For those monsters would not suffer harm from any sort of physical strike. Only magic could fell the beasts, making any encounter potentially fatal for the average individual. The best defense against them was simply to avoid them. Ask anyone, and they would each have a different cautionary tale to tell, all warning the foolhardy to avoid the blightlands like death itself.

The largest blightland—the Great Vanargand Wood—loomed ominously just east of the royal capital. It was strictly, absolutely, utterly forbidden, even as blightlands go. And there was an intruder in it.

"Are they still inside?"

Sven nodded gravely. "Most probably, Your Majesty. The field only detected one passage. That the individual's mana has not been detected again leads me to surmise that they have not left. I can only guess as to why."

"We'll put the guards on high alert. Increase patrols around the Wood. I want you to ascertain this person's movements. Where are they going? What is their objective? Learn all you can about them. Do not fail me in this."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Just what kind of a person could this intruder be...?"

Would that His Majesty could know that what he dreaded was but a humble maid collecting groceries for her mistress. But he could not.

And would that the archmage could know that that maid would enter the Wood via a portal, thus making her invisible to his detection field. But he could not.

Chapter 6:

The Silver Angel and the Red Knight: A Steamy Rendezvous

MELODY HAD WORKED IN THE SERVICE of the Rudlebergs for five days when her mistress came to her with a request.

“A tea party, my lady?”

“That’s right. I need to make my comeback after the last one!”

The last tea party exactly one week ago was still fresh in Luciana’s mind—including all her regrets from it. The creaking floors, the cawing crows, her friends shuddering and jumping at every shadow. The embarrassment was still raw.

Beatrice and Milliaria, Luciana’s best friends, were new nobility, their houses having been formed in the past few decades; House Lillertcruz and House Faronkalt respectively. The three of them had grown up together thanks to the proximity of their lands, but in truth, both Lillertcruz’s viscountcy and Faronkalt’s barony had once belonged to the Rudlebergs.

The Rudlebergs’ countship hung precariously in the balance thanks to the failures of their patriarch two generations prior. That count, as an example of said failures, had been forced to sell part of their land, and conferred it upon Houses Lillertcruz and Faronkalt. This allowed him to alleviate the family of much of his accrued debt. Lillertcruz and Faronkalt had done the count a favor, some might say, but the count didn’t see it that way. He resented the new viscount and baron, as well as their “theft” of his forefathers’ lands.

Of course, the two houses had nothing to do with the count’s misfortune. Whether the count would admit it or not, his failures were entirely his own and his anger misplaced.

Thankfully, the grudge would not last, and the following count, upon cutting his predecessor’s folly of a lordship short, quickly made amends, thus avoiding

needless conflict with the Rudlebergs' new neighbors—something the lord prior had been too shortsighted to foresee. The three families would continue to nurture that goodwill, forming a strong alliance, so it was absolutely vital to the future of their relationship that Luciana rectify the insult of her previous tea party.

“Can it be done, Melody? You’ve made so much progress.”

“Well...”

Luciana finished her breakfast, then sat back and admired the dining hall while her maid contemplated. Melody hadn’t missed a single spot. The place was immaculate, more than fit for guests.

Luciana plucked at the snow-white tablecloth. Only days ago, it was ragged and dark with filth, much like the rest of the estate. A haunted house, some called it, yet now it was...

Luciana didn’t rightly know *what* to call it.

The front gate wasn’t rusted down to the hinges anymore, and it didn’t squeak. The cobblestone walkway was once again a real walkway instead of a wasteland of cracked rocks. Thinned and moved to more flattering positions, the trees no longer blocked out the sunlight. The facade wasn’t crumbling on one side. The brass knocker shone with new luster. And the interior was utterly unrecognizable.

It was a miracle. A real *manor* that Luciana wasn’t ashamed to show her friends. And that was only the beginning of what Melody had done.

Luciana tugged at a wavy, golden lock resting on her shoulder. She was no longer a “could-have-been,” she *was* beautiful now, all thanks to Melody’s scrupulous care.

Her hair flowed down her back like water. Her skin glowed with youth and vitality. Her features, already as near to perfect as one could get, were made yet even more perfect with a subtle layer of makeup. Her gorgeous, aquamarine eyes glistened like gemstones.

Even her clothes spoke to the incredible transformation of this place. Her awful myrtle dress was gone, replaced with a vibrant chartreuse one—or so it

seemed. Rather, they were one and the same. The myrtle dress had been her mother's, and it had simply faded with age, so Melody, lacking the funds for a new wardrobe, had done something magical, just as she'd done with her own clothing, and breathed new life into the dress. She even tweaked it slightly to align with modern trends and sensibilities.

Melody had given her lady a manor fit for a noble, and more. Luciana knew she could impress this time. For once, she was not only presentable, but she *wanted* to present.

"As you wish, my lady," the maid finally said after long deliberation. "How does next week sound?"

"Next week. Perfect," said Luciana. "Thank you so much, Melody!"

The lady flung herself at her maid, wrapping her arms around her.

"Good lord," Melody howled, "this is so unbecoming, my lady! *So* unbecoming!"

Luciana chortled. "But you're not telling me to stop, are you? You know you want this."

"Where did you learn to speak like that?!"

"Sorry, sorry," she giggled, releasing the poor maid. "I just couldn't help myself."

The young lady had no idea what was in store for her.

Melody huffed and puffed, catching her breath. "Clearly we have much work to do before the tea party."

"Work? What kind of work?"

"Educational."

Luciana had opened Pandora's box, and there was no closing it.

"Blighted hell, Melody, end this! I can't do it! It's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, my lady. Don't stop. One, two. One, two." Melody clapped on the beat. Luciana stepped forward in time, ten particularly thick

tomes balanced on her head. “Chin up, eyes forward! Straighten up, my lady. Your center of gravity needs to be farther back! Step like you’re walking a tightrope. Glide. One foot in front of the other. Think graceful! Refined!”

A blighted hell had indeed come to the foyer of the estate. There, Melody was putting Luciana through a rigorous lesson on how to walk like a lady.

“Neck...breaking,” Luciana groaned. She made one wrong step and lost her balance, the books on her head toppling to the floor with her. “Ow, ow, ow!”

Melody knelt before her, placing her hand on Luciana’s. A moment later, she pulled her lady up and smiled so gently a saint would have been jealous. Relief washed over Luciana. This ordeal was finally ov—

“Once more, my lady. Back to the beginning.”

“What? No. Melody?!”

The maid shoved her all the way across the foyer, right back to the start. As if by magic—most definitely by magic—the books fluttered off the floor and stacked up on the crown of Luciana’s head.

Saint Melody vanished; there was only Drill Sergeant Melody. “Once more! One, two! One, two!”

“Nooooo!”

Once upon a time, Melody had been Mizunami Ritsuko, the greatest prodigy who ever lived. Her talents were twofold: innate and earned. Mizunami Ritsuko had been no stranger to effort; it was a way of life to her.

Indeed, becoming a maid had not been a simple matter of applying the knowledge and skills granted to her by birth. She studied and practiced and learned the hard way, a way she (perhaps unfairly) held others to as staunchly as herself. She was passionate to say the least, but Luciana probably would have had a different way to describe it.

Still, the curriculum worked. Luciana’s inner lady was nurtured, and she improved rapidly—though Luciana liked to think she could have done so *without* the neck injuries.

Preparations for the tea party proceeded without incident, as did Luciana's lessons.

And then, on the very last day before the party, they both breathed a sigh of relief: one because her lady had achieved a measure of competency in etiquette, and the other because she had made it out alive. Though for very different reasons, each wore a smile at the end of it all.

Melody was out shopping, content in the knowledge that they were ready for tomorrow, no matter what it might bring. And then, out of nowhere, a splash sounded and something that smelled like fruit vinegar soaked her.

She whirled around toward the source of the splash and met the eyes of a fellow maid—a young woman with dark brown braided hair. Her mouth hung open. She held a bottle in her right hand, a cork in her left, and that bottle was pointed right at Melody. Deductive reasoning filled in the rest.

I suppose that explains why I heard someone asking if she could “pop that open” to “test the fragrance.”

Several seconds went by as the other maid drained of all color. “I-I-I am so sorry!” she stammered. “Oh, I’m such a klutz!”

Melody started to console the girl, reassuring her that this was just an honest accident, but the maid was beside herself. Before Melody could get a word in, the girl grabbed her by the arm.

“I’m so, so sorry!” she professed. “My name is Paula, and the estate I work at is this way. Please, I’ll run you a bath and see that your clothes aren’t ruined!”

“I’m, um, Melody. And it’s all right, really—” The girl did not seem to be listening. “Uhm, hello?!”

“Here, madam,” the girl said to the shopkeeper. “For the vinegar. Now let’s hurry!”

“I’m trying to—hold on! For goodness’ sake, hold on!”

Paula was most certainly not listening. She continued to pull Melody along until they arrived at her place of work.

They came to a small residence on the border of the Upper and Lower

Districts that didn't quite belong to either one. This family had even less standing than the Rudlebergs, whose estate sat higher up. It likely belonged to a baron, or perhaps even a knight—a non-hereditary title and as low a rank as one could hold while still technically counting as nobility.

Melody mused over all this, and by the time she reached this conclusion, she was standing in the residence's bathroom.

"Please, madam, while the water's warm," said Paula. "I'll take care of your clothes."

The whirlwind gusted onward. Before she knew it, Melody was naked and about to take a dip. Paula seemed quite skilled with her hands—when corked bottles weren't involved, at least.

"Well, since I'm here." Melody surrendered, rinsed off, and sank into the water. "So uncanny," she muttered, submerging down to her shoulders. "The tub is ceramic, which is Western, but the process is Japanese."

In the modern Western world, baths weren't a complicated affair. One would fill the tub and get in. Their purpose was rarely to actually get clean. Here, however, the custom was decidedly Eastern, with a separate shower area for rinsing off before soaking.

Such a strange world Melody had found herself in. The maids looked right out of 19th century England, but so much else was generically Middle Ages Europe. And even then, there was magic, flushing toilets, Western ceramic tubs with Japanese bathing practices—frankly, it felt inconsistent.

"It's like someone picked out all the best parts of Earth and made a setting out of them."

Melody giggled at the preposterous notion. Wherever this was, it was entirely disconnected from the reality she knew. The societies and cultures in this place would have developed independently of the ones from her reality. Any overlap was nothing more than coincidence, she concluded.

How long has it been since I relaxed in a bath someone else drew for me?

She leaned back, stretched her legs, and hummed lackadaisically to herself. How long had it been, indeed. She hadn't been in a tub big enough to lie in

since her past life. She decided she deserved this.

“Maybe I can...let my hair down. Just this once.”

And she did. The peace and quiet, a rarity of late, compelled her to remove the enchantments on her hair and eyes. When she looked into the water, lapis lazuli eyes met her, framed by silver hair.

Celesty.

She smiled, reminded of her mother. *It's been a while, Mom. I'm a maid now. All that's left is to be the most perfect one in the world.*

“Right,” she mumbled. “The only question is how.”

She gazed at the ceiling as she pondered the question. What did “the most perfect maid in the world” even mean?

The ceiling offered no solutions. Did her mother know? What was the most perfect maid to Selena? It seemed only the gods held the answer.

If I had to guess, I'd say the most perfect maid in the world is probably, well, perfect. She does it all, and she does it the best. So I guess that's what I'll shoot for.

Being the Rudlebergs' maid of all work sounded like a great first step on that journey. Ritsuko had learned a lot about *how* to be a maid, but this was her first time putting it into practice. She needed this experience more than anything if she wanted to fulfill her oath to her mother.

Water sloughed off Melody's body as she stood in the tub, clean and warm and feeling better than she had in ages. She made for the changing room. Hopefully Paula would have her uniform ready.

In all her musing, Melody had thought only of her mother. Never once had she spared a thought for her father, from whom she'd inherited her brilliant silver hair. Her dream of becoming a maid had all but banished him from her mind. The poor man.

Absent father figures notwithstanding, Melody started to open the door to the changing room—when it opened for her.

A man with red hair stood on the other side. He was naked. *Buck* naked.

Totally nude.

One startled noise broke the silence. The moment looped over and over. Melody gaped at the man, more confused than embarrassed.

Their eyes met. Then his fell. Low. Down to her neck. Then her collar. Then her breasts. Then lower.

“You’re...an angel,” the naked man breathed.

Melody shot out her hand on pure instinct, setting it against the man’s firm abs. “To oblivion—*Dimenticate!*”

The spell was technically a work in progress. Melody didn’t actually know in practice if thunder magic was the right approach for an amnesia spell. She still had to investigate much of the spell, such as the best site for shock application, how long the memory loss would last, and how selective it was. In its current state, the spell acted more like a stun gun than an amnesic.

But it was a damn good stun gun.

Light flashed, and the man convulsed. With hardly a grunt, he toppled back. He would feel the blow to the back of his head in the morning, but that wasn’t Melody’s problem. It was a fair price to pay after sullyng her innocence so.

Melody didn’t know many men in either of her lives, so this confrontation supplied something of a crash course. Even with the man unconscious, there was simply too much...anatomy that she did not care to memorize.

The nerve! she fumed, angrily throwing a towel around herself. *Not even the decency to knock or... Wait.*

Logic gradually took precedence over emotion as Melody sorted through the possibilities. By process of elimination, this man had to be...

Footsteps stomped toward the room. Melody hastily fixed her appearance. “B-blacken—*Annerire.*”

“Melody, are you okay?!” Paula said as she burst in. “Master! What is he doing here?!”

Gods save me, I knew it! I just assaulted the lord of the estate!

That “lord’s” name and the true identity of the red-haired, buck-naked man:
Sir Lectias Froude.

Chapter 7: To Oblivion

SOME TIME EARLIER, IN THE OFFICE OF Count Leginbarth's capital estate...

"The Spring Ball, my lord? Do you really think people will notice one knight among the peerage missing from it?"

"You think they won't? You'd be doing me a service if you attended. Many a fair maiden has asked me about your absence in the past, you know. And His Highness the crown prince plans to attend Royal Academy this year, so if he's there I want you there as well. Understand, Lect?"

Lect frowned. "Yes, Lord Leginbarth."

He would never get used to Lord Leginbarth's piercing, violet eyes.

Cloud Leginbarth was thirty-three; Lect served as both his personal guard and assistant.

Not that the count couldn't fend for himself. He boasted a physique more suited to a knight than a vice-chancellor: The buttons of his shirt waged a constant losing battle against the broadness of his chest. His complexion was stately yet rugged. With his cropped silver hair and five o'clock shadow, he had the strapping, handsome looks of a soldier.

Inwardly, however, the man was a gentle soul and well loved. Truly, Leginbarth had it all. Women justifiably fought over him, yet he'd never married—and had no intention to.

The count's heart belonged to Selena, and he had no interest in sharing it with any other. Save for perhaps his daughter, Celesty McMarden.

Cloud sighed in relief beneath the stone mask of his composure. *There's some measure of breathing room. Hopefully the women will spare me and flock to him.*

Cloud was shrewd. He knew how to get what he wanted.

Though unlanded, Lect also attracted plenty of attention from the fairer sex. Being a knight made him something like petty nobility—the distinction meant little among peers whose children would inherit their titles, but the young man clearly had potential. Vice-Chancellor Leginbarth favored him and therefore had Lect serve him in several capacities. Few would be surprised if he earned himself a genuine lordship in the near future.

It certainly helped that Lect was a handsome lad, tall and athletic with striking features. His lean, muscular build did not lack for strength, and he kept his vibrant red hair short. His eyes—a fan-favorite trait of his—drooped lazily yet keenly perceived everything around them. On top of all of it, he had a strong character. It was no wonder many placed high hopes on him.

Really wishing Sable and I could swap places right about now, he grumbled to himself.

When Lect had reported Selena's passing and the existence of the count's daughter, he expected Cloud to send him west, where Sable had gone in search of the girl. Yet he encountered quite the opposite. Cloud kept him in the capital, reasoning that Sable should scour the western lands on his own, being more familiar with them. With Celesty being not just the illegitimate offspring of a nobleman and a commoner, but also a maid, they had to conduct their search for her in utter secrecy lest House Leginbarth become the target of malicious scrutiny.

The count had every intention of taking in and legitimizing his own blood, but if nasty rumors began before they could find her, she would encounter a populace primed to fling mud at her. He had therefore taken every precaution to ensure his daughter could join him with poise and dignity.

Of course, he would have to *find* Celesty first. No word of the girl had reached him yet, and none likely would.

Because Celesty McMarden had not gone west.

How the count would swoon were he to know that his flesh and blood lived within this very city, working as a maid. He sighed, for he could not.

"Were that it was my daughter you could escort to the Spring Ball," Cloud lamented. "Someday. With luck."

“You would ask me, my lord?” Lect said.

“Of course. I trust you fully in matters of protection.” He shot Lect a sharp look. “And professionalism.”

The man hadn’t even laid eyes on his daughter, and already he was baring his fatherly fangs. Lect could not comprehend why they were directed at him, though. Far be it from him to willingly stick his nose into the stuffy business of aristocrats.

He assured his lord of this in more polite terms.

“That said, I do expect you to bring a partner with you, Lect.”

“What?!” the knight blurted. “B-but why?!”

“It is part of the service you would be doing me. I’ve grown tired of the incessant appeals to court you. If people see you at this ball without a companion... Gods, it will never end.” Lect gulped. “Why do you think I always attend functions with my sister? Specifically to prevent what I am attempting to rescue you from. It’s a miracle my dear brother-in-law lived fast and true.”

A cruel way to pay respects to the departed, but the count clearly meant it. His first ball after inheriting his father’s title stuck in his memory like a bad hangnail.

“It doesn’t matter who, just find someone,” Cloud said. “Preferably someone versed in the ways of high society, so as not to embarrass yourself, or her. At any rate, the sight of you with a companion should keep the hounds at bay for a time. Unless you fancy yourself prey, in which case, by all means, attend alone.”

“I will...consider my options.”

As promised, Lect considered his options on his way home. And then he considered them some more. He did an awful lot of considering during that journey. He had no convenient family members or acquaintances to recruit like his lord could.

“Maybe Paula could... No. Ridiculous.”

Paula was his all-works maid. He liked that she didn’t pay much attention to

his rank (she came from a merchant family that was no longer in business), but she lacked the bearing and manners expected of a ball attendee.

Lect had a bad habit of getting tunnel vision when he got stuck in his head. Before he knew it, he'd made it all the way home and into the bathroom without so much as announcing himself. A good, long soak would help him sort through his thoughts.

But when he stepped inside, the room was strangely warm. Had Paula already prepared the bath?

"She can be on the ball when she wants to be," he muttered.

Perhaps the change of clothes in the dressing room would have tipped him off to the fact that the bath was already occupied, but Paula hadn't set any out yet. She was too absorbed in cleaning a certain maid's uniform.

Exhausted from his day, Lect couldn't think straight. Why in the world would Paula have prepared a bath for him? Why would *any* maid prepare a bath for her master without knowing exactly when he would return? The knight asked neither of these questions and began to disrobe.

Soon enough, nothing obscured his chiseled physique. He sighed wearily as he opened the door to the bath.

...And met a squeak of surprise and a deafening silence.

A tub of full of hot water did not await him, as he'd anticipated, but instead a pair of deep, azure eyes like bright jewels. It took him another beat to realize they belonged to a woman.

Time skipped in a loop. Each repeat offered another chance to comprehend. And each failed.

Who was this woman? Why was she in his bathroom?

And she was certainly a woman. Of that, he was sure. Her hair hung like beautiful, silvery silk, clinging to her wet, flushed, supple skin. Eyes like the sky at dusk, yet deeper still, gaped at him with coquettish innocence.

Not a single piece of fabric stood between them.

A droplet trailed down her neck. Lect chased it with his gaze, tracing it to her

collar, where it hung for a tantalizing moment. Then it continued down the curve of her breasts, and his eyes followed its path.

He stood in a trance. Here was beauty given form. A single thought occupied his mind, shoving out all others. “You’re...an angel.”

Something soft touched his abs. The girl’s fingers pressed against the hard ridges, and for an instant, Lect thought he might break for the first time in his life.

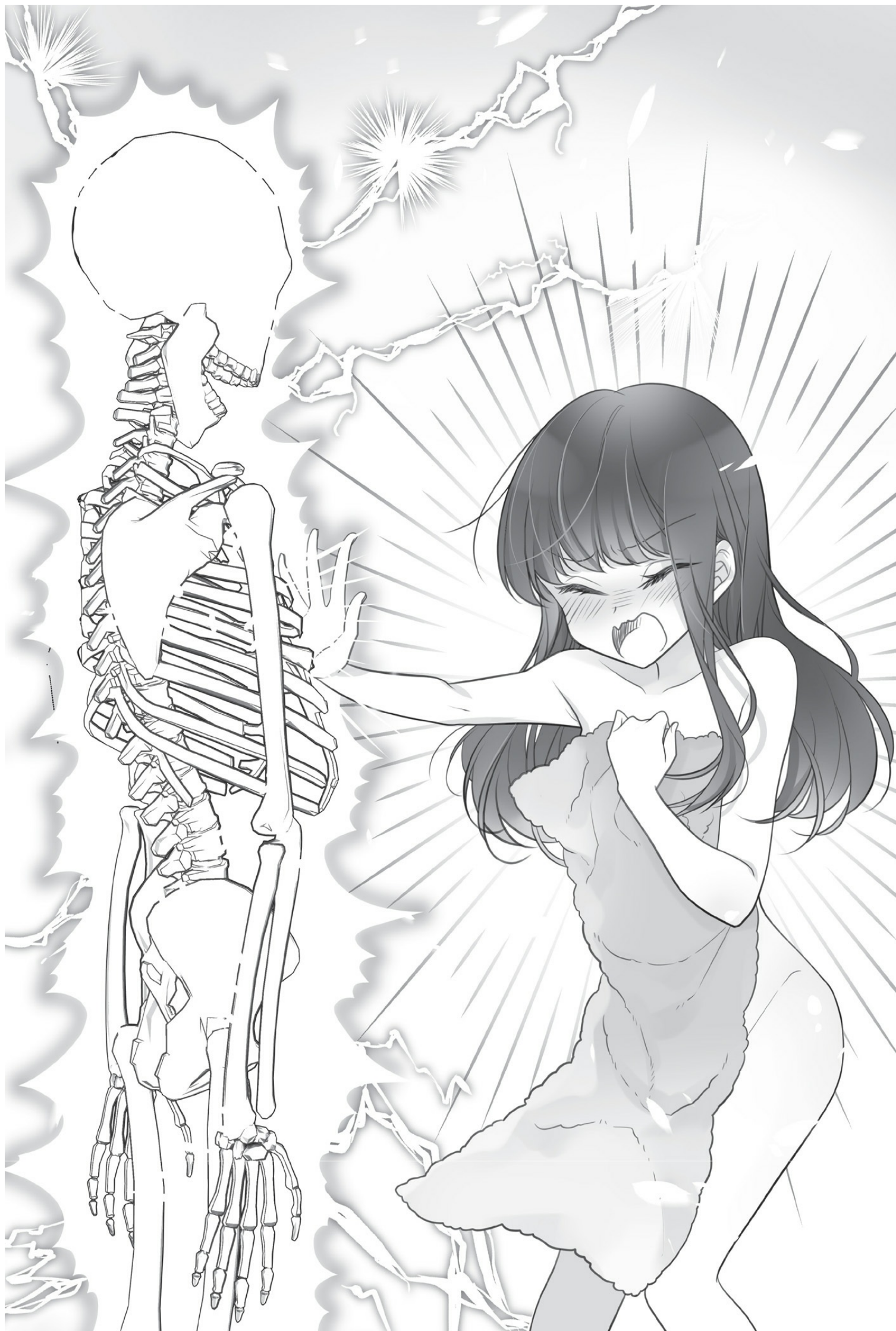
Then the girl screamed. “To oblivion—*Dimenticate!*”

And there was nothing.

Lect reawakened some time later. He blinked open heavy eyes, and there, peering down at him with concern, crouched a girl with silver hair and lapis lazuli eyes.

Silver hair—like Count Leginbarth’s. Lapis lazuli eyes—like the count’s beloved.

“My lady... There you are.” He reached up to stroke her cheek.



The girl cocked her head to one side, inadvertently dodging his touch. "Lady?"

Lect opened his eyes fully, his hand freezing in midair. Sense returned. There was no silver-haired lady here, only a black-haired maid.

An illusion brought on by a muddled mind.

Lect rose with a sigh. He was lying on a large sofa in his parlor, but why? Who was this girl with dark hair and dark eyes? And why was she so familiar?

"Aren't you...?" he began.

"Y-you remember?!" A flush rushed down the girl's neck, her eyes flying wide, eyes that he definitely remembered now that his head had cleared.

"We met in Trendivalez," he said. "You're the one who was looking for the stagecoach."

"Oh dear, oh jeez, do I go for the throat?" the girl rambled to herself. "Do I... Pardon?"

Lect couldn't make out much of her muttering, but what he could understand sounded quite ominous. More illusions, he deduced.

"Are you not?" he asked.

"Trendivalez. Red hair... Oh! Yes, I am! You're the man who showed me to the stage station!"

Lect grinned, pleased that she recalled him. "What brings you to my estate? I'm afraid I don't remember much beyond walking through the front door."

The girl breathed something like a sigh of relief. Odd. And short-lived. She promptly began hemming, hawing, and otherwise fidgeting, trying to avoid answering the question, though Lect couldn't fathom why.

The door burst open. "Ah, Master! You're awake."

"Paula," Lect said. "Perfect timing. Care to explain why I was asleep here? Who is this woman?"

Paula glared at him. Almost suspiciously. Warily. But that had to be in his head. What could he have possibly done to earn her contempt?

“So you really don’t remember.” Paula paused. “Oh, Master, I told you a friend of mine was visiting, so you said you’d be waiting for them here in the parlor, and then you went out like a light. You must have been exhausted.”

“Y-you’re certain that’s what happened? I suppose I have no memory to compare it to.”

“You’ve been so busy lately.” Paula shook her head. “Perhaps *too* busy if you’re having spells of amnesia.”

Too busy was right. He had only just returned from a long, realm-spanning journey in search of his lord’s lost lover, only to take on more work as guard-slash-assistant. And now he had to find a partner to escort to the Spring Ball. It was entirely possible he was more fatigued than he realized.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Lect said.

“You really don’t remember? *Really*, truly?” Paula eyed him with suspicion.

Lect answered in the affirmative yet again. He couldn’t remember a thing, no matter how he tried.

Melody finally relaxed. *Thank goodness.*

Paula, however, almost looked disappointed. *Shame. I would have liked to beat him over the head with the tea tray. Maybe another time.*

She had lied through her teeth, of course. Melody had explained the situation quite thoroughly, including the (theoretical) effect of the spell she had cast on Lect, and Paula agreed to lend a hand, given the circumstances. Unfortunately, the spell had worked. Paula supposed she could live with that for Melody’s sake.

“I would be more *careful* in the future if I were you, Master,” she said. “Anyway, allow me to introduce you. This is Melody, my new friend.”

“Melody Wave, sir. Maid for the Rudleberg estate. It’s a pleasure.” The black-haired maid bent her knees and curtsied.

Lect was starstruck for a moment. *Such a simple greeting. I had no idea it could be so...beautiful.*

He had never seen a curtsy so perfect, almost dance-like in its elegance. Lect

began to understand the beauty of propriety. This girl would comport herself well among nobles, he realized.

“My name is Lectias Froude. But please, call me Lect.”

“As you wish, Master Lect,” said Melody.

“Just Lect is fine.”

“Okay then, um, Lect.”

“Perfect.”

“If you insist, though I find it inappropriate to refer to a noble without a title. I’m only a maid, after all.”

“Perhaps you will get an opportunity to use my title if we ever meet in an official capacity. But today we’re simply in my home. Think nothing of it.”

“I suppose, if you say so,” Melody surrendered. “In any case, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lect. And thank you so much for your help in Trendivalez.”

She smiled at him, and Lect’s heart stopped dead in his chest.

When it resumed beating, it pounded harder and louder than ever before. He feared the maid might hear its hammering.

Wh-what’s happening to me? he wondered.

Lect took solace in the fact that he maintained his composure on the surface. Unbeknownst to him, however, Paula was grinning knowingly behind him.

From that day forward, with Paula as his convenient excuse, the sun rarely set before Lect found a way to see the girl who so ailed his heart. And each time he did, his heart fluttered and pounded anew, though Lect could never sort out why.

Few twenty-one-year-olds would struggle to place such an emotion, but Lect did. And he would continue to for quite some time.

The tea party the following day at the Rudleberg estate went off without a hitch. All that remained for the maid was to await Royal Academy’s opening ceremony with her lady.

Well, that and the arrival of Luciana’s parents.

Chapter 8:

A Less-than-Sweet Reunion

THE RUDLEBERG DEMESNE, LOCATED ON THE north end of Theolas, was once one of the largest and most distinguished in all the land. However, the disastrous countship two generations ago squandered more than half of it, leaving the Rudlebergs noble in title only. Eager to mock this fall from grace, their peers had taken to calling their house the “Ignobles.”

It took several decades to pay down the debt, and even when they did, House Rudleberg remained a shadow of its former self with no clear path to redemption. Despite their dwindling coffers, however, the lord never forgot his people, and as such the people never forgot their lord. Just last year, in fact, when a bad harvest portended famine, he took the financial blow himself and lowered taxes so that his subjects might survive until the next harvest.

The man behind such generosity was Count Hughes Rudleberg. Few lords were so deeply respected by family and subject alike. Hughes was a man of integrity who took it upon himself to both learn from and right the wrongs of his forebears. He gave back to his people, freeing them from their poverty despite his own.

So perhaps it was karma that he should earn the attention of the lord chancellor and vice-chancellor. For his efforts, they bestowed one of the greatest honors any noble could hope for upon Count Rudleberg: a position in the Royal Chancery—one of, if not *the*, most important governing bodies in the kingdom.

The Rudlebergs had much to celebrate, what with this news coinciding with their daughter’s enrollment in Royal Academy. They planned to commemorate the occasion after relocating to their capital estate, but trouble in the county had delayed things, so Luciana had gone ahead of them. Due to the academy’s strict enrollment procedures, she could not delay. Her parents would therefore never know the true extent of the house of horrors she inherited on their vacant property.

“By god...”

Hughes Rudleberg stood where Luciana did exactly one month ago. The foyer was unrecognizable to him. He would have made for a handsome man, with his dashing blond hair and warm brown eyes, were his jaw not hanging dumbly agape.

“This can’t possibly be the same manor.”

Marianna Rudleberg suffered a similar shock as she gawped at the sight. She had brunette hair and green eyes, but, like her husband, her gaping mouth stole her beauty and left her looking like a fish.

This could not be their capital estate. This place actually appeared *livable*. More than that, it seemed downright luxurious. Grand, even. Everything that wasn’t the Ignobles.

“We’ve been expecting you, my lord, my lady.”

And another thing: Who was this young maid? The only maid they remembered was far older.

“Mother! Father! You’re finally here!”

“Luciana!” the count and countess cried in unison.

Their daughter lunged at them, snapping them out of their stupor. The count held his daughter tenderly in his arms. Marianna, after recoiling only slightly at the suddenness of Luciana’s appearance, smiled at the joy on her daughter’s face. How they had worried for her, off in the capital on her own, but here she was beaming and beautiful, the home around her greatly restored.

“Oh, how I’ve missed you, darling,” Hughes said. “I’m so glad to see you in good health.”

Luciana replied with a warm smile before finally easing away from her father. She reached up and around her back. Then, faster than anyone could see, she swung her arm down hard.

“Good health *this!*”

Thwack!

“*Bwah!*” the count croaked.

“Sweetheart!” cried his wife.

Hughes crumbled under the blow to his head. Whatever had hit him, it packed quite the punch but mysteriously little pain.

He collected himself and regarded his daughter with sorrow. “Luciana! What is the meaning of this?”

“Answer your father!” Marianna snapped. “Is that how we raised you?!”

Luciana didn’t look the least bit apologetic. On the contrary, she glared daggers at her parents, her cheeks puffed up like a pouting child’s.

She held up a weapon in her right hand. But was it a weapon? It looked more like a bunch of folded-up paper. It *was* a bunch of folded-up paper. Hughes had never seen such an implement. A weapon? A tool? He didn’t even know what to call it.

“Daughter, what is that?” he said.

“A paper fan called a ‘harisen.’ It’s a torture device for harmlessly dishing out punishment,” she answered.

“A *torture device*?!” her mother gasped. “Luciana!”

“I just said it’s harmless, Mother. I’m not going to hurt Father, but I *am* going to give him a piece of my mind!”

“R-regarding what?” Hughes stammered.

“This! The estate! I don’t care *how* strongly absentmindedness runs in our family. This was crossing a line!”

“The estate? Gods, girl, what could you possibly be wanting for in such a magnificent—*bwah!*”

Another *thwack*. Luciana was very glad to have practiced her form in the days leading up to their reunion.

Melody nodded in approval. She’d trained her charge well.

Luciana had come to her maid with a more personal request after the success of the tea party. She wanted to express herself, particularly her discontent, in a

more succinct and poignant way than words. Melody knew just the thing: the trusty harisen, a paper fan commonly used as the slapstick punchline of Japanese comedy duos.

One demonstration of its destructive yet painless force and Luciana was in love. She had enjoyed those lessons. Very much.

“Thank you kindly for proving my point!” the harisen master snapped. “You sent me all the way out here, to a pigsty that could topple in a stiff breeze, without knowing a *thing*, didn’t you? I have half a mind to call that abuse!”

“A pigsty?” Hughes looked around the restored foyer. “Where? What in the king’s name are you going on about?”

“Explain yourself, Luciana. Your father and I can hardly believe this is our property,” said Marianna.

“And you have Melody to thank for that! She’s the one who fixed everything up!” Luciana ranted. “Without her, we’d all be living with rats and ghosts right now!”

“Melody?”

Luciana pointed to the black-haired maid standing a respectful distance back. She looked young, about Luciana’s age, but performed an exquisite bow nonetheless.

She smiled daintily. “A pleasure to meet you, my lord, my lady. I am Melody, maid of all work. I have had the great honor of seeing to the care of your daughter and estate these past few weeks.”

The count and countess stood speechless for several moments. Slowly, it dawned on them how beautiful the girl was. Not *quite* as beautiful as their daughter, of course, but still rather stunning.

“My lord!” Hughes said. “Luciana, you’re even lovelier than I remember!”

“Oh, thanks for finally noticing!” Luciana flicked the fan, and Hughes flinched at the sound, already thoroughly traumatized.

“Dear, that dress,” Marianna said, “where did you get it?”

Luciana wore a bright blue dress that seemed to sparkle when it caught the

light. Marianna could have sworn she'd never seen it before, sure her daughter owned nothing this extravagant.

"This is the dress you gave me half a year ago, Mother."

"What?! But that's impossible! It looked nothing like this!"

"Melody worked her magic. You should ask her to clean up some of your dresses later too. Would that be okay, Melody?"

"Certainly, my lady," the maid replied.

"Luciana, I'm struggling to..."

"My lady, lunch is ready," Melody continued when the countess trailed off.

"Thank you, Melody," said Luciana. "Mother, Father, I'll explain as we eat. And you, Father, better have an apology ready when I'm done!"

"I-I will think on my actions," her father acquiesced.

"O-of course," her mother agreed. "But first, I am rather peckish."

Melody guided the Rudlebergs to the dining hall. Along the way, a thought struck Hughes.

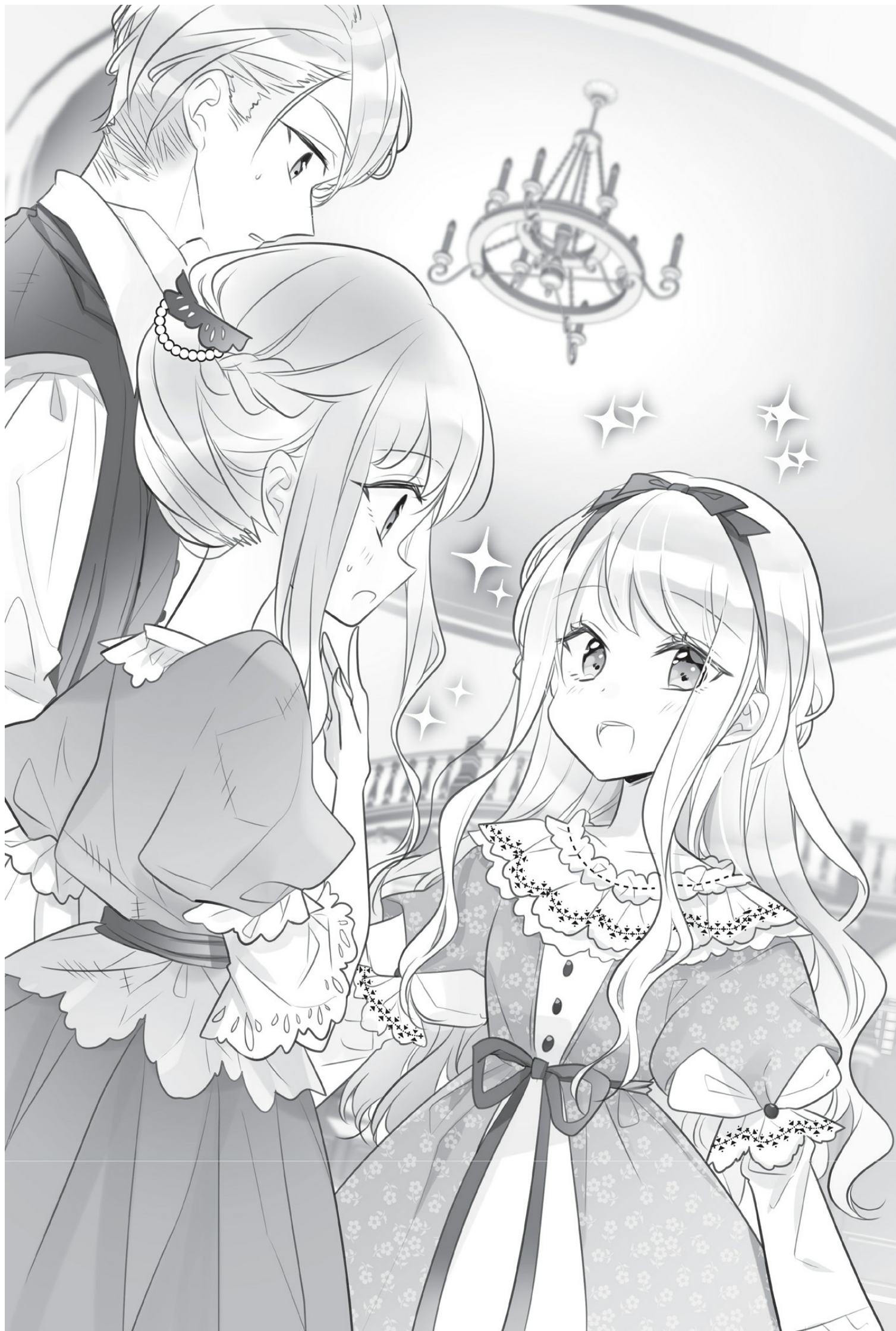
"I remember we had another maid here first. An older woman. Is Melody extra help?"

"The older maid had to retire on account of an injury," Luciana said.

"Melody's taken her place."

This only added to the lord and lady's confusion, for it meant Melody was the sole maid for the entire estate.

So who had prepared lunch?



“The maid has been with us the entire time,” Hughes pointed out. “Who’s been cooking?”

“Melody. Who else?”

That was not the obvious explanation Luciana thought it was. Melody was right here with them; how could she be in two places at once?

“She doesn’t need to do it so much anymore, but I asked her to perform this trick today specifically, just to speed things along,” Luciana continued.

“What trick?”

She might as well have been speaking in riddles.

Except that when the count and countess arrived at the dining hall, they realized with sinking dread that they’d have preferred the riddles.

“This way, my lord.”

“Your seat is here, my lady.”

“Right here, Lady Luciana.”

Hughes and Marianna blinked over and over, but the inexplicable sight before them never changed. The same exact girl stood at three separate seats around the table.

“T-triplets?” the count stammered.

Luciana grinned. “Triplets is modest, Father.”

“Pardon?”

The count nearly leapt out of his skin at what happened next.

A wild Wine Melody appeared. And then a wild Glass Melody appeared. And then a wild Hors d’oeuvre Melody appeared. And then another Melody. And another. And another. And another. You get the idea.

That same girl appeared again and again and again and again. Perhaps they were quadruplets? Maybe quintuplets? Sextuplets? The count stopped trying to count.

He shrieked. His wife shrieked. Luciana plugged her ears.

Eventually they ran out of air, swooned, and passed out cold right there at the table.

The Melodys gasped. “My lord! My lady!”

As with Luciana, a swarm gathered around the master and mistress and carried them off to their chambers. Boss Melody watched them go in horror, leaving Luciana and herself alone in the hall.

Luciana, fingers still in her ears, grimaced. “They even scream the same. Like two peas in a pod. Honestly.”

“Personally, I would say three,” a ghostly pale Melody murmured.

Luciana smirked ever so slightly, as though she picked up Melody’s muttered addition.

Only a week remained until Royal Academy’s opening ceremony.

Chapter 9: The Anomaly

A MILD SPRING MORNING USHERED IN Luciana's first day at Royal Academy.

"Do you have everything, my lady?"

"Don't worry, Melody. I dumped my whole bag out last night and double-checked, just to be sure. I'm positive!"

Luciana patted her schoolbag with a smile. The silver embroidery contrasted artfully with her dark forest-green blazer. Her skirt hung down below her knees, the rest of her legs covered with stockings as required by the school's modest dress code. A single red ribbon around her collar marked her as a Royal Academy first-year. Second-years wore blue, third-years yellow. Men wore ties instead.

"I'm off! Take care of the estate while we're gone," she said.

"Yes, my lady," Melody replied. "Have a pleasant day, Lord Rudleberg, Lady Rudleberg."

"Oh, I wish I could take you with us, Melody," said Lady Rudleberg.

"Now, Marianna, you know only family is allowed at the opening ceremony."

"I know that, Hughes. We'll tell you all about how dashing Luciana looked when we return, Melody."

"I look forward to it, my lady," Melody said.

She shared a look with Marianna, and Luciana blushed. "How can I look 'dashing' when all I'll be doing is sitting there?!"

"Why, look at you!" the count said. "You could be doing absolutely nothing at all and you'd still cut the most gallant figure in all the realm!"

"It's true, my lady," Melody added. "I hope you'll regale me with every last detail later, Lady Rudleberg."

“You have my word,” Marianna assured her.

“Can we please go now?!” Luciana cried, her face burning.

Her three tormentors finally nodded in agreement and released her, as cute as her flustered state was. It was time to board their carriage and make their way to Royal Academy.

A week prior, Melody fretted over the fright Hughes and Marianna had suffered upon meeting her. Perhaps it would damage her lord and lady’s relationship with their maid. But she needn’t have worried. After that first shock, the Rudleberg household got along well. The clones took some getting used to, but the family eventually warmed up to them. Marianna even started to request their assistance. Once she experienced their usefulness, they became less uncanny, and she realized the value in having what essentially amounted to several maids for the price of one.

But a maid’s work was never done. As soon as possible, Melody was at it again.

A good maid was an invisible maid. Generally, her master or mistress should hardly notice her work. Melody had set aside that principle the first day she met Luciana, but circumstances demanded it. It was an act of God, in a sense. Now that things had settled, however, Melody made it a rule to spruce up the estate before the family woke, leaving only her lord’s and ladies’ rooms to clean later.

Melody entered the count and countess’s chambers and began making their bed.

Some time later, she exited the room, red in the face. This was not unusual. Melody generally left that room flushed every couple of days, but she would never admit why. Her lord and lady’s business in the bedroom was no one’s but theirs. A good maid was a prudent maid.

“That just leaves Lady Luciana’s chambers.”

She reined herself in before entering Luciana’s room. As crude as the girl could be, Luciana kept her things quite tidy. Once Melody swiftly made her bed, there was little left to do.

However, while wiping down the lady's desk, she discovered something that would turn her sedate morning upside down.

"What's this doing out?" she wondered aloud.

Large, bold text on a sheet of paper drew her eye—"Royal Academy Letter of Acceptance."

In smaller letters, it read: *This letter serves as proof of acceptance into the Paltescian Royal Academy for Higher Learning. Present it at the opening ceremony for collection prior to commencement. Those without this document may not be admitted to the ceremony.*

Melody braced against the desk to keep from collapsing. Her lady's words rang in her mind.

Don't worry, Melody. I dumped my whole bag out last night and double-checked, just to be sure. I'm positive!

"Oh, Lady Luciana... You were supposed to put your things back *into* your bag."

Curse House Rudleberg and their genetically predisposed forgetfulness. Why now, of all times?

"I'll just have to catch up to them."

A tall order for such a short girl. And the ceremony would begin soon.

But this particular short girl would find a way to overcome any obstacle.

"Gateway—*Ovunque Porta.*"

A door materialized before her. When she passed through it, she emerged in an alley near the academy. Melody had accompanied Luciana to the academy to assist with enrollment procedures and could have entered it directly, but that would be trespassing. Plus, she couldn't rely on this spell in public.

"I've sure made things more difficult for myself. But a maid does what a maid must."

A good maid was an invisible maid, but estates would have amenities to facilitate that invisibility, such as separate doors for nobles and maids.

Melody had considered all this while creating the gateway spell. For example, she could not create doors where others could see them. Maidliness took precedence over convenience in this matter.

She hurried out of the alley to search for Luciana and soon entered the campus.

Royal Academy neighbored the palace, and as such, it thronged with young noblemen and women from across the realm, though it was not devoid of commoners. A select few had gained enough prominence one way or another to earn admission. The academy itself sprawled wide, replete with lecture halls, auditoriums, fields for sport, and even several courtyards. All this often proved a confounding snare for unwary first-time visitors, who could easily wander in and never find their way back out.

Melody stopped to ask the gateman about the ceremony, and he said it would be in the central auditorium. Students were awaiting commencement in the adjoining anteroom.

“I don’t have long! I’ve got to hurry!”

Melody clutched the acceptance letter and made a mad dash for the central auditorium. Perhaps a bit too mad, because she crashed into someone as soon as she rounded the first corner.

Being the smaller party, Melody went flying after the collision, landing on her rear with a yelp. “Ow...” she groaned.

“I’m so sorry! Are you all right?” The other party offered their hand.

“No, I apologize. I was in a hurry, and I...” Melody accepted the hand and stood, but lost her breath when she looked up at her rescuer.

He wore a dark forest-green blazer accented with gold embroidery. A red necktie hung around his neck. A first-year, just like Luciana.

The boy stood several heads taller than Melody, his slender limbs lending him a looming quality. Only the necktie betrayed his gender, given his androgynous appearance. Melody resisted the instinct to run her fingers through his dark medium-length hair to test if it was as silky as it appeared. Soft, gentle turquoise eyes stared back at her.

He was utterly beautiful. When people said “drop-dead gorgeous,” *this* was what they meant.

Melody could not have hoped for a more handsome hand to help her up. Even she, whose heart was already sworn to the apron, had to appreciate art when she saw it.

“Th-thank you for helping me up,” she said. But the boy did not let go of her hand. “Can I help you?”

He continued to hold her, staring into her eyes with bemusement, like she had disappointed him somehow.

“S-sir?” Melody asked again.

The boy blinked and finally let go. “Apologies. Are you hurt?”

“No, sir, thank you. I apologize for the trouble.”

“Don’t. It’s no trouble. You’re a maid, are you? This is a long way from your estate.”

Melody gasped. She was wasting time. “Oh goodness, I need to go! My mistress forgot something, and I need to make sure she gets it. Do you know where the anteroom is?”

“New students will be waiting just down this corridor,” the boy explained. “Take the second right and you’ll find it dead ahead.”

“Thank you so much! Excuse me!”

Melody resumed her mad dash. More carefully this time. After a few steps, she glanced back over her shoulder and found the boy standing right where she’d left him. Watching her.

“Pardon me,” she said, “but aren’t you a new student as well? You may want to come with me.”

The boy said merely, “Be right there,” and nothing more.

Melody supposed that was the end of it, then. She offered a polite curtsy and continued on her way.

The boy watched Melody veer right as per his instructions. He peered around the corner. Then he did it again, as if he was waiting for someone. Whoever they were, he seemed troubled by their absence.

He waited a while longer, continually peeking around the corner, until he finally sighed in defeat. “Why...? *Why?*”

“There you are! What in the world are you doing here, Your Highness?”

Christopher von Theolas, eldest son of King Garnard and crown prince of the Kingdom of Theolas, turned toward the voice. A second-year boy in a uniform and a blue tie approached him. His long honey-golden hair, loosely done up, swayed behind him as he walked. Bewitching emerald-green eyes scrutinized Christopher. Melody would have recognized him as her travel companion from the stagecoach.

Maxwell, son of Lord Chancellor Reclentos, aide and confidant to the crown prince, stopped before His Highness. “We need to return to the hall before the ceremony begins. Or have you forgotten who it is that’s meant to speak on behalf of the new students?”

“Now hold on, Maxwell!” Christopher put up his hands. “I mustn’t move from this spot. Understand? It is *imperative* that I meet her!”

“‘Her’? Who is ‘her’? Marquess Victillium’s daughter is already here.”

“No, damn it! Not her!”

“Then I ask you, why *not* her? Out of all your suitresses, is she not the foremost? I cannot advise you to risk your relationship with her over another woman, and you know I’ll go easier on you than His Majesty will if he finds out about any such dalliance. We’re going.”

“Listen to me!” the prince hissed. “We still don’t have the heroine! The *Saint*! I was supposed to bump into her just now, but all I got was a black-haired maid! She’s supposed to have *silver* hair, Maxwell! Don’t you get it?!”

“Give me strength,” Maxwell sighed wearily.

“This is serious, Maxwell! She’s supposed to rush around this corner, and then we bump into each other. That’s the hook! She’s supposed to have silver hair,

Maxwell! *Silver!* Not black! She was cute, I'll admit, but she's not the heroine! We need the *heroine!*"

A cute maid with black hair, the incredulous confidant thought while his liege wailed to the heavens. *Could it be...?*

He recalled the girl he had traveled here with in the carriage. She, too, had black hair. And she had wanted to be a maid.

"The Dark One is right around the corner, and we don't have a heroine. Do you understand how dire this is?!" Christopher continued.

Maxwell tuned it out. He had become far too accustomed to doing that lately. "Were your genius not hampered by episodes like these, Your Highness, you would be a god among men."

He dragged Christopher back to the hall kicking and screaming.

Melody arrived at the anteroom just in time to deliver Luciana's letter of acceptance. But more problems arose at once.

"An escort, my lady?"

"I had no idea I needed one for the ball tonight!"

Every year, on the night of Royal Academy's opening ceremony, they held the Spring Ball. It was a kind of debutante and beautillion ball in one, meant to serve as the high society debut for young nobles. For fifteen-year-old Luciana, today was that day.

But there was one strict rule associated with this ball in particular: All noblewomen had to attend with a male escort. Unfortunately for her, Luciana had only just learned of this requirement today by overhearing others discuss it.

"Your mother and father never mentioned this, to my knowledge," Melody said.

"Men don't need a partner, and they're childhood sweethearts. Mother never had to consider it because they've always had each other, so it completely slipped her mind!"

“That is...troubling.” Melody could not claim she was surprised anymore by the slippery memories of the Rudlebergs.

“We’ll have a moment to meet each other after the ceremony, so I’ll poke around and see if I can find anyone then. Not that my hopes are very high...”

“I-I believe in you, Lady Luciana.”

Luciana saw her maid off with a smile, though she didn’t share Melody’s optimism.

The Ignoble Rudlebergs and their haunted house of horrors were infamous in the capital. Melody had done much to improve their standard of living, but that didn’t fill their barren coffers. No one had been to visit and see the renewed opulence of their manor either. To the public, the Ignobles were as ignoble as ever.

Having heard as much from the retired old maid and picked up on the whispers of high society, Luciana doubted she would get to attend that night’s ball.

“Is that the girl who lives in that haunted manor?”

“It’s a good thing the academy provides uniforms free of charge. It’s probably the best outfit she has in her wardrobe.”

A cruel giggle punctuated the hushed gossiping. The only indication Luciana gave that she’d heard any of it were her white-knuckled fists. But she would not let the nasty commentary get to her.

They want to pretend like I can’t hear? Fine. But they’ll have to try harder than that to break me.

She turned toward the girl who’d giggled and locked eyes with her. Calling upon all of Melody’s training, she offered her the most polite and dainty Fancy Luciana smile she could muster.

The girl blushed and spun away.

“Students may now enter the auditorium,” an attendant announced.

Dauntless, Luciana strolled into the hall. They wanted an Ignoble, but they would not find one. She would not display a single shred of weakness. She

would be the picture of nobility.

Melody walked down the corridor, racking her brain for ideas to aid her lady.

I could dress myself as a man and escort her myself? No, that's just silly.

A breeze brushed past her cheek. She'd emerged onto a walkway between buildings, and on her left lay a grand courtyard.

"Oh my," she breathed.

It was nothing like the courtyard she had put together at the Rudleberg estate. This one was even more exquisite, sweeping and artful in its unassuming use of the generous space granted it. Between expertly pruned trees and foliage streamed an artificial brook, its gurgling a calm symphony. Gazebos dotted the grounds for the students' enjoyment.

"Wait a minute, is that...Max?"

"Melody?"

Max's emerald eyes sparkled, and his honey-golden hair shimmered in the sunlight. He was as handsome as ever as he relaxed in a gazebo with a book. He wore the academy uniform, the blue tie around his neck marking him as a second-year.

"Long time no see," he said. "By your outfit, I take it that you've accomplished your dream?"

"I haven't seen you since the stagecoach! Thank you again for your company," said Melody. "I didn't know you were a student at the academy. And you're a second-year too. Wait, but that would make you a...a noble!" She bowed her head low. "I-I am so sorry for my impertinence!"

Maxwell laughed. "We're equals, you and I. Friends. There's no need for decorum among friends, is there? Anyway, I'd love to catch up if you have a spare moment."

"I-I suppose we can. A little."

Max patted the space next to him. Melody timidly obliged.

“What brings you here today, Max?” she said. “I thought only newly enrolled students came to the ceremony.”

“I happen to know one such student. Call me his...attendant. Actually, ‘wet nurse’ wouldn’t be inaccurate. He has a great mind, really, but he also tends to let less-than-rational thoughts run through it from time to time. Someone must keep him in check.”

“My sympathies.” Melody smiled. She would have fainted had she known the mysterious “student” Max spoke of was the crown prince himself.

“What brings *you* here? I assume you’re not under the school’s employ,” Max said.

“No, I work for House Rudleberg. I came to deliver something their daughter had forgotten.”

Rudleberg. Maxwell raised his eyebrows—he recognized that name. As the lord chancellor’s son and heir, he had spent no small amount of time at the Royal Chancery and was acquainted with a Lord Rudleberg who worked there. He also knew of the man’s derogatory moniker.

Now there’s a surprise, he thought. To think she found work with a noble house without a letter of introduction. Curious.

Then he considered the state of said noble house. Work was work, but this could not have been *good* work.

“I’m sure it must be overwhelming, getting your start with a noble family,” he said. “If you have any trouble or questions or... Well, I’m here to listen.”

“Thank you, but it’s a wonderful job. Very fulfilling, and they treat me well.”

“I-I see. Good, then.” He could find no lie in her smile. If he could, Maxwell would have leapt to the girl’s aid, but it seemed there was no need for his help.

He flinched at the dagger of disappointment that stung him at this revelation. He shouldn’t have felt disappointed that the girl didn’t need him, and yet...

Maxwell had always been attractive. Even as a young boy, he frequently drew admiring glances. Now, in the peak of adolescence, those glances came more often and carried more weight. But all the attention left him sick of women,

disillusioned by those looks that meant they wanted something from him. It wasn't lack of interest on his part, to be sure, but neither was he inclined to initiate any kind of relations with them.

He felt no such aversion toward Melody.

She'd ignored his looks. Even after learning of their difference in status, she spoke to him no differently than before—aside from the modest manners any maid would display.

Something about that enticed Maxwell more than all those longing looks ever could. What was this feeling? Was it love? Or...

"Oh, but there is one thing I ought to mention regarding my lady," she said. Her smile faltered.

Maxwell frowned. "Is that so?"

Are the Rudlebergs not what they seem? If they're the type to belittle, so help me...

"She hasn't found an escort yet."

"I... Pardon?"

"For the ball tonight," Melody clarified. "It's supposed to be her chance to shine, but she doesn't have a partner. I've been thinking and thinking, and I just don't know what I can do to help. Oh, I'm hopeless. Some maid I am, right?"

Maxwell snorted, then burst into laughter.

"Max!" Melody fumed. She blinked at him in disbelief as an angry flush swept over her cheeks. "Why are you laughing at me? I'm being serious!"

"I know, I—" He snorted and regained his composure. "Sorry. I'm sorry. That's just not at all what I had in mind when I said you could talk to me."

"My lady is in *peril*, and you're *laughing*!"

Notably, *she* was not in peril, but the Rudlebergs' daughter was. All that doom and gloom, and none of it pertained to herself. Maxwell remembered the way she'd beamed moments earlier and couldn't help but laugh again, mostly at himself for jumping to conclusions.

"I apologize," he said. "Let me make it up to you and solve that little problem."

"You can do that?"

"Easily. I will escort the Rudlebergs' daughter."

"You will?!"

"I had planned to attend solo, but I'm not the kind to sit idly by while a friend is in need." He stood and placed a hand on his hip, as if preparing to escort Melody then and there. "My right arm for one night is a small price to pay for your peace of mind."

He cut a gallant figure, his smile dashing and demeanor regal. Any normal girl would have swooned.

"Thank you so, so much! Thank you, Max! Oh, I need to tell my lady right away!"

Melody, however, remained unfazed.

Not that I was trying to seduce the girl, but her stoicism...certainly stings, Maxwell lamented. He clung to his smile even as his pride splintered. *Still, that's what I like about you, Melody. I'm certain we'll be good friends, you and I.*

Melody produced a notepad from her apron and began jotting something down. She handed a page to Maxwell. "Here is where you can find our estate. Shall we have a carriage ready?"

"No need. I'll see to that. Could you please tell the good lady that I'll pick her up at around, say, five o'clock?"

"Why don't you come with me? You can introduce yourself to her."

"Had I the time, I would love to. But unfortunately, I have other duties to attend to. Do send my regards."

"I will. We'll see you tonight." Melody bowed before hurrying back toward the anteroom.

Maxwell grinned at her as she left. "What kind of a woman is her mistress, I wonder. That ought to be something to look forward to."

As the ceremony wound down, Melody returned to the anteroom and relayed the good news to Luciana.

“You found an escort?!” Luciana said.

“I happened to run into a friend of mine, a second-year by the name of Max, my lady. Although I never knew he was a nobleman.”

“And he’s agreed to be my partner?”

“He’ll be at the estate this evening at five to pick you up. It was a rather sudden arrangement, so I do apologize that you couldn’t meet him beforehand.”

“Thank you so much, Melody!” Luciana leaped for her maid, arms out.

But Melody had learned from the past and skillfully sidestepped her mistress. “My lady, it is unbecoming of a noblewoman to accost her maid in public.”

“Fine, but you’re in for it when we get back,” Luciana grumbled. “Anyway, who is my escort, exactly?”

“Max, my lady. Did I not say so?”

“Well, yes, but what’s his house?”

Melody froze. It occurred to her that she did not have an answer. “I... neglected to ask, my lady.”

“You don’t know your friend’s full name?”

“R-rest assured, he is a fine and respectful young man! He’s quite attractive too! I-I assure you, no one would object to his company. Most likely.”

“He’s ‘attractive,’ is he?”

Luciana’s heart raced at the prospect of this mysterious stranger arriving at her door later that night—though not at all in a romantic way.

She stared up at the ceiling. *The absentmindedness isn’t just hereditary. It’s contagious...*

Of course, this was a misplaced concern. Melody was not absentminded at all.

Her head was simply full of air.

Chapter 10:

The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths

“**G**REETINGS. I AM CHRISTOPHER VON Theolas, and I speak this morning not only as crown prince but on behalf of my fellow students.”

His Highness’s voice reverberated to every corner of the auditorium. The audience sat up straight, hanging on to his every word as though his coronation would begin within the hour.

Great and wise though he was, Christopher needed no title, current or future, to draw attention in any room. He’d accomplished more than any fifteen-year-old ought, already having created a staging service and the Commerce Guild’s facilities for low-income individuals. Already, he’d done incalculable good for the people of his realm.

His dark hair flowed like silk, and his turquoise eyes glistened like the sea. Prince Christopher was an enchanting young man, his androgynous features charming just as many men as women.

Everyone knew the crown prince. Everyone admired the crown prince. He was Theolas’s guiding star—beautiful, shrewd, cunning, innovative, decisive. He cared little for vanities like status, and his revolutionary ideas proved enticing to noble and commoner alike.

That said, most people only ever glimpsed the very surface of Christopher’s mind.

“We still don’t have the Saint! How are we supposed to stop the Dark One and save the world without a *heroine*?!” he raged. There was a side to him few knew about, a side that went on mad ramblings alone in his chambers in the royal palace.

Maxwell stood just outside the door, muttering his usual prayer for strength. Christopher had been the perfect prince during the ceremony; where had all that regal bearing gone?

Prince Christopher was the smartest man to live in Theolas since its inception, but he was prone to what Maxwell could only call “bouts of madness.” Try as he might, Maxwell could never make sense of it.

There was only one woman in all the world who could soothe his inscrutable anguish.

“My, what is His Highness shouting about this time? Does something ail him?”

She was indeed a woman—to call her a girl would be a slap in the face. Her red hair burned darker than sunset and tumbled down to her waist. Eyes sharp as jade and even more resplendent than the gem itself narrowed at Christopher’s door. Everything about her seemed handcrafted by the gods as an ode to perfection, right down to her full, vermilion lips.

Even in a modest dress, her mature figure shone through, full where it mattered and slim elsewhere. The little peek of her ankles from beneath her long skirt offered a tantalizing hint as to what lay beneath the cloth. The strength in her expression and fire in her eyes only added to her allure. Anna-Marie, daughter of Marquess Victillium, personified beauty itself, and she had come to the prince’s chambers at Maxwell’s behest.

“I’m supposed to be picking a dress for tonight,” she said.

She was the only one who could snap Christopher out of his rambling spells, though Maxwell could only guess as to why. Perhaps it was because the pair were childhood friends. In any case, her talent for this had gained her a place within the palace, despite her status as one of many potential suitresses His Highness would someday choose between when selecting a queen. Tonight, Christopher was supposed to take her to the Spring Ball.

“The same thing he always shouts about,” Maxwell said. “Do you mind, Lady Anna-Marie?”

Anna-Marie didn’t bother quieting her groan before she entered the room, shutting the door behind her. “Be still—*Silence*.”

She spoke in a strange spellcasting tongue—certainly not one native to Theolas—to surround the room in a soundproof barrier. That placed her and Christopher in a pocket of absolute privacy where no one could overhear them

no matter what they said or did.

Anna-Marie calmly yanked a sword out of a decorative suit of armor nearby and began sprinting toward the prince, roaring as she did, screaming far less calmly than when she'd cast her spell.

"Get soooooome!"

"If she doesn't turn up soon, we're all as good as—what the hell?!"

His Highness the crown prince squealed like a pig. Rest assured, however, that no one could hear him thanks to the soundproofing. Thus, he could squeal all he liked with no societal repercussions.

And squeal he might, for a razor-sharp blade was careening toward his neck. Christopher reeled back on pure instinct, dodging the blade by a hair. The thing about instinct, though, is one doesn't have much control over it. The prince certainly didn't, and he toppled back, smacking his head against the floor. He growled in pain, rubbing at the back of his head and curling up where he lay.

Anna-Marie looked down at him with disappointment bordering on disgust. "Christ. What a total flop of a poster boy. Don't you feel sorry for yourself?"

"A-Anna! How long have you been there?! And also, what's gotten into you?! Are you trying to kill me?!"

"Hey, not a bad idea. Maybe we can get a better prince to reincarnate in your place."

"Tell me how you really feel!"

Anna-Marie touched the tip of the blade to his neck and scowled at him. "You are a *route*, Christopher. So act like it! Or do I have to call you *Kurita Hideki* to make you understand?"

"Well *you're* supposed to be the villainess, *Asakura Anna*! You're supposed to be nice to me!"

Mizunami Ritsuko might have recognized these two as the high school couple (a moniker they themselves would reject vociferously) that she sat next to during that tragic flight to England. They, too, had awoken in this strange new world thanks to forces they could not understand.

Their memories had returned to them when they were six. It happened when Anna-Marie, already one of the prince's potential partners, first laid eyes on Christopher. A tidal wave of memories washed over them in that moment, and they knew the other person was experiencing the same flood of recognition.

"Don't tell me you screwed up meeting the heroine," Anna-Marie griped.

"It's not my fault! I waited exactly when and where you told me to! She never showed up!"

Anna-Marie grimaced. "If this world really is *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, which does seem to be the case so far, then the main story won't start until you and the heroine meet. You're saying you haven't yet?"

"D-don't look at me like that! I did my best, okay? I can't *make* her pop up out of thin air!"

The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths was an otome game, a type of romance visual novel targeted at women. Asakura Anna, Anna-Marie's past life, had been obsessed with it.

The story followed a girl bereft over the loss of her mother who was then taken in by her father, thus beginning her dizzying new life as the daughter of a count. She would go on to attend Royal Academy in the capital, where she would meet the people who would help her on her journey of self-discovery. Among those people were five men of various ages and backgrounds, one of whom would be lucky enough to spend the rest of his life with her.

It was a classic love story about hope and overcoming loss—about as stereotypical otome as otome games could get. Yet it was this very otome game that had sponsored the tour of England that Asakura Anna had been unfortunately lucky enough to win.

She knew the game and its beats front to back. The world she and her friend found themselves in had to be the one from the game. The country's name, the capital, the monsters, the magic system, the history—it was all here. Even the characters.

Anna-Marie Victillium, the marquess's daughter, was the heroine's main rival—the villainess. Christopher von Theolas, the crown prince, was one of the five

important men the heroine would meet—one of the potential romance routes.

Everything about their current selves came straight out of the game. They looked the same. Their roles were the same. As far-fetched as it sounded, there was only one explanation: This world was, in fact, *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*.

“How many times do I have to tell you we *need* the heroine? Has any of that sunk into that itty-bitty brain of yours?”

“Why do you think I’m losing my mind over here?!” Christopher shouted. “Without her, we don’t have a fart’s chance in the wind against the Dark One whenever it shows up.”

This game was a particular type known as a “visual novel,” a text-based story with progression primarily determined by player choice at pivotal moments, similar to (and sometimes coinciding with) dating sims. *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* even had minigames in the form of exams or fairs or other events typical of daily life at the academy. Many a young girl, Asakura Anna included, sang its praises.

But that wasn’t the only standout feature. Slice-of-life romantic shenanigans were only one aspect of the narrative. The other was an RPG, complete with a legend about a chosen one.

The legend told of a “Saint” and a “Dark One.”

Long, long ago, in a time so old no texts survived to speak of it, the Dark One rose. A maiden managed to seal it away, but that seal would break soon after the heroine entered Royal Academy. The only one capable of standing up to that ancient evil would be the one who inherited a great, unimaginable power: the power of the maiden who had contained the Dark One in ages past. The power of the Saint.

That Saint was, of course, the heroine of the story. But many in this time had forgotten the old tale of the clash between the Dark One and the Saint; the heroine would not know who she truly was. All the while, however, the Dark One’s seal would continue to weaken, and strange mishaps would begin to occur throughout the academy.

Throughout the story, the heroine's powers would gradually awaken, and eventually she would find herself below the royal palace, in the ancient library, a forbidden area lost to time that only the Saint might enter. There, she would learn the truth of her legacy and her destiny: that when the Dark One rose again, she would be the one to dispel the darkness with strength born of an oath.

The game challenged players to overcome many fearsome foes such as the monsters and men under the Dark One's influence—and Anna-Marie, of course. In certain routes, players even dealt with spies from the Rordpier Empire to the north. When the RPG section of the game kicked off, it didn't stop. The heroine had her work cut out for her.

After forging bonds with all the romanceable partners and fighting many battles, fate dictated that the heroine would fail in preventing the Dark One from rising once more. Only then, at the eleventh hour, when all seemed lost, would she make her oath. And by that power, along with any one of the men who had helped her learn to love again, the heroine would fully awaken as the Saint, holy and true.

"The death of my mother left me a shell of my former self," she would say, "but you stood by me regardless. While grief ravaged my heart, you soothed the raging misery and replaced it with hope. I want to live. I *will* live! There *will* be a future, and we will see it together!"

And then a voice would boom, "*Blessings upon thee, o maiden of silver. The pact is made, thy soul laid bare, thy heart proven true.*"

It was the climax of every route and would trigger regardless of whom the player chose to romance. That oath was immutable. The voice *would* boom, and the heroine *would* become the Saint. And then she would defeat the Dark One, usher in an age of peace, graduate from Royal Academy, marry her beloved, and live happily ever after.

If this world was a mirror of the game world, things should happen exactly that way. The Dark One would rise one day, and they would need the Saint when it happened.

After all, there can be no happily ever after if no one is alive to see it.

“Look at this.”

“At what?” Christopher whined.

Anna-Marie thrust a list at him. Royal Academy’s student roster. One name was conspicuously absent: Cecilia Leginbarth, the heroine.

“Wait, what’s going on here?” Christopher said.

“I put feelers out in the Commerce Guild and I haven’t heard a peep about House Leginbarth purchasing anything a young girl might need. If the count’s taken in his daughter, there should be *something*, right? Dresses, cosmetics, furniture. But no. Nothing.”

“You think they haven’t found her yet?”

“Considering you didn’t meet her when you were supposed to, that’s the only possibility that makes any sense.”

“But we know her name. How hard can it be to find a girl with a head of silver hair and bright blue eyes? How many people do you know who look like that?”

“Her name’s irrelevant. What matters is what the count gives her *after* he finds her.”

“Oh,” Christopher mouthed.

“The heroine’s mother used to be a maid, and nobles don’t have relations with their maids. It’s in bad taste. So he renames her to protect her and keep from arousing too much suspicion. It’s hardly mentioned in the game. We never even learn what her original name was, much less where she’s from. Easy as she may be to spot, it’s a big kingdom with a lot of people. Agh, maybe I *would* know all that stuff if I hadn’t friggin’ died before the fanbook came out!”

Anna-Marie clutched her head in her hands. Christopher watched her breakdown without a hint of mirth.

“I was *this* close to getting to see her in person, dang it!” Anna-Marie rambled on. “Can you imagine? Can you *imagine* actually getting to see her smile?! She’s got the face of an *angel*!”

“You sure like girls a lot,” Christopher quipped.

Anna-Marie huffed. “Beats staring at Your Royal Stupidness’s dumb mug.”

“Words are hurtful, you know!”

“At *least* let her get with Sir Lect! That’s the OTP! Please, oh my god, just let me see her with her knight in shining armor! Now *he’s* a man. Ugh, those muscles. That body. Take notes, Christopher. Put some meat on those bones.”

“Trash taste, bimbo! The heroine’s the girl for me. Someone dainty and well-mannered and slender. You know, all the things you aren’t.”

Anna-Marie had swung first, but foolish Christopher had swung back a bit too hard. A man did not comment on a woman’s physique, for it was not his place.

“Do you have...*any* idea how hard it is for me to keep this figure?” Anna-Marie growled. “Do you?!”

Christopher suddenly remembered the sword in Anna-Marie’s hand. “Hey, chill! You’re actually gonna kill me this time!”

“That’s the idea!”

Lady Anna-Marie was quite skilled with a blade, but only in Christopher’s presence. Similarly, Christopher was quite skilled at running for his life.

There was only one woman in all the world who could soothe the prince’s “bouts of madness,” and it was not done with gentle words or the consolation of a fellow fish out of water, lost in this new life they now led. No, it was more a happy side effect of the stresses that came with being a lady of high regard, and how cathartic it was to take those frustrations out on a punching bag.

The punching bag’s name was Christopher, and by the time Anna-Marie was done with him, he would be lucky if he had energy enough to stand, much less continue his ramblings.

The door to His Highness’s chamber opened sometime later. Maxwell could not keep from asking, “What, er, is it exactly that you two do in there?”

“Oh, nothing really,” Anna-Marie answered between panting breaths. “I simply comfort His Highness’s aching heart. Nothing more.”

She emerged flushed and disheveled, lightly coated in sweat. Her breathing was ragged but in that sensual way that spoke of only mild exertion. Even Maxwell, for all his distaste of women, could not claim to be unaffected.

Christopher, on the other hand, looked like he had seen death. He had the haunted bearing of a man who had just barely escaped with his life. He was also breathing raggedly, and sweat coated his skin more thickly than hers. He would not meet the lady's gaze.

Sound had returned when the door opened. Prior to that, Maxwell had only the vibrations in the floor and shaking of the door to judge by—but he could read between the lines.

"Is there a reason you two don't announce your engagement?" was all he bothered to ask. Maxwell had the prudence of a maid. Truly.

"Goodness, Lord Maxwell," Anna-Marie said. "Me? Marry His Highness?"

"You've got some sense of humor," Christopher sighed.

The prince lingered by the door while the lady returned to her chambers to continue preparing for the ball.

"I don't understand," Maxwell wondered to himself. "They're never apart, it seems. What is it that keeps them from making it official?"

Within the narrative of the game, the two of them would have already promised themselves to each other. Unbeknownst to Maxwell, however, the prince and the marquess's daughter were going to great lengths to prevent that very scenario.

"If she and I marry," Christopher lamented under his breath, "the next morning they'll have a corpse for a prince."

"Achoo!"

"You have a cute sneeze, Melody. Not sick, are you?"

"Of course not, my lady. Now, let's hurry and settle on your outfit. You have to look positively *stunning*! Rethread—*Ricucitura*!"

Melody Wave—House Rudleberg’s unassuming, black-haired, dark-eyed maid. In reality, the silver-haired, blue-eyed daughter of Count Cloud Leginbarth. Inspired by the parting words of her late mother, she had made a maidly oath, and thereby gained seemingly divinely ordained powers which she had co-opted in the name of “maid magic.” Had Anna-Marie not passed before the release of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths’s* fanbook, she would have known this maid’s birth name was Celesty McMarden.

How could Anna-Marie have predicted the strange development of the main character ignoring canon to become a maid? She could not have. No one could.

Regardless, the wheels of fate turned. No matter the errant threads snarled in the loom of destiny, its tapestry would be spun.

Chapter 11:

Guests in the Palace

“IT’S PERFECT!”

“It’s...me.”

Luciana stared at her reflection in disbelief. She did not recognize herself. There, where she stood, was not the Rudlebergs’ daughter but a fairylike beauty. Her hair and skin, given extra care on such a special night, glowed as if lit by magic. What most certainly *was* magic was the off-the-shoulder dress Melody had spun. It shimmered in the light, its bright blue hue gradating into a soft aquamarine as it flowed down to Luciana’s ankles.

Luciana spun around, studying the stranger in the mirror from every angle. She couldn’t contain her joy.

“You look lovely, my lady.”

“Oh, Melody...” Tears welled in Luciana’s eyes, but she held them back.

She owed her maid everything. Without her, she never in her wildest dreams would have imagined herself attending the Spring Ball with anything other than timidity. Melody had come into her life like a whirlwind, and Luciana had never been so thankful for a storm.

Luciana swore to herself that, one day, she would repay Melody.

Ironically, Melody shared that gratitude in equal measure. Her lady had given her a chance to put her skills to the test, to play dress-up with her mistress for a *ball* of all things. She was overjoyed.

Melody truly *loved* being a maid.

Her parents gasped when Luciana presented herself.

“Oh, look at you, darling,” said her mother. “Why did no one tell me I had such a gorgeous daughter?”

“You’re embarrassing me, Mother.”

“She’s right, Luciana. You simply are stunning,” her father said. “Incidentally, is that dress another of Melody’s works of art? I don’t recognize it. Sh-she spruced up one you already had, yes?”

Luciana chuckled. “I had a feeling you’d ask.”

Hughes’s heart skipped a beat. The Royal Chancery paid well, to be sure, but House Rudleberg did not have funds to spare. Far be it from him to tighten his purse strings during his daughter’s high society debut, but Luciana’s attire did not look cheap.

“Rest easy, my lord,” Melody assured him. “The dress is recycled.”

“She took two dresses and sewed them into one!” Luciana said.

Although her wardrobe had improved thanks to Melody’s magical touch, Luciana still wanted for something glamorous. Something fit for a ball. Melody had remedied that by conjuring up the dazzling, gradated fabric that now adorned Luciana, constructed from two separate dresses—one blue, one aquamarine.

Lord and Lady Rudleberg likewise wore garments Melody had rejuvenated. For Hughes, a contemporary tailcoat suit; for Marianna, a bright red dress.

“She’s just full of surprises,” Hughes muttered.

Melody cocked her head. “My lord?”

“That she is,” his wife agreed.

“We’re all on the same page then,” Luciana said.

The Rudlebergs smiled wryly at each other. Melody alone remained ignorant of the true wonder of her abilities. Even Luciana, despite her deficiency in arcane knowledge, had come to understand how extraordinary Melody was, yet she had not shared that realization with the maid—something told her that was a can of worms best left unopened.

The Rudlebergs awaited the carriage in the dining hall, biding their time over tea.

“You’re going to a friend’s party when we leave, right, Melody?” Luciana asked.

“Yes, if it’s all right. I would be leaving the estate unattended.”

“All right? I have half a mind to order you to go,” said Hughes. “You haven’t had a single day off since you came to us. So long as you aren’t away until dawn, I’d say you’ve more than earned yourself some fun.”

Melody bashfully thanked her lord.

Someone she had met very recently had asked her to attend some sort of function. It was not uncommon for citizens throughout the capital to hold parties of their own to coincide with the Spring Ball, and Melody assumed this was one such event.

A knock came at the door, announcing the arrival of Luciana’s escort.

“There he is,” said Marianna. “Max, you said his name was? I wonder what he’s like.”

“Now, I trust Melody, but I still have my misgivings about sending my daughter off with some stranger,” Hughes protested.

“Then by all means, Father, find me someone else,” Luciana shot back.

Hughes pressed his lips shut. *If I don’t like the look of his jib, I’m going to have more just words with this boy. No offense to Melody, of course.*

Puffed up and putting on his best dad face, Hughes made his way to the foyer and opened the door. His bravado swiftly evaporated.

“Y-y-y-you’re,” he stammered, “L-L-Lord Ch-Chancellor Reclentos’s...!”

“Good evening, Lord Rudleberg. Maxwell Reclentos. I’ll have the honor of escorting your daughter to tonight’s ball.”

With hair that shone like honey and eyes like emerald jewels, there stood the son and heir apparent of Lord Georic Reclentos, lord chancellor of the Theolan royal court, and the crown prince’s closest friend.

Gods above, Melody! How am I meant to have words with the son of a marquess?!

Hughes had been anticipating a baron or perhaps petty nobility—certainly not the son of one of the most distinguished and important houses in all the realm. Clearly, his maid’s ability to work magic extended far beyond the literal.

The count forced his gaping mouth shut, his wife and daughter following suit. Melody was not excluded from the shock, though the family was too busy reeling from theirs to notice.

“Well met, Lady Luciana,” Maxwell said.

“Huh? I-I mean, yes! Likewise, good sir! Well mep!” Luciana’s face burned. She’d misspoken. Maxwell’s face twisted as he resisted the urge to laugh.

Shock was the theme of the night; even Maxwell was not spared. He had prepared himself in advance for the manor awaiting him, as he had not been spared the rumors of the Ignobles’ estate.

What he found, however, defied all expectation. The estate was modest but certainly not unsightly, and clearly well cared for. Nothing about it struck him as “ignoble” in the slightest.

Least of all the blushing maiden before him.

“And I thought I knew beauty,” he murmured.

“Pardon?”

“Ah, nothing. Speaking to myself. Shall we go? The ball awaits, my lady.”

Though of a higher status, Maxwell offered Luciana the utmost courtesy, referring to her as one of lower station might. A minor change in behavior, yet a meaningful one.

“Yes, let’s,” Luciana replied, accepting his outstretched hand.

Maxwell smiled. “If you’ll excuse us, Count. Until we reconvene.”

“Y-yes, of course,” Hughes stammered. “I leave my daughter to you.”

“I’m off, Father, Mother,” said Luciana.

“Tonight is your night, darling. Make the most of it, and show the world who you are,” Marianna said. “Turn heads.”

“I will, Mother. I’ll see you later, Melody.”

“Have a beautiful night, my lady,” the maid replied.

As Maxwell led Luciana out the door, he turned and sent Melody one last smile. Melody maintained the one she already wore, unflinchingly professional, and bowed.

Maxwell smiled again, this time to himself and a bit sadly. He helped Luciana into the carriage, and off they went to the royal palace. The count and countess’s carriage arrived shortly after. Melody watched them depart as well.

“All right, now to get ready myself.”

She did so quite swiftly, then awaited her own rendezvous at the manor’s back gate. A carriage pulled up, and a man with fiery hair and golden eyes hopped out.

“I hope you haven’t waited long,” he said.

“Not at all,” Melody replied. “Shall we be off, Lect?”

Lectias Froude assisted the maid into the carriage. Hooves clopped against pavement as twilight deepened to dusk.

They arrived at Lect’s estate to find Paula awaiting them, her hands planted on her hips.

“There you are, Melody. Come with me. We’ve got work to do!”

“P-Paula! Wait! Hold on, I—*wah!*”

“Master, you’ll have to take care of yourself. We’ll be busy.”

Paula dragged her fellow maid into one of the back rooms of the estate. The instant the door shut, she threw articles of clothing off and just as quickly replaced them with others. Melody just might have met her match. Paula worked with such efficiency, applied makeup with such precision, coordinated everything so tastefully—and she did it all as well as Melody herself. Perhaps even better in some areas.

As she worked, Paula explained that the makeup she used came from the family business before it went bankrupt. But Melody could hardly bring herself

to care about the explanation.

There's been a maid this perfect right under my nose this whole time!

"Done!" Paula declared before Melody could collect herself.

Melody examined herself in the mirror, and her eyes shot open wide. "Paula, this is... This is incredible work you've done. I hardly recognize myself. But why go this far? I'm more than happy to satisfy the requirement for Lect's attendance at this party by joining him, but aren't we only going for formality's sake and coming straight home?"

"That dolt. He hasn't told her, has he?" Paula muttered quietly and fiercely enough that Melody couldn't quite catch it. "Oh well. You'll learn soon enough. Better get going before you're late."

She shooed Melody into the foyer, where she found Lect waiting in a formal suit.

"Sorry about that," Melody said. "I'm ready."

"Then let's get..." Lect trailed off as soon as he laid eyes on Melody.

He stayed frozen for several seconds before Melody snapped him out of it. "Lect?"

"Right," he finally said. "Ahem. Let's get going."

"Of course. See you, Paula."

"You two have fun!" Paula said.

"I only intend to greet a few people and make my presence known. We won't be gone long," Lect said. "Keep an eye on things until we're back."

"Can do, Master. Enjoy your evening."

Paula watched her master and his date board the carriage once more and bowed as it trundled away. When the clomping of hooves faded, she stood up straighter and traced the path of the carriage—right to the palace.

She shook her head. "'Won't be gone long,' he says. Just admit you're head over heels, you dolt."

Paula hadn't pulled out all the stops making that girl shine for nothing. If they

weren't gone long, she'd consider it a personal failure.

Some time later, in the carriage, Melody was having a crisis.

"E-excuse me. Lect? Where did you say we were headed exactly?"

"The...palace." The knight averted his gaze, and that said it all.

"And why is that? You said this was a small function."

"I did. And it is. Relatively speaking. The palace is, um, quite large, really. For a ball, that is. The Spring Ball. To be specific."

"Ah, of course, the Spring Ball. Famous for its quaintness," Melody grumbled. "Lect! That ball is for debutantes and bachelors. I am neither! My lady is going to be there, Lect!"

"I, um... You see, my lord made it very clear that I was to attend. W-with a partner. I apologize."

Oh lord, what have I gotten myself into?! Melody agonized.

Lect's conditions for his potential partner had been strict, and Melody satisfied them all. She had to have poise, be well-versed in matters of etiquette, be courageous enough to hold her own among nobility, and harbor only completely platonic feelings toward him. Though Melody was technically a commoner, Lect was only a knight. They simply had to remember their manners and keep to themselves.

"A maid," Melody scoffed, "attending the same ball as her master. It's unheard of! Unthinkable! No. I mustn't. Take me back now."

"Shame," Lect sighed. "Paula spent many sleepless nights sewing that dress, you know." Melody clenched. "Three days without sleep. And all for nothing..." He rested his elbow against the frame of one of the windows and sighed dramatically.

Melody shook with indignation. *This...! This snake! And here I thought Lect was an honest man! That'll teach me to take a nobleman at his word.*

Tailoring a dress was no easy feat. The one Melody wore was apparently

store-bought, but the touches Paula added made it seem custom-made.

Her maidly pride conspired against her. She could not in good conscience waste the effort Paula had put into her outfit.

“*Oooh*, fine!” she finally surrendered. “I’ll go, but what if my lady sees?”

“I sincerely doubt she’d recognize you. You look, um...very beautiful tonight.” Lect turned away. Compliments were not in his nature. It was telling that he had deigned to bestow one on Melody at all.

Its significance was, unfortunately, lost on her. “It’s true. I do look like a completely different person, no doubt thanks to Paula’s expertise. Still, I’m afraid it will only be enough to fool men. The keen feminine eye is not to be underestimated, Lect.”

“That so?”

“Yes, it is! Gosh, I wish you would have told me all this sooner.”

“I was, er, afraid you would say no,” he confessed.

She had to grant him that; she probably would have. She did not care to spare him any sympathy, however. There were more pressing issues at hand.

“What to do...” Melody mused.

“I apologize. I suppose no amount of makeup would be enough to conceal your unique hair or eyes, and those identify you more than anything. Something I should have considered.”

Melody perked up. “That’s it. My hair and eyes identify me.” She stared up at Lect. “I’m going to borrow something of yours for the time being. Color—*Arcobaleno*!”

“What are—o-oh!”

The maid brought her face directly up to his and all its angelic beauty came into sharper focus. Her breath feathered over Lect’s skin, and his heart hammered mysteriously in response.

Chapter 12:

The Scarlet Seductress and the Fae Princess

“NOW, WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, LET THIS year’s Spring Ball begin!”

With His Majesty’s opening remarks, the ballroom came to life. Of the three pairs of double doors that led to the room, the largest flew open. Usually reserved for the royal family, marquesses, and high-ranking aristocrats, tonight they showcased all the young men and women making their debuts.

Reverent applause filled the ballroom.

Normally, guests would enter one by one, each name announced in order of rank, starting with the daughters of dukes. Tonight, however, was a special exception, and the first lady announced was far from the daughter of a duke. Incredibly, the second most important man in the realm happened to be escorting a particular debutante.

“Lady Anna-Marie of House Victillium, daughter of Marquess Victillium, escorted by His Royal Highness the crown prince, Christopher von Theolas! Welcome!”

Applause rang out, even louder than before, as Prince Christopher stepped into the ballroom and before the audience. His garb differed significantly from the traditional dress code of tailcoats the other men wore. Instead, he was dressed in the silver-laden ceremonial garments of the crown prince. At his side and a deferential second later appeared his sultry crimson-haired companion, Anna-Marie.

Her hair sat piled atop her head, exposing what would normally be a scandalous amount of skin. A masterfully applied layer of makeup accentuated her mature, enchanting features. Despite being only fifteen, she carried herself like a woman. A dark yet eye-catching dress cascaded down her figure, hugging her waist before blooming out to billow down her legs. Gems sat inlaid in the A-line skirt, and lace webbed up to her neck from her shoulders and chest, guarding her cleavage. Men strained for the mere chance at catching a glimpse

of the perfect skin peeking out from beneath the lace.

Jealousy over such glamour, such a masterwork of beauty, was an exercise in futility—everyone knew it. They feared her allure as one feared a god.

In hushed whispers, many called her the Scarlet Seductress. Not pejoratively, of course. The peerage knew her character and her capabilities well, and the only thing keeping the public from referring to her as the crown princess was an official announcement of engagement.

She and the prince exchanged soft smiles, bowed to the king and queen, and waited for the remainder of the guests to be summoned.

As one daughter after another appeared in the ballroom, Christopher whispered to Anna-Marie, “The heroine should be the last one called out of the counts, right?”

“In the game,” Anna-Marie said. “We don’t even know where she is, though, so it’ll probably be someone else.”

“Hm. But this world is *based* on the game, right? It wouldn’t make sense if she never showed up. How do we know if you-know-what’s even gonna happen without her?”

“We don’t. We won’t know anything for certain until the night’s over, so stay sharp. If the heroine’s not here, then anything could happen.”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice.”

This ball was a key event in the game, but without the heroine present, there was no telling how things would unfold. Christopher and Anna-Marie maintained their regal poker faces, but unease roiled beneath the surface.

By the time the list of counts neared its conclusion, the applause had dwindled substantially.

“Lady Luciana of House Rudleberg, daughter of Count Rudleberg,” the master of ceremonies announced.

Scattered chuckles echoed in the otherwise silent room.

“Does she even have a proper dress to wear? They don’t let you in here wearing rags, do they?”

“Rudleberg makes me ashamed to be a count. Had he any dignity, he’d spare us the ignominy and stay in his hovel.”

“I feel sorry for her escort. No one wants to walk through those doors for the first time with a *Rudleberg*.”

The capital was not kind to the Rudlebergs. All knew the ignominious tale of their fall from grace, as well as the rumors of their ramshackle, rat-infested mansion. Such tales had swelled and festered without hindrance, as the Rudlebergs rarely left their lands.

The next words from the master of ceremonies, however, silenced every chortle and snicker.

“Escorted by Lord Maxwell of House Reclentos, son and heir apparent of Marquess Reclentos. Welcome!”

All eyes swept toward the grand doors reserved for only the noblest among them. Some questioned if they had heard correctly; others outright refused to believe it.

House Reclentos was counted among the most noble of all. Their generations of lord chancellors didn’t earn their places due to nepotism, but genuine merit, and none had the gall to deny it. Maxwell, the house’s future patriarch, was already well on his way to continuing the family tradition. He was perhaps the most in-demand escort out of all the ball’s attendees. Women clamored for his attention and the opportunity to earn his favor. He could have had any woman in the kingdom, and he had chosen an *Ignoble*.

The ballroom buzzed with questions and doubts. Anna-Marie, meanwhile, harbored some of her own. *Lord Maxwell is an escort?! He’s supposed to attend alone. He does in the game, anyway. This is where he’s supposed to meet the heroine, and he only asks to be her partner at the next ball!*

Christopher’s mind was elsewhere. *That liar! He told me he wasn’t interested in anyone!*

Two silhouettes passed through the door. One was unmistakably Maxwell Reclentos. Half the women in the room scowled, turning their ire to the harlot who had stolen Maxwell away from them. Jealousy and fury raged in their

hearts—right up until they spotted Luciana.

She entered with the regal bearing of a princess. Someone in the crowd compared her grace to the fae, thus sparking the moniker “the Fae Princess.” The name spread like wildfire among the bewildered onlookers. None could refute such an apt title, however, as nothing else explained the presence of the ethereal, bewitching sight before them.

Her golden hair, done half-up, glistened brighter than the sun itself. Her eyes were deep, blue-green pools of water, and her skin was flawless and pure save for the touch of red on her cheeks. An off-the-shoulder dress mesmerized onlookers with its striking blue-to-aquamarine gradient. With each step, it rippled like waves across the ocean, gems glimmering like sunlight glancing across the surface of the water. Her smile could cure any ailment with its innocence and sweetness.

People forgot to applaud. Luciana and her escort paid their respects to the king and queen in utter silence.

Wh-why is it so quiet all of a sudden?! Luciana thought. Do I not get applause?! Oh gosh, everyone’s staring!

Maxwell had a better grasp of the situation, and it was all he could do not to let his discomfort show.

Meanwhile, one spectator was losing her grip perhaps even faster than Luciana. *Yes! Well done, Lord Maxwell! Heavens, she’s adorable! She’s perfect!*

As was another. Maxwell, you rotten bastard! She’s literally my type, and not only do you lie to me about going solo, but you take her?! She’s dainty! She’s slender! She’s everything I’ve ever wanted, and you took her from me! I swear, you are introducing us!

Anna-Marie and Christopher got along as well as cats and dogs, but they shared one passion: women.

Once all the noblewomen had been introduced, the orchestra began to play, and the first dance commenced—a waltz. At most balls, the king and queen would lead this dance, but at the Spring Ball, the debutantes held that privilege.

Even so, two couples practically owned the dance floor: Anna-Marie with

Christopher and Luciana with Maxwell.

The royal couple stepped together in perfect harmony, a testament to their long history. Luciana and her partner, in contrast, moved clumsily, as expected of their last-minute acquaintance. Still, they conducted themselves gracefully, and their hesitancy and anxiety served to endear them to their onlookers.

Anna-Marie's waltz stirred the hearts of all who witnessed it. She moved with fire, with passion, while Luciana flowed unsteady and soothing like water. The spectators were divided between hot and cold, sensual and pure. Surely, many a heart stuttered through palpitations in that crowd.

There were two onlookers, of course, who were decidedly fixed in their opinions of the performance.

Give her to meee! I need her, Maxwell! She is so perfect!

Give her to meee! I need her, Lord Maxwell! She is so cuuute!

Internally, the prince and the marquess's daughter were one nudge away from a full meltdown. Outwardly, they were the models of nobility.

Meanwhile, many of the less virtuous men in the room—even those who had scoffed at her name moments prior—had only one thought on their minds: *She's mine next!*

The Spring Ball was shaping up to be as exciting as it was successful. That is, unless you were anyone other than Anna-Marie or Luciana. In which case, the night did not make for much of a debut for you.

Even so, one could not feel *too* bad for the other debutantes when they themselves were just as entranced by the dancing as anyone else—so much so that most lagged a step behind their own partners.

That's not the way I learned to dance, Luciana noted. *Maybe it's a local trend?*

Tripping over one's own feet was certainly a trend—if a trend could be localized to a single room.

“Quite the daughter you have there, Lord Rudleberg.”

“L-Lord Chancellor!”

As the Rudlebergs watched their daughter dance, Maxwell’s father, Marquess Georic Reclentos, approached.

“How long I’ve warred with my son over finding a partner for events such as these,” he mused. “Imagine my surprise when he comes to me at the eleventh hour saying he intends to escort someone. I see now that he was enchanted by that little fairy you have on your hands.”

“Y-you honor us, Lord Chancellor.”

“Please, I’m grateful. I will admit, I suspected you were using your daughter to get into my good graces, but it’s clear to me now that I did you an injustice by assuming so. The simplest answers are often the correct ones, and it would be quite the convoluted conspiracy if what I’ve witnessed tonight was mere smoke and mirrors.”

“I-I see.”

Hughes did not entirely follow. Being an Ignoble, he did not often consort with his peers and thus was unfamiliar with the political games and trickery that Georic had come to expect from those around him.

Their house has long been scorned. They have few allies, thus few enemies as well, effectively rendering them neutral, the marquess reasoned. Their coffers are a concern, but we can see those refilled in time. The daughter of a count is certainly of appropriate standing, and she is the only woman he’s ever shown even a slight interest in.

He chuckled to himself. Hell, even if this is a stunt to improve his own house’s standing, I’d be impressed enough to allow it. A future marchioness ought to be familiar with the art of cajolery. And if it isn’t cajolery, all the better. Few are the women with such an innate ability to captivate.

The marquess smirked. He was in a very good position indeed.

When the first song came to an end, the debutantes—

“Luciana! You *will* explain yourself this time!”

“You’re keeping one too many secrets for our liking.”

Beatrice and Milliaria rushed up to Luciana, blocking her off so she couldn’t escape.

“If you’ll excuse us, Lord Maxwell,” they said in unison, snatching up their friend and dragging her away.

“G-guys! Wait!” Luciana pleaded in vain. No one came to her rescue as she wailed the whole way to the seating area.

Maxwell simply stood by and watched, too stunned to react. Beatrice’s and Milliaria’s escorts found themselves in a similar state of shock, so the three men consoled each other.

“Y-Your Highness. I, um...”

In the meantime, the daughter of Duke Rincot’dor cornered Christopher, demanding his attention.

“Why, you grace me with your beauty, good lady,” Christopher said on autopilot. “Would you care to share the next dance with me?”

“Oh, I’d love to, Your Highness!”

What is this, a house party? Gah, just let me go see Luciana!

“Lady Victillium, might I trouble you for a dance?”

Duke Rincot’dor’s son was only a step behind, and he accosted Anna-Marie as his sister claimed her partner.

“Why, yes. Of course,” Anna-Marie said reflexively. “I hope you won’t disappoint me.”

“That, my lady, I can promise you!”

What is this, a house party? What pests! I wanna go talk to Lucianaaaaaa!

The struggles of high nobility. Social obligation, the greatest chore of all, lay firmly in the way of the prince and his companion’s one true goal. Perhaps they should have been thinking about the plot of the game that would dictate their new lives, but Luciana had bewitched them as thoroughly as she’d bewitched the rest of the room.

The second song started up and a new dance began, but this time all the guests were free to join in.

The night was young, and the ball only just beginning. More guests would arrive throughout the night, so when the smallest of the double doors swung open, no one gave them a second thought.

Chapter 13:

An Angel Descended

VICE-CHANCELLOR CLOUD LEGINBARTH, HIS direct superior the lord chancellor Marquess Georic Reclentos, and his new subordinate Count Hughes Rudleberg stood to the side of the dance floor chatting amicably.

This marked Cloud's first genuine interaction with Hughes, and his impression was positive. The man knew his job, and he did it well. Such good and capable company came as a relief.

His gaze wandered to Hughes's daughter, Luciana. She and her friends smiled and laughed in a way that gripped his heart. Would they have smiled with his daughter, were she here right now? Would they have befriended her?

Cloud sighed. If only his father had accepted Selena, his one true love, he wouldn't have had to wait until he inherited his title in five long years to seek his daughter out. Perhaps she'd be here with him right now. Perhaps they would have danced. His heart shuddered under the fresh grief that image inspired, but the hope that he might someday meet their daughter was a small consolation.

How cruel a mistress fate is, he lamented. I pray she's merciful enough to allow me to see your face, even just once.

The count looked up at nothing. Trapped under the weight of his duties, he had not yet visited Selena's grave. But no amount of responsibility could completely distract him from the ache of his regrets.

"Something wrong?"

Georic freed Cloud from his spiraling thoughts.

Cloud composed himself and responded. "Wondering where Lectias is, that's all."

"Yes, I was wondering that myself." Georic smirked. "Your scapegoat is running late, it seems."

Cloud chuckled.

“I presume there’s a story behind that?” Hughes prompted, and Cloud quickly filled him in. “I see. You did seem rather popular with the ladies before making your escape. So this Sir Lectias was meant to be your bulwark against them.”

“Lord Leginbarth sells subjects to rabid women,” Georic pronounced theatrically. “Shall I tell the criers?”

“I would not have had to force his attendance if he appeared at functions more regularly,” Cloud protested. “And I did at least do him the courtesy of advising him to escort someone—for his own defense.”

“Quite the tall order on such short notice. You’re a cruel man.” Georic glanced across the ballroom. “Speak of the devil.”

Cloud turned just as the smallest of the three doors opened. Silence radiated out from it like a dense fog sweeping into the room. Lect’s height and red hair made him easy to spot, but only when onlookers scurried away did Cloud get a glimpse of his partner.

She was an angel.

No one said it. No one had to. Tacit understanding rippled through the ballroom: An angel had descended upon them.

Her hair shone brighter than gold; its smooth waves shimmered like amber woven into lustrous silk. Her eyes raged red like fire and boiled like blood, as hypnotizing as they were terrifying. She wore a dress whiter and purer than a drift of snow. A silver-embroidered lace mantle flowed and fluttered like seraphic wings behind her.

No words could adequately describe such beauty. She was alluring but not seductive. Graceful but not spritely. She was mesmerizing and awesome, like a breathtaking painting given human form.

Georic and Hughes watched wordlessly as she approached. Cloud, too, could not speak, though not for lack of words.

Selena...?

The count could not help but see his lost lover in the angel gracing the

ballroom. He knew that could not be the case, however. This girl looked nothing like Selena. And yet something told him that this angel was she, come down from heaven to reunite with him.

Lect and the girl stopped in front of them. "Apologies for my lateness, my lord." They bowed.

The lords regained some semblance of composure at this gesture. "R-right. Good evening," Hughes said.

Cloud still needed a moment to collect himself.

Georic filled the silence for him. "We have your excuse for your tardiness right here, I take it. And a magnificent one at that. Care to introduce us?"

"I am honored to make your acquaintances, my lords," the girl said. "My name is Mel...Cecilia."

Cloud's heart stopped. Cecilia. Her name was Cecilia. The name he had picked out for his daughter and planned to bestow upon her when at last they met.

Fate was indeed a cruel mistress.

Some time earlier...

"There!"

As the carriage trotted along toward the palace, Melody examined her amber-colored hair and nodded in approval.

No one should recognize me like this. Lady Luciana isn't even expecting me, so I'm confident this disguise will work. Thank goodness I got practice doing this when I left home.

"Was that magic just now?" Lect asked. "I've never seen such a spell."

In an instant, Melody's hair had turned as golden as his eyes, and her eyes as red as his hair. He studied her, enraptured. The white of her dress had paired with her natural coloring quite tastefully, giving her the look of a gentle angel. Now, she bore the air of the divine, of a noble and awe-inspiring seraph.

Either way, an angel, by Lect's reckoning.

“This should solve our problem, I think,” she said.

“You’re certainly unrecognizable now if you weren’t before. Your lady won’t suspect a thing.”

“That said, please do not make this a habit. Use your words in the future, Lect.”

“Yes. Of course. I’m sorry.” He lowered his head meekly. Melody accepted his apology.

They reached the royal palace shortly after that. Melody let Lect escort her toward the ballroom, placing herself in the role of a chaperone. It wasn’t quite the same as being a maid, but it was close enough to ease her nerves and put her back in her comfort zone.

The stares they earned the moment they stepped out of the carriage undid that comfort.

Th-the guards don’t know I’m a maid already, do they? Am I too refined? I’m not acting too maidly, am I?!

Thankfully not, as maids did not often wear angelic white dresses. Melody’s paranoia was, in fact, purely founded in hubris.

The smallest of the three doors opened, and they entered the ballroom.

A grand, lavishly ornamented chamber greeted them. Magically lit lamps and lights hung about the room. Guests danced and chatted, filling the hall with a hum of energy. Melody somehow remembered to smile, but her nerves crackled as she stepped into the heart of noble society.

Thankfully, few paid any mind to entrances made via the small doors they had used. Those who did notice, though, stared. And kept staring.

Stunned, no doubt, Lect figured. He knew better than anyone how gorgeous his partner was. He recalled going similarly delirious at the sight of her when they first met. The best pieces of art always left an impact.

People made way for them as Lect and Melody passed, as though in reverence. Lect had never seen anything like it. He felt as if he’d stepped into a particularly hyperbolic fable or myth.

A certain anachronistic duo would have called it “protagonist privilege.”

All this after a simple change of hair and eye color, Lect mused. I’ll need to be twice as vigilant for spies if mages can alter their appearance on a whim. Wait...

“Lect,” Melody said, “is that them?”

“Hm? Oh, yes.” Certain pieces had very nearly clicked into place in his mind before Melody spoke up. Alas.

They approached three men: Lect’s lord, Count Cloud Leginbarth, Lord Chancellor Georic Reclentos, and a blond man Lect could not place. Melody knew this last figure, of course, but Lect had no knowledge of that—nor of the panic brewing within her.

“Apologies for my lateness, my lord.”

“R-right. Good evening.”

Lect eyed his lord. He hadn’t been smitten by his companion, had he?

Georic ended the silence. “We have your excuse for your tardiness right here, I take it. And a magnificent one at that. Care to introduce us?”

Melody curtsied. “I am honored to make your acquaintances, my lords. My name is Mel...” She stopped herself just in time, mentally kicking herself. “Cecilia.”

It was the first name she could think of. She was going to need a list for all of her aliases before long.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful woman. I am Marquess Georic Reclentos.”

The blond man offered a polite smile. “Count Hughes Rudleberg, madam.”

Melody took some solace in the fact that her lord clearly did not recognize her. She curtsied, then waited for the silver-haired man to introduce himself... but he remained silent.

“Forgotten your manners, Cloud?” the marquess chided.

“O-oh. Pardon me. C-Count Cloud Leginbarth...madam.”

“A pleasure to meet you, my lord,” Melody replied. “It is an honor.”

“L-likewise.”

Lect and Georic eyed Cloud. What had gotten into the man? Was he simply stricken by the maiden’s beauty?

Melody, too, began to harbor a nagging suspicion in the back of her mind.
Cloud Leginbarth... Do I know that name?

She did. It was, in fact, the name of her father, a name that her mother had left in her final testament. Melody’s memory, however, was selective, and it had selected maids over family.

That’s it! He’s the vice-chancellor! Lord Rudleberg’s superior at the chancery! Phew. That’s one mystery solved.

It really wasn’t. But the book was closed as far as she was concerned. Poor, poor Cloud would likely never meet his daughter unless he himself could unearth the truth.

For a mercy, Hughes never did see through Melody’s disguise. Paula had outdone herself, and the altered hair and eye color helped as well. It was highly advanced magic, the kind that no one in the world other than Melody could achieve. Not even Anna-Marie, despite her talents. In other words, it was beyond comprehension, and thus the perfect camouflage—to everyone except one particular person.

“Wow, Luciana, look at how pretty she is,” Beatrice said. “She might be even prettier than you.”

“What is happening at this year’s ball?” Milliaria moaned. “Do we even belong here?”

Luciana refrained from comment. She only stared at the mystery girl. Hard. She knew.

She knew of Melody’s extraordinary abilities, that she could do practically anything, that she could even work miracles. This disguise could not fool her.

What is Father doing?! That is so obviously Melody! Luciana yearned for the harisen fan she’d left at home.

Hughes shuddered. A draft, perhaps.

And who is that man?! Her lover?! She is so not getting out of this one!

Luciana locked onto her target. She'd just been brainstorming ways to blow off some of the steam she'd built up answering her friends' relentless questions regarding her relationship with Maxwell. She was itching to indulge her mischievous side, and this was the perfect excuse. In truth, she could not bring herself to feel any true upset over this turn of events.

Five minutes. Five minutes was how long Melody's disguise had lasted.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the ballroom, the villainess and the main route were too preoccupied to realize that their heroine had arrived at last.

Just let me go see Lucianaaaaaa!

Were their heroine even on their minds, that is.

Such was the lot of a future king and queen (pending official decree, of course). They could not deny their subjects, and regardless of the advent of any angels, so long as the Spring Ball continued, they would serve as its tirelessly working heart.

Not once but twice they had let the heroine pass them by. One had to wonder what other chances had gone unnoticed by the oblivious couple.

They hadn't forgotten the plot of the game, right?

Chapter 14:

No Escape

HAVING ATTENDED TO THE FORMALITIES regarding the marquess and counts, Lect and Melody greeted their partners: Cloud's older sister, Christina, followed by Georic's wife, Haumea, and of course Countess Marianna Rudleberg. The latter seemed just as fooled by Melody's appearance as her husband, but the act wasn't an easy one to keep up.

"What a pretty little thing she is," Christina cooed. She had her brother's silver hair. "Why didn't you introduce us sooner, Lectias?"

"We...only just met, really. And she's not of noble birth, so this is her first time around, well, *this* sort of culture." Lect maintained his poker face admirably.

The story they spun claimed that Cecilia was born in the western lands of the kingdom and was a distant relative of Paula's. She had come to the capital to visit her, and that was when she and Lect first met. Their acquaintance was short, hence the lack of formal introduction, and she was a commoner, so tonight would be her *only* peek into high society.

Christina giggled at Lect's explanation. Beside her, Haumea shifted in her seat. "Well, goodness me. If this is the girl you've settled on after all these years, she must mean a lot to you. It's a shame we won't see her again, isn't it, Lady Christina?"

"Indeed it is, Lady Haumea. Why, the only way she might attend the next ball is if she were to somehow come into nobility—by, say, marrying into it, perhaps?"

"Now why didn't I think of that?"

The noblewomen tittered in that refined way they had surely practiced at length. Lect swallowed down a sigh. It was just a bit of frivolous fun. They would beg his pardon, of course, if he was *truly* offended. Of course they would.

This is exactly why I didn't want to bring anyone, he grumbled.

Theirs was a dangerous variety of noble for men like him. The kind that liked to gossip and banter and tease. Incredible, how such influential, stately, powerful ladies could be so callous and petty. They did enjoy his suffering so.

Lect glanced at Melody. She was still smiling, as unaffected and angelic as ever. An admirable quality.

Beneath the mask, however, Melody was shrieking. *She's staaariing!*

In truth, she hardly paid attention to the clucking noblewomen—her focus lay elsewhere. All the way across the ballroom. Where Luciana was staring. Hard. Melody had only noticed after she and Lect had excused themselves from the lords, but one look to the side, and there she was.

Staring.

Melody shrieked in torturous silence. A ghost would have frightened her less. *She... She doesn't know, does she? No. How could she? She doesn't know. She doesn't know...*

She knew. Melody knew she knew. She lied to herself anyway, because it was all that was holding her together.

"So you knew she was the one at first sight?" Christina pressed.

"N-not at first sight, per se," Lect said.

"Now, Lady Christina," Haumea chimed in, "I'll bet it was a prolonged affair. He meets her and he's stricken, but then he goes to see her again and again, every day, until he realizes he can't bear to live without her. That's far more romantic, don't you think?"

"My ladies, I—"

"You stud, you," the hens harmonized.

They were too much for him. A heart and mind as candid as Lect's could never hope to win against the wiles of women practiced in the art of courtly politics. No matter how innocuous his answer, they twisted it until he was compelled to give them more. Never had he faced such deadly opponents.

Marianna, however, was out of her element. Societal pressures told her she had to contribute to the discussion in some way. But how?

She decided on the worst thing possible to say—at least for Melody it was.

“S-say,” Marianna said, “Cecilia, would you like to meet my da—”

Time slowed. Melody’s genius brain sprang into action, every piston pumping, every neuron firing. The lady’s next word would be “daughter.”

She couldn’t let that happen. Coming face-to-face with Luciana was the absolute worst-case scenario. Across the ballroom, Melody caught the glint in Luciana’s eye, like she was just waiting for her mother to finish that sentence and give her a reason to pounce.

Melody had to do something. Anything!

“Lect!” she blurted out. Rather un-angelically, at that. Everyone stared at her in stunned silence, Marianna included. Melody tugged at her partner’s sleeve and doubled down. “W-would you...like to dance?”

The ballroom was quiet. The previous dance had just finished, and the next would begin shortly. It was her only hope of escape.

But Melody had committed a faux pas in this moment. It was the man’s place to invite the woman to dance, not the other way around. Even so, the way she blushed and timidly clung to his coat sleeve—it was, in a word, precious, and Lect was not immune. She had him wrapped tightly around her finger.

He guided her to the dance floor, heart hammering faster and louder than ever before.

Christina cackled as Lect’s knees buckled under him. “I think we broke the poor boy. Adorable things, though. She’s quite the bold one.”

Haumea grinned and nodded.

Marianna did the same. “Is anyone else’s face a little hot? Goodness, that takes me back.”

That set the hens clucking again. “Lady Marianna,” Christina gasped, “you’ve done...*that* before?”

“Oh, yes. Several times when we were students. My husband would never ask me himself. Always busy chatting with his friends or some such.”

“Goodness me!” Haumea covered her flushed cheeks with her hands.

Christina giggled. “Lady Haumea, is it just me or is there gold in this mountain?”

“Why, I was thinking exactly that, Lady Christina. As it happens, I’ve suddenly lost my last source and was in the market for a new one!” The marchioness let out a regal and foreboding laugh.

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow,” Marianna said, foolishly ignoring her instinct to run.

She would regret that when the other two sneered like predators. In unison, they replied, “The night is still young.”

By the time their cruel and bloody work was done, not a single speck of coal remained.

Meanwhile, with Luciana...

Melodyyy...!

Mischievousness was rapidly heating into rage. It was clear as day that Melody was avoiding her.

“What are you frowning for, Luciana?” Beatrice asked.

“No reason,” she said through gritted teeth.

“It doesn’t look like no reason to me,” Milliaria said.

Her fury was no longer secret, but neither of her friends could discern its source. Luciana refused to tear her eyes from that angelic newcomer. Was she jealous that the girl was prettier than her? That wasn’t like her.

“If you say so,” Beatrice said. “Anyway, do you need a partner for later?”

“A partner?” Luciana said. “A partner for what?”

“You don’t know? It’s a tradition. They do it at every Spring Ball,” Milliaria said. She showed her the schedule.

Luciana blinked. “Wait, really?”

“I take it she didn’t know,” said Beatrice. “It’s an interesting twist, I’ll admit.

So are you participating?”

“Oh, yes,” Luciana sneered. “Yes, I am.”

“Then do you need a—”

“Lord Maxwell!” Luciana blurted. She trotted over to him.

He stepped away from a conversation he was having with some other men and tilted his head. “Yes?”

“Come dance with me!”

Melody’s invitation had been a faux pas. Luciana’s “invitation” was doubly so on account of her utter lack of humility. It could not be stressed enough that women were *absolutely not* supposed to seek out their own dance partners.

The bold proposal therefore shocked all who stood within earshot, but no one dared raise an objection against this confident, beautiful girl.

“I... What?!”

Before Maxwell could react, Luciana snatched his hand and dragged him onto the dance floor, leaving speechless onlookers in her wake.

“So, um, Beatrice?” one of the escorts said. “Would you like to, um...”

“No. That’s all right. Whatever Luciana’s up to, we probably don’t want to get in the way. It’ll certainly make for a good show, though.”

Milliaria glanced at her friend. “It usually is with her, isn’t it?”

They shared a smile before turning their gazes to the dance floor, eager to witness every moment of the drama about to unfold.

Lect and Melody faced each other. He drew her closer with one hand around her waist and used his other hand to hold hers. They stood close enough to hear each other’s breaths, hearts beating so hard they could almost feel them thumping against each other’s chests.

Lect was a mess.

Who could blame him, though? He was about to dance with the girl he

fancied.

The girl I... Do I...have feelings for her?

The realization hit him like a bolt of lightning, sudden and shocking. Lectias Froude was in love with Melody Wave. There could be no doubt.

Except there was. Twenty-one was quite late for a first love, but that was the hand he'd been dealt. He didn't understand these feelings, having never experienced them before, but love seemed the most likely answer.

Blissfully unaware of this inner turmoil, Melody sagged with relief at escaping her predicament by the skin of her teeth. *My lady can't get to me now. We'll just dance one dance and quietly slip away.*

They could blend into the crowd and make a quick getaway. Luciana would be none the wiser.

Meanwhile, Lect's torment continued. *Wh-which foot do we start on again? Gosh, I can't remember. I can't think.*

"Lect, you need to loosen up. Are you nervous?" Melody said, picking up on the tension in his body, if not its cause, thanks to their close proximity.

"I, um..."

"Not much of a dancer? I suppose that does explain why you don't go to balls very often." Melody giggled, and Lect's heart threatened to burst. "Relax. It's all in the rhythm. Let your body take over and just enjoy yourself."

That wasn't at all what she had told her lady during Luciana's "lessons," but then again, this wasn't her lady. Melody poked her tongue out and gave a silly, unrepentant smile.

Lect's anxiety drained away. He was certain now. He knew what these feelings were. He'd been right.

The orchestra began to play, and the angel moved.

Lect caught on quickly and led quite well once he regained his footing. His toned physique and physical conditioning lent itself well to the movements demanded of ballroom dance. Every turn and step Melody took, he stayed with her, not only keeping pace but elevating their performance.

He can dance! Okay, maybe I'll get to have some fun too!

Melody started to pick up the pace. First it was a step here, then another there, then a turn that way, each improvisation a test for how much she could get away with. Lect matched her step for step, and she grew bolder.

Sparks flew. Their bodies moved as one, perfectly in tune with one another. No wasted steps. No movement that wasn't deliberate. The entire ballroom turned around them as they hypnotized onlookers with their subtle yet striking flourishes. Lect hoisted Melody up, and she twirled in midair.

In that moment, everyone knew.

The ballroom was theirs. Heaven's domain. For here was an angel soaring through the sky, her wings fluttering behind her.

But she shared this domain and the attention therein.

The Fae Princess was near.

Meanwhile, two guests remained entirely oblivious to the drama unfolding in their ballroom. At a certain point, one had to consider it a talent.

"Will they lay off the dances already?" Anna-Marie whined. "I haven't gotten to say a word to Luciana yet."

"Cry me a river," Christopher shot back. "I should've danced with her three times by now. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I didn't enjoy getting attention from all those cute girls, but the heart wants what the heart wants."

"I want you to shut up. Keep it in your pants, dude."

"Why are you making it weird?! I'm a guy! I wanna dance with cute girls! It's my *job* to dance with cute girls!"

"So when you followed that girl to help her 'powder her nose,' that was part of your job, huh? Oh, I weep for you, Your Highness. Go jump in a lake."

"Can we not?! I have nothing to prove to you!"

Finally released from the shackles of obligatory social rituals, the royal couple excused themselves to the restroom, whereupon they re-shackled themselves

with their own chains. Some rivalries could transcend lifetimes, it seemed.

It would be some time before they returned to the ballroom. Quite some time.

The song ended, and silence filled the ballroom, broken an instant later by applause. Lect and Melody smiled at each other, shoulders heaving, and bowed.

“Thank you for the dance, Lect. It was wonderful.”

“Yes, it was.” Sweat streamed down the sides of his face.

His expression took Melody aback. *I’ve never seen him smile like this before.*

She didn’t know what to make of it, other than it made her happy to see her friend happy.

As she returned from the high of their fantastical dance to cold reality, Melody remembered where she was and how urgent it was that she *not* be here very soon. “Lect, we—”

“Lords and ladies!” someone shouted.

Melody jumped. *G-goodness, what’s this about?*

“It is the royal family’s sincerest hope that the night has treated you well, that men and women, friend and lover alike have forged and strengthened their fellowships through the art of dance. Now, it is time to extend that gift beyond these walls. Students, you are the stars of the night, and one day, when you pass through Royal Academy’s halls, you will light up the sky. But you will not do so alone. You will shine among peers—the peers you have met this very night. To that end, let fellowship grow beyond the bounds of propriety. For just one song, let ladies become lords and lords become ladies. I assure you, both will appreciate the lessons one could learn from such an experience. Now, let the Spring Ball’s annual same-sex dance begin!”

Same what? Right now?! Since when do they do that?!

Pairs of men and pairs of women congregated, effectively sealing off Melody’s path of escape.

“I was wondering if we’d missed it,” Lect said.

“So you knew this was happening?!”

“It’s a tradition. They do it every year.”

“E-every year?! Well, good for them, but I think it’s time we—”

Melody yelped. Someone had grabbed her by the arm. She stared down at the hand on her, traced her gaze up an arm, and promptly blanched upon identifying her captor.

“Shall we? Mel... Pardon me. *Madam Cecilia?*”

Bright gold hair. Aquamarine eyes. There she was—the Fae Princess, beaming in all her splendor.

Melody shrieked inwardly. *I don’t like that smile! I don’t like that smile one bit, my lady!*

The angel and the fairy vanished into the crowd.

Back with Anna-Marie and Christopher...

“The story’s supposed to change based on who the heroine chooses for the same-sex dance, right?”

“Right. If she dances with one of the friends she makes at the opening ceremony, their affection goes up, and she’ll have more support from them,” Anna-Marie explained. “If she dances with the villainess, yours truly, her rivalry stat goes down, making her an easier obstacle later. It’s all very open-ended, you see.”

Christopher scowled. “And if I’m remembering correctly, that dance is popular with a particular kind of person.”

“Some of the boys have CGs—you know, art stills—together, so what do you expect? Some of the fanfic gets pretty spicy too. It’s not my cup of tea, but the Christopher and Maxwell shippers are particularly—”

“Stop it! Stop it right now!” The prince held his head in his hands and groaned. He was quite comfortable with his sexuality, actually, and did not

appreciate that insinuation about his friend.

“That said, I’m basically down with anything as long as Lect’s involved. Hey, you might make a cute couple.”

“I said *stooop!*”

Anna-Marie couldn’t resist turning the screws. She had to savor the fun while she could, after all.

It happens after the dance, she reminded herself. And without the heroine, there could very well be casualties. We have to keep our guard up.

The marquess’s daughter returned to the party, stoic and resolved, skipping along the way. Danger loomed, she knew, but so did a chance to finally dance with Luciana. She preferred to think about the latter and returned to the ballroom utterly oblivious that she’d already squandered her opportunity.

At a certain point, one had to pity this bumbling duo.

Back at the party, the maid and her lady prepared to dance. Fate waited patiently at her loom, tangled threads at the ready. No programming or precedent dictated how she would weave this time.

Chapter 15:

The Truth Comes to Moonlight

A MOMENT OF SILENCE. AND THEN MUSIC. All eyes were on the dance floor.

More precisely, they were on the angel and the fairy. All who looked upon them felt swept away on a journey to a place beyond their imaginations, carried off by otherworldly beings.

The Fae Princess took the role of lord and led the angel in their magical dance. The angel surrendered herself, shadowing her guide like air buoying up wings. Who was this amber beauty? Where had she come from? The questions only added to her mystique.

And yet the two danced in perfect harmony. Onlookers could not help but wonder.

Really, it was not so curious that a maid should know her lady, especially since days prior, their roles had been reversed; Melody had guided Luciana through her first steps into the world of ballroom dancing. She had taken the man's place then, but clearly her lady had absorbed much through their lessons.

They found themselves at the center of the room, both literally and figuratively. Other dancers vacated the place of privilege as though leaving it open for them. A mesmerizing, enthralling energy flowed out from the pair. They were like the bud of a flower, the surrounding people its petals. With every beat, every dance step, that flower bloomed more brilliantly, until it encompassed everyone in the room.

The fairy and the angel spun, and their neighbors spun in turn, followed by their neighbors, and then theirs, the motion cascading outward in a wave. Everyone followed the will of their queens without a word of command. Though it was spontaneous, any onlooker would assume such a dance had been coordinated in advance.

Melody stood at the center of her own hypnotic spiral. But unlike most

others, she was not filled with awe, but rather panic and dread. Luciana smiled at her, but the steadiness of that expression only terrified Melody more. There was no joy behind those eyes.

At first, at least.

Before long, Luciana couldn't help but enjoy herself. A flicker of delight warmed her eyes.

This is the part I admonished her about yesterday. She's leading it excellently. Melody's feet were light, her chest warm. Her lady was learning. Here too. And that step just now. My lady, you dance like a proper lord!

Some of the tension lifted from her shoulders, affording her a moment to breathe. She'd surrendered to her fate as her worst-case scenario unfolded, and she had to see this dance through. One could not escape after taking that first step.

But was mere surrender becoming of a proper maid, even in a situation like this?

No. She wasn't dancing with just anyone; she was dancing with her lady, and on her pride as a maid, she would not squander the opportunity.

Their eyes met and silent words passed between them.

Forget everything, Melody. Just dance with me!

Melody cast away the last of the doubt clouding her heart. *It would be my pleasure, my lady!*

They left the ballroom behind them.

The fairy ran through an open field, frolicking and skipping until she tripped. When she tumbled to the ground, she merely laughed.

The angel shook her head at the silly girl and sat beside her in the springy grass, gazing at the fairy with perfect love and devotion.

Beautiful flowers surrounded them on all sides. The fairy sang, and the blooms danced for her. The angel beckoned, and the petals answered her summons.

For a moment, they existed not in the royal palace's ballroom but in paradise itself. Every onlooker was a passenger on that supernatural journey. As the song slowed, resolving toward its final note, the illusion seemed to come alive.

It *did* come alive.

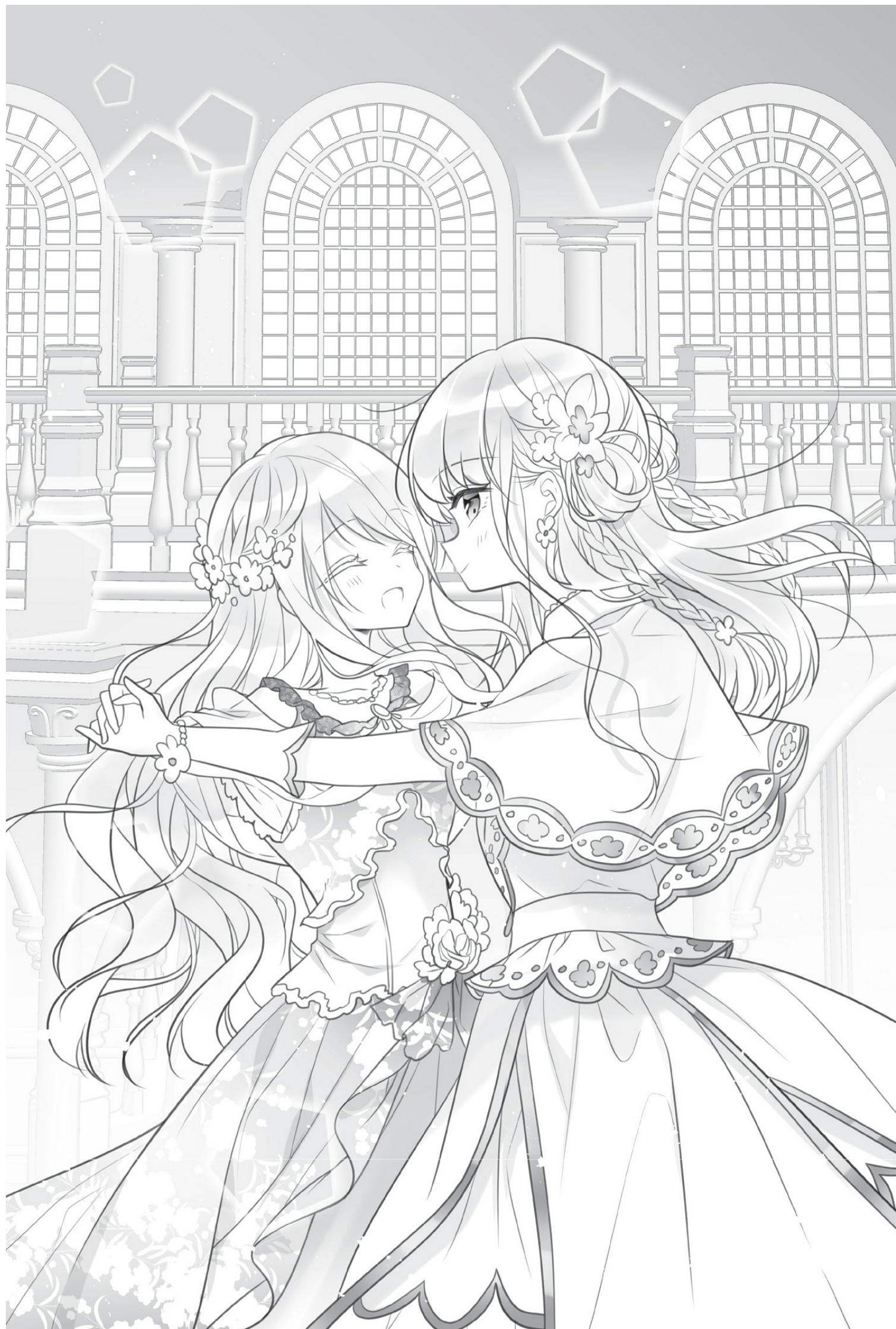
Melody lost herself in the moment, and the floor beneath her feet radiated a luminescent silver light.

Onlookers and dancers alike stared. The only one who seemed to *not* notice the blatant magical display was Melody, who remained utterly entranced, even more so than Luciana.

Light cut tracks into the floor, forming a path through the ballroom. That path could have led to any of the dozens of people walking around the room, but its true source was clear.

Her lady's performance had so moved Melody that arcane energy flowed through her. The peaks of these magical surges had broken through the dam of her subconscious control, manifesting as glowing silver footsteps. The residual mana bathed the dance hall in platinum radiance.

Luciana (maintaining her smile, of course, just as she had learned to do) was baffled. *M-Melody?! What's going on?! The maid was too absorbed to read her thoughts this time. Not good! Very not good! What do I do?!*



Luciana thought quickly. Melody had clearly caused this phenomenon, but few regarded it with anything other than curiosity. There was still time to salvage this, and Luciana knew what she had to do. After the night that had just unfolded, she was more than happy to do it too!

She drove one of her heels into Melody's foot.

Jeez...! Ow, that hurt! Melody mentally winced. My lady?! What did I tell you about stepping on your partner's feet? You are so getting supplementary lessons when we return to the estate!

I had to get your attention somehow! Look around you!

Around me? What are you... Oh, good lord!

Naturally, they communicated all of this telepathically through polite, unshaken smiles. And even after Luciana's little improvisation with her heel, their dance continued unabated. It was doubtful anyone had noticed the exchange.

Do something! Luciana silently urged.

Wh-what is this? Oh. It's my magic. Well, it's easy enough to rid myself of it. Melody collected herself, settling her racing emotions as the song neared its conclusion. The light began to dim. *Now...begone!*

As the final note warbled into silence, the maid and her lady struck a pose, and the light flickered out. An exquisite finale to an exquisite dance.

Only heavy breathing broke the quiet for a time. Then the king and queen stood, stricken with awe, and applauded the dancers. The rest of the attendees quickly followed suit, until the entire hall filled with a standing ovation.

No one could believe what they had just witnessed. There were spellcasters among the crowd, but even they explained what had just transpired as beauty itself rather than wild magic set loose by unchecked emotion. Not even the king's archmage possessed that kind of power.

This posed a golden opportunity. Everyone was distracted.

"Melody, can you cast some spell to get us out of here? We need to talk," Luciana said.

“R-right. Of course. Ahem, subtlety and grace—*Conoscenza di Servir*.”

A thin, airy, filmlike substance wrapped itself around Melody and Luciana. Everything beyond it appeared hazy and distorted.

“Wow, what is this?”

“The best domestic servants exist solely behind the scenes,” Melody explained. “While not rendering us entirely invisible, this spell will make us stand out less to the average eye. I devised it as a backup measure for my work. This isn’t exactly the context I had in mind for it, but it’ll do.”

“All right, well, let’s get out of here. There’s a courtyard nearby where we might find a bit of privacy.”

Melody’s shoulders slumped. *Drat. I was hoping we could move on. I suppose I’m in for an earful.*

Luciana took her by the hand and led her away from the ballroom.

Like clockwork, Christopher and Anna-Marie reappeared, the former eager to witness a sapphic dance featuring Luciana, the latter intent on a firsthand experience. But their enthusiasm swiftly met with crushing sadness as applause announced the end of the dance.

At least the clapping drowned out their wails of grief.

“Well, that was interesting.”

“Yes. It was.”

Having lost their partners, and for lack of anything better to do, Lect and Maxwell had paired up for the same-sex dance. And what a strange dance it had been.

“As much as I’d love to bask in the moment, we should probably find our partners,” Maxwell said.

Lect agreed. They split up, Maxwell remaining on the dance floor, Lect searching around the chairs and tables. There, he found his lord, Count Leginbarth, eyeing something sadly.

“Ah. Lect,” he said on the tail end of a sigh. “Where has your lady friend, Cecilia, gone?”

“We got split up during the last dance. I came to see if she was here.”

“I can’t say I’ve seen her, if she is. This is no place for a maiden to wander alone. Shall I help you look for her?”

“Stay here, if you would, my lord. She and her partner may yet return.”

“Very well. Do tell me if any ruffians are getting too personal or giving her trouble.” The count’s eyes sharpened. “I’ll give them double.”

Lect swallowed hard. His lord knew how to intimidate. The only question was why he felt the need to intimidate Lect, of all people. “Sh-she’ll appreciate the concern, my lord. Anyway, what were you looking at?”

“Oh. This.” The count revealed a small portrait of Selena McMarden when she was just seventeen. It was one of very few things he had left to remember her by, though it wasn’t like him to wax sentimental at a public gathering. Something was on his mind. “You may think me insane, but... Madam Cecilia. She reminds me of her.”

“Of Lady Selena, my lord?”

“Absurd, I know. She doesn’t even have her eyes.” He smiled sadly. “Or her hair.”

A forlorn shadow passed over Lord Leginbarth’s face, revealing for a moment the true depth of his loss.

Lect left him and searched the less populated areas of the ballroom for his partner. Luciana was her lady, so she may have pulled Melody aside for questioning. They wouldn’t want prying eyes on them, in that case.

Lect made for the nearby courtyard, replaying everything that had led up to this night as he did. *We first met at my estate—no. In the Avarenton March, actually. When we were hunting for Lady Selena. To think I’d...fall in love with that girl.*

And a girl of barely fifteen, at that. In fact, she wouldn’t turn fifteen until later that year, so she was only fourteen right now. Seven years was quite the age

gap, but that was the least of Lect's worries. They hardly knew each other, and Melody was a maid, first and foremost. And second-most. Even third-most. Lect knew the girl had no room in her heart for love. Were they to marry, she would have to give up being a maid, and if that weren't unlikely enough, she did not seem the marrying type.

Lect arrived at the courtyard amid his swirling thoughts. In the center of the area stood a large fountain, on the rim of which sat Melody and Luciana. The air around them did not seem tense, and he breathed a sigh of relief that this little incident had not damaged their relationship.

They were just parting ways when he arrived. Luciana waved to the maid and trotted back in the direction of the ballroom, but not before shooting a hard look at Lect as she passed him.

"I'll thank you for giving her an excuse to have a decent night, but trick her again and I'll make you wish you'd never been born. That's a promise."

Lect nodded at once. The lady knew how to intimidate. "Duly noted."

Luciana left, and the knight took his cue. He approached the red-eyed angel by the fountain, smitten all over again when he caught a glimpse of her.

Lady Luciana has quite the keen eye, he noted. But Lord and Lady Rudleberg seemed none the wiser. Doubtless few could imagine a girl like her actually being a black-haired and dark-eyed maid.

But was she? Was she truly a maid with black hair and dark eyes? Or was that yet another illusion?

We met in Trendivalez in the Avarenton March. She's always had black hair and dark eyes.

Had she? Had she *always* had black hair and dark eyes?

She... She has. Always. I saw her again at my estate. I was asleep in the parlor, and when I woke up, she had... She...

Did she have black hair and dark eyes?

She did. I remember. Why am I doubting myself?

Just then, a cloud made way for the moon, whose light poured over Melody.

The Arcobaleno spell colored her hair down to the molecular level, so that light reflected off it exactly as she wanted it to.

But for the briefest of moments, as the pale light parted the darkness, her hair appeared to shine. Not quite pure white but ever so slightly silver.

Lect stopped in his tracks. His eyes widened.

Fate was a cruel mistress. And she had a funny sense of humor.

Lectias Froude knew all he needed to know.

He knew Count Leginbarth had a lover by the name of Selena, and that they had a daughter by the name of Celesty. He knew Celesty supposedly possessed her father's silver hair and her mother's lapis lazuli eyes. He knew what Selena looked like according to her portrait. He knew that Melody Wave had come to the capital from the same town Selena had lived in, and that she left it around the same time as Celesty. He knew that Melody Wave had the ability to alter the color of her hair and eyes. He knew that her hair was not *really* amber.

Lect was seeing things. He had to be. Yet that flash of silver hair had stirred up memories he could not easily deny.

They had not reunited in his parlor. He recalled now. A flicker of a vision. A moment of her bare and angelic and...

Agh, focus! he admonished himself. *It wasn't the parlor. We met again in the bathroom. And she had... She had lapis lazuli eyes. And silver hair.*

Hair as brilliant as the sun, exactly as Anavalez's mayor had described it. The resemblance resolved itself before his eyes, features that no change in coloration could obscure. Melody looked *shockingly* similar to Selena. And what were the chances that a girl who looked like Selena from the same region as Selena—a region she fled soon after Selena's passing—was completely unrelated to her?

"My apologies for slipping away," Melody said with a smile.

"It's all right."

He could say nothing more.

I've found you. I've finally found you, my lady... Melody. You are Lady Celesty.

The girl he had fallen in love with was his lord's own daughter.

Melody—Celesty continued to smile at him, unaware. Lect squashed down the swirl of emotion roiling inside him before it could betray him. It was all he could do.

My beloved... My lady has chosen to be a maid. Were I to report this to my lord, I would rob her of that dream. Yet if I don't, my lord will suffer in silence.

There was no right answer. None that Lect could see. No future where all could live happily. Not while he knew this truth.

He wished he had never learned it.

Chapter 16:

A Pendant of Premonition

SHORTLY BEFORE LECT'S ARRIVAL, MELODY sat beside her lady on the rim of the fountain and explained the situation.

"And you're *really* not mad at him anymore?" Luciana asked.

"No, he apologized before we arrived. I'm past it. Honest."

Even so, a lie was a lie, and Luciana didn't like the sound of that man swindling Melody into attending a ball she never meant to attend. "If you say so. Just say the word, though, and I'll get my harisen."

"I-I appreciate you taking my consent into account."

Melody heaved a sigh of relief. Luciana had been ready to spill blood when she heard about how Lect had tricked her into joining him at the Spring Ball. It was nothing short of a miracle that the maid had managed to stay her hand.

Granted, Luciana was still weighing her options. *I'm really, really glad Melody and I got to dance, but now I'm irate that he had anything to do with it. He's got her calling him by a pet name, and he doesn't even have the decency to treat her with respect and invite her properly? If he thinks he's going to court my Melody, he'll have to do it over my dead body!*

The line had been drawn, and Luciana decided Melody stood squarely and securely on her side. She was indeed the jealous type.

"Just to be sure," she said. "This man. He's a *friend*, right?"

Melody tilted her head. "I'm afraid I don't understand the question. Yes, Lect is a friend. A good friend."

Luciana relaxed, though she did harbor some small pity for the man. Very small. *It's unrequited, then. As it should be. And not a moment's hesitation either. I don't know whether to be happy about that or feel sorry for him.*

They were obviously on good terms, but romance didn't seem to be in the

cards. Far from it.

“Speaking of friends, my lady, I’ve made another one, a servant at Lect’s estate named Paula. She’s an all-works maid like me, and, well, just look at how she did my makeup!” Melody’s cheeks flushed red like a maiden in love as she espoused the girl’s talents at length.

Romance is certainly not in the cards, Luciana concluded. I think I do pity him. Not enough to lift a finger for him, but still.

Melody only had one love, and it was maids. That was as clear as the stars in the sky. The extent of her love did concern Luciana slightly, but then again, that very obsession had led her to the Rudlebergs in the first place. That made her ramblings a little more heartwarming and less alarming.

“...It was really something, my lady.” The maid finally wound down. “Oh my, I didn’t mean to ramble for so long! I apologize, my lady.”

Luciana wished she could hang a portrait of Melody wearing that adorable, flustered look. “It’s all right. It’s cute how much you can talk when you’re passionate about something. Anyway, we really should be getting back, shouldn’t we?”

“Yes, we should. Oh, my lady, your dress! One moment.”

An impassioned dance followed by a similarly impassioned attempt on Lect’s life (thwarted by Melody) had left Luciana’s dress disheveled. Melody straightened it, double-checking the spells she’d cast on the garment while she was at it. One could never be too careful when sending their lady into a large gathering. In the name of safety, she’d placed powerful defensive charms on the Rudlebergs’ clothes for the night.

Still holding, it seems. Nothing’s going to get through those for the time bei—

Melody shot up, spinning in a circle. She could have sworn she’d felt someone watching her. She followed the feeling toward the ballroom roof but found nothing but darkness.

“Melody?” Luciana said. “Is everything okay?”

Am I imagining things? No. I’m certain. Someone was watching us just now. I

felt it.

It was a silly notion, but one she couldn't shake. "My lady, may I cast an extra charm on you?"

"Another one? Sure, but what for?"

Melody asked to see her pendant, and Luciana obliged. The maid cradled it in her hand. "Awareness—*Arte Sensitivo*."

The pendant's gem flashed with a bright glow for a beat.

"So, um, what did that do?"

"It's a kind of detection magic. I've set the spell for line of sight, so if anyone looks at you with ill intent, you'll know if you're wearing this."

"Wow! That's incredible!"

"In the unlikely event that the pendant triggers, you'll see a beam of light visible only to you, pointing in the direction of the source of the ill intent. Whomever it happens to be, stay far away from them, my lady."

Many a noble would have paid a small fortune for the ability to pinpoint one's enemies with such ease. Luciana held it in awe.

"Be warned, my lady, the spell is incomplete," Melody added. "The sensory abilities I've applied are just as imperfect as any human's actual senses. It could mistake ill intent for someone *near* you as ill intent for you and react to a false positive. Please keep that in mind."

Luciana nodded her understanding and hung the necklace back around her neck. "Now we should head back. Are you going home?"

"Yes, I think so. We've finished with the formalities, and I do still have to ready the estate for your return."

"I wish we could spend more time together, but duty calls I suppose. You'd better reconvene with that *man*, and... Oh."

"Well," Melody said. "There he is."

Lect approached them from the ballroom, striding toward them with purpose.

"Well, I guess he's not *totally* worthless after all," Luciana spat. "Anyway, I'll

head back so you two can catch up. Bye!”

“M-my lady! Good lord, stop running! It’s unbecoming!”

Luciana did not heed her maid’s admonishment and continued to trot away, stopping only for a moment to mutter something to Lect. Melody was still wondering what she could have said when a cloud peeled away from the moon, allowing its light to spill down on Melody unimpeded.

It’s nice to see the moon is still beautiful, no matter the world. Oh, but now’s not the time for that.

“My apologies for slipping away,” she said when Lect reached her.

“It’s all right.”

Melody cocked her head to the side. He was looking at her strangely, as though distracted by something.

Regardless, they returned to the ballroom together and said their goodbyes to Count Leginbarth.

“Leaving already?” he said. “A shame. Madam Cecilia, I do hope we’ll see more of you. You’re always welcome here, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Lect observed the interaction between Melody and his lord closely. Neither noticed the unease in his expression, nor the stiffness in his posture.

And so ended Melody’s magical night at the Spring Ball—decidedly without incident.

“What’re you staring at?”

Meanwhile, free from obligation, two misplaced souls took refuge in the royal family’s special leisure area. They themselves experienced not a bit of leisure, however.

Christopher eyed his companion with confusion. Anna-Marie’s mind wandered, her gaze lingering on a window near the top of the ballroom—the very place where Melody had thought she felt a watchful presence.

“It’s supposed to happen soon, but it’s quiet. Too quiet,” she said.

“‘It’? Oh. Right. *It*. Time already?”

Anna-Marie regarded Christopher’s flippancy with annoyance. “In case you forgot, *it* is important. And yes, it’s time. But he’s not here yet. This isn’t at all how it happened in the game. I don’t get it.”

They looked up at the window together. Still nothing.

“Is it because the heroine hasn’t shown up?” Anna-Marie wondered aloud. “Bjork Quichel, the fourth route. Right about now, he’s supposed to make his appearance through that very window and lead an assault on the Spring Ball under the influence of the Dark One.”

“Without the heroine, though, it’s up to us to stop him, isn’t it?” Christopher leaned forward and felt for the silver dirk hidden in his boot.

Anna-Marie shifted to feel the reassuring press of a silver wand against her thigh. “Only the Saint can truly defeat the Dark One, but we aren’t entirely defenseless. If I have my lore right, and I do, silver is its weakness. The Saint’s power manifests as silver light when she lets loose, and all the boys she recruits fight alongside her with silver weapons.”

“And the last Saint sealed the big bad away in a silver pedestal with a silver sword, yeah?”

“*In* the sword, to be specific. She couldn’t completely defeat the Dark One, so she sealed it in a silver sword in the Great Vanargand Wood as a last resort. Then she shoved it deep into a pedestal.”

“And the only way to undo it,” Christopher grimaced as he spoke, “is with the powerful magic found in the blood of the Theolan royal family.”

According to the texts in the ancient library far beneath the royal palace, House Theolas and the Saint were deeply connected. The last Saint was, in fact, of royal blood—powerful blood that thrummed with magical energy. The silver blade that would free the Dark One first had to quench its thirst for that mighty blood.

Only one person possessed the blood that could undo the ritual: Christopher.

He, therefore, had to be the assailant's target tonight.

"Why is *this* the loser I had to reincarnate as?" he whined. "Seriously, why me?"

"Don't be a baby. Be a man for once, would you?"

Christopher turned his attention back to the window. He wasn't taking the bait this time.

In the otome game *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*, the heroine, Cecilia, finds herself at the center of a series of events during her time at Royal Academy. Over the course of the narrative, she meets five men—five routes—and forges a bond with each of them.

The first and main route was the fifteen-year-old crown prince, Christopher von Theolas. The second was the sixteen-year-old son of the royal court's lord chancellor, Maxwell Reclentos. The third was twenty-one-year-old Lectias Froude, Cecilia's personal guard.

All three men were Theolan nobles (or otherwise royalty) and, with Royal Academy largely populated by nobles, would appear frequently throughout the game. Their relationships with the heroine were slow burns, romances that would build gradually in the course of their daily lives. Basically, traditional romances.

But the fourth route was an exception. The fourth was the enemy and a vessel for the Dark One: Bjork Quichel.

In Theolas's northern reaches, nestled in a forest bordering the Rordpier Empire, a coven of mages absconded to form a village far from the conflicts of men and monsters. There, in what they dubbed Schnozelle, one of those founding mages had a son that he named Bjork Quichel.

"Well, what do we have here? A village of spell-throwers. Rejoice, filth, for you have more use as slaves than as corpses!"

When Bjork was only ten, the Rordpier army, an army of slavers, ransacked

the village. Their arrival heralded the end of the pacific population's short-lived serenity. Bjork's parents were among the few who fought back, and they were dealt with swiftly.

So began Bjork's life as an orphan and a slave.

Though he was young, magical talent came naturally to him from birth. A band of mercenaries who made their living hunting beasts in the empire's blightlands recognized his talent and purchased him. With little else stemming the explosion of the local monster population, such mercenary bands proliferated at that time.

But Bjork suffered in their care. To the mercenaries, he served only as a useful weapon or useless fodder.

His luck would change when he turned eighteen.

The blightlands continued to fester, tormenting the imperial citizens, and eight years later the mercenaries were working as hard as ever to stem the tide. By then, Bjork had already lost five masters to this endless war.

By some sick twist of fate, his sixth master was the man who had led the raid of Schnozelle all those years ago. Evidently, he was too unsavory even for his unsavory comrades. Bjork loathed the man for what he had done to his home, but his cruelty went deeper. He had run the mages he'd enslaved ragged. Some perished under the conditions, while others were sold off as Bjork had been, their lives put at the mercy of lesser men's wallets.

The empire had no use for such a man. He lacked pragmatism and a proper understanding of the value of his tools. Cruelty had its place but not at the expense of the empire's assets, and so they dismissed him.

"I'm better than this, damn it! I don't belong here! Blighted fools! All of them! *All of them!*"

His temper had a short fuse, and when it finally blew, Bjork was usually the one to take the brunt of it. Not for any particular reason, however. The ex-commander didn't even recognize the boy.

And that only made Bjork hate him more.

“They’ll see. They’ll all see!” he would rave.

The ex-commander had forsaken his motherland, setting his sights on the Kingdom of Theolas. But how would he prove his greatness in this new land? The answer was simple: Slay a foul beast in the largest, most dangerous blightland in the realm—the Great Vanargand Wood. Surely then His Majesty would recognize his bravery, his skill, his excellence, and practically beg to knight him!

Bjork’s magic fooled the archmage’s detection field, allowing a contingent of ten to pass into the Wood. None would survive the journey but Bjork and his master.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it! The Blight is too good for those cowards! Those *weaklings!*”

The ex-commander owed his survival to Bjork. One did not simply enter the Great Vanargand Wood—scourge of Theolas, home of a thousand shadows, grave of a million—and hope to stroll back out unscathed. The area was strictly, *absolutely* forbidden, not that the ex-commander could comprehend any of the reasons for this prohibition. Little filled his head but hubris.

Bjork sneered. *He’s done most of the work himself in that stupid head of his. All I had to do was plant the seeds. To think I let this bumbling buffoon rob me of my family. My home. Today, I will have justice.*

The man’s obsession with the Wood and plans for glory had come from Bjork. Certain magical limitations prevented slaves from killing their masters, so he had to seek out more creative methods of revenge.

His fate was sealed the moment we stepped into these woods. Even if I die, he’ll never make it out alive. It’s over. I’ve won.

Darkness filled Bjork’s heart. And the Wood took notice.

“Damn it, damn it! Slave! We’re done here! Show me to the exit!”

“We’ve been running in circles, sir. I’m afraid I have no idea where we are.”

“Worthless sack of filth!”

The man slapped Bjork across the face. The boy’s lip burst, and blood trickled

down his chin. Only the ex-commander's reliance on Bjork for his survival stayed a second strike. If he was going to make it out of here, it would be thanks to Bjork, and the ex-commander knew it.

Sadistic glee welled up within Bjork while the ex-commander fumed and stamped and gnashed his teeth. Such beautiful hatred. Such twisted delight. Such delicious darkness.

"Damn it... Where to next? Hey! Where the hell are you going?!"

Bjork strolled away. The Wood was calling, and he was glad to answer. The man ordered him to stop, but he continued. The Wood was calling, beckoning him deep, deeper still, and he was glad to answer.

"Wh-where are we? Are you listening to me, boy?"

He was not. He was not there. There was only Bjork and the sword. No one else. Just him and the beautiful...oh so beautiful silver sword. *How much more beautiful would it be freed from this unsightly pedestal?* he wondered.

"Come," the Wood whispered to him. *"Release me, mage. Take up the sword and you, too, shall be free!"*

Darkness. Nothingness. Then blood. Bjork was holding the sword. Crimson dripped off its edge. A corpse lay at his feet.

"Your hunger for revenge is sated; now you must indulge mine. I bid you, go. Go and swathe this land in eternal darkness!"

Foul blackness clouded the blade's platinum sheen and Bjork's heart along with it.

The ancient evil was awakened, its seal weakened, its demented soul thrashing in its cage, aching to gouge despair into an unsuspecting world. And wielding it was the hate-filled husk of Bjork Quichel, *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths's* fourth hero.

A carriage carrying Melody and Lect departed the palace for the Upper District. And Bjork watched it go.

From atop the ballroom, a man with unkempt purple hair and irises grayer

than ash followed the carriage's passage. He was small for his age: about Melody's height, thanks to his traumatic childhood. A tattered robe billowed around him.

Bjork Quichel gripped the dark blade in his right hand. He was behind schedule. The sword thirsted for blood, and he'd been forced to keep it waiting. He should have infiltrated the ballroom by now, but unforeseen complications hindered him.

The girl... She should not have sensed me...

His mind was twisted and scattered. Claimed by the Dark One. He could no longer tell which thoughts were his and which were *its*.

Should be...in the ballroom... Distracted. Seen by the girl... Seen through magics. Impossible...

Melody's instinct had been right: Someone *had* been watching her. Though really, it was only a glance. Just before infiltrating the ballroom, Bjork had noticed two girls in the courtyard, and despite the powerful magic concealing his presence, his brief look had alerted one of them.

Okay... The girl has gone. The time has not... Patience.

Bjork sank into the shadows. The danger had only been delayed.

Chapter 17:

Without Warning

“**I** HUMBLY APOLOGIZE FOR MY DISAPPEARANCE, my lord,” Luciana said when she returned to Maxwell.

“It’s quite all right. I hope you had a chance to settle your business. I have some friends I’d like to introduce you to.”

“Y-yes, of course.”

Maxwell flashed a dashing smile as he offered his hand. Luciana was not immune.

They set off hand in hand. Maxwell surveyed the hall. “I wonder where the angel has gone. She was your dance partner, wasn’t she?”

“The angel? Oh, Mel—uh, Madam Cecilia. She just left, I’m sorry to say.”

“And I’m sorry to hear it.” Maxwell frowned. “I’d have liked to dance with her.”

Luciana grumbled under her breath. “Not like you could dance with *me* or anything.”

How rude was it to say something like that in front of your own partner? Luciana pouted, making no secret of her displeasure. Maxwell put his hand over his mouth, and his shoulders shook suspiciously.

I-is he laughing at me? Wasn’t he just frowning? Who does he think he...?

Luciana’s face burned. She was the one who’d just abandoned *him*. Her own hypocrisy hit her all at once.

Maxwell chuckled. “Forgive me. Perhaps I went too far. I can’t blame you, of course. Anyone would leap at the chance to share a dance with someone so beautiful, and I must say, fairies suit angels quite well.”

“Fairies?”

“You haven’t heard? The show you two put on is the talk of the ball. They’re calling you the Fae Princess, which I find quite fitting, I might add.”

“Th-th-they’re calling me what?!”

Maxwell’s smile curled. “You’ve established quite the reputation for yourself. I imagine your first day at the academy’s going to be quite hectic.”

Luciana hung her head. She was an Ignoble, the furthest possible thing from a princess. She didn’t deserve such a vaunted title. Surely others agreed, and she could already picture the kind of attention her “reputation” would garner.

“Chin up, my lady.”

She lifted her head to find Maxwell smiling down at her. They resumed walking.

“You’ve nothing to worry about,” he said. “And you’ll want to look proper when I introduce you, won’t you?”

“O-of course.”

Luciana was confused. As far as she could tell, she had plenty to worry about. Regardless, she would trust him for the time being.

She didn’t get a chance to fret over whom Maxwell planned to introduce her to, however, for her pendant lit up at just that moment.

Melody told me about this, she recalled. It reacts if someone’s looking at me with “ill intent.” Luciana traced the beam of light that shot out of the pendant. *Who is that?*

The beam landed on a diminutive, portly man sporting a foul, frog-like grin. Luciana was quite proud of herself for not gagging on the spot.

O-okay, ew. I will most definitely be staying far from him. Wait, it’s reacting again.

This time, the light led her to a beautiful blonde girl. She shot Luciana the occasional cold, envious glare while chattering with her friends. Nothing any noblewoman wasn’t used to, to some extent, but Luciana found it perplexing.

What could I possibly have that she doesn’t? Some people are a mystery.

Luciana's smile never faltered. A true lady's never did.

Maxwell quietly admired her resilience. *She's sharp, taking note of the less amiable of our peers. Good head on her shoulders.*

He, of course, was just as observant. He was far more experienced and nimbler when it came to navigating high society, so Maxwell saw to it that his charge was well protected. Perhaps needlessly, as she spotted the same potentially problematic individuals as he did.

A lord's wife needs good judgment, Maxwell noted. The ability to discern friend from foe in an instant is an invaluable trait indeed.

He cast such thoughts from his mind. He had only just met the girl, and now he was evaluating her? Luciana was his charge, nothing more. He was doing a favor for his good friend Melody. They had hardly even spoken; they were little more than strangers. It was illogical to feel anything so strong for a stranger.

Although, she *was* quite beautiful. Logic could not explain away that.

Maxwell sat uneasily with this new rush of embarrassment. Melody had set him similarly off-balance but not quite to this degree. But he could ponder it later.

He leaned in and whispered to Luciana, "That man. That is Count Saison. He assists with taxes and other finances of the realm."

"Count Saison?"

"He has a reputation for being rather improper with the maids in his office. Watch yourself around him."

"He has a thing for maids, does he?" Luciana made a note of that.

"That girl there is Lady Rincot'dor, the duke's daughter. She's brewing up a bit of a grudge with you for supposedly stealing her spotlight."

"I stole her spotlight? How so?"

"Isn't it obvious? The stars of the night are of course Prince Christopher and Lady Victillium. Form dictates that next in line should have been the duke's daughter, but none here would argue that second to Lady Victillium's beauty was not Lady Rincot'dor but the girl who danced with the angel: you, Lady

Luciana. She feels spurned. From her perspective, the ball has been stolen from her.”

Luciana’s blood ran cold. There were scant few enemies one could make who were worse than a duke. Still, she clung tenaciously to her smile.

Maxwell found her determination amusing. “Rest assured, resolving that particular problem is part of why I’m introducing you to my friends.”

“Right, um, and just who are—”

“Lord Maxwell!” a velvety, sultry voice exclaimed. Luciana’s heart stopped. “Why, what brings you to this side of the woods?”

A masterwork of beauty stood before Luciana. Gender be damned, the woman was stunning.

“Ah, but here is the answer,” the woman said. “Well met, Lady Luciana Rudleberg. I am Anna-Marie of House Victillium. It’s a pleasure to finally meet the Fae Princess face-to-face.”

“I-I, um... M-my lady, I... I-it’s an honor,” Luciana sputtered. Muscle memory spared her curtsy the same fate as her introduction.

Anna-Marie nodded, pleased with the gesture. Luciana thanked her lucky stars she hadn’t caused offense. But it was too soon to relax.

“Trying to get one over on me, are we? Don’t I get to introduce myself?” a man said, striding up to join them.

“Oh, but of course you can, Your Highness,” Anna-Marie said. “You were simply distracted admiring dresses.”

Luciana wobbled with wooziness as His Highness the crown prince, Christopher von Theolas, appeared behind Lady Anna-Marie. He offered Luciana a smile every bit as regal as Maxwell’s.

“It’s a pleasure, Lady Luciana,” he said. “Christopher, at your service. Some call me prince, but Maxwell calls me friend. It pleases me to see you getting along well.”

“The p-p-p-pleasure is all m-mine!” Luciana squealed. Again, muscle memory rescued her curtsy. Maxwell alone had given Luciana heart palpitations, and

now she was meeting royalty! She had to be dreaming.

“There’s no need to be nervous,” Maxwell said. “They’re not nearly as imposing as they look.”

“As if I regularly carry myself with ostentation,” Anna-Marie shot back. “You wound me, Lord Maxwell.”

The banter served to relax Luciana, if only slightly. The prince invited her and Maxwell to join him in the royal lounge to speak further.

“The ball is buzzing with talk of your positively *intoxicating* dance with the angel, Luciana,” said Anna-Marie. “Just who was she? I certainly didn’t recognize her.”

Luciana couldn’t avoid this topic, it seemed. The royal couple had apparently missed the dance.

“I was wondering that myself,” Christopher chimed in. “No one seems to have an answer to that question. They say she was quite the beauty.”

“Ah, Mel... Madam Cecilia,” Luciana said. “She’s—”

“Cecilia?!” the royal couple blurted, shooting up to their feet in unison. Maxwell and Luciana recoiled in shock.

“Where is she now?! Where is she, Luciana?!” Anna-Marie pressed.

“What does she look like?! Where is she from?! What is her house?!” the prince added.

“She, um... She’s already left,” Luciana answered. “She’s blonde, and, well...”

“She left?!” the couple said. “...She’s blonde?”

Luciana nodded, then explained everything—rather, the fake everything that Melody had told her. When she finished, the pair slumped back down in their seats.

“What in the world’s gotten into you two?” Maxwell asked.

“It’s nothing,” Christopher said. “Forget it. We apologize.”

“D-deeply. We let our curiosity get the better of us,” said Anna-Marie. “I got a little carried away.”

But in silence, Anna-Marie mused over this revelation. *Cecilia. Could she be the heroine? She can't be if she has blonde hair, but Sir Lect escorted her, just like in the game. If she's not Lord Leginbarth's daughter, then just who is she?*

She'd get nowhere asking herself these questions. For now, she was the marquess's daughter and had to act as such. She put Cecilia out of her mind for the time being.

The four shared a dance with each other's partners, then spent the rest of the night together. Luciana mentioned at one point that she rarely left home, had few acquaintances in the capital, and feared it was improper of her to have taken up so much attention that night. Anna-Marie and Christopher set to remedy that.

They did the rounds, introducing Luciana to nobles of all stripes. Luciana had to bow and pay proper respects to each of them, but they greeted her acquaintance with enthusiasm. She was, after all, one of the night's stars.

The pendant reacted to some of them, but such was the way of nobility. Luciana noted the hostility, mentally forming a checklist of whom to keep an eye on once school started.

As the clock struck midnight, the ball wound down to a close.

"Thank you so much for gracing me with your company tonight," Luciana said.

"It was our pleasure, Luciana," Anna-Marie replied.

"That it was," agreed Christopher. "I hope we'll see each other again at the academy."

Luciana beamed at the prince and gave a spirited, "As do I!"

Maxwell, the isolated second-year, shook his head. "If only I could turn back time and join you all."

"If the lord chancellor allows it, perhaps you could repeat the year with us," Anna-Marie suggested. "I'd be glad to put in a good word for you with the headmaster."

The four laughed.

“Lady Luciana, you truly made this night a magical one.” Christopher took her hand and placed a gentle kiss on it. “Until we meet again.”

Luciana did her best to maintain her composure while Anna-Marie and Maxwell struggled not to scowl.

Can't give this idiot a single inch or he'll take a mile. He's gonna get it later, Anna-Marie thought. *Bjork Quichel, though... Where are you?*

The missing player in this little drama had never left her thoughts. She glanced at the window one last time.

Nothing.

We'll have to rethink everything. Go over plans again and... Is he ever going to let go of her hand?! Luciana's just standing there like... Wait, what is she doing?

Luciana gawped, but her wide eyes were not on Christopher. *The pendant, it's... It's so bright!*

A beam more vivid and brilliant than any previous one pointed up at the ceiling. Luciana's eyes followed it.

She had only an instant to spot the man hurtling down from the chandelier, sword raised high. The light pointed at him, but she was not his target.

“Watch out!”

Her body moved on its own. She shoved Christopher out of the way of that vicious blade careening downward.

The glint of its edge ran down the length of her back. Her dress shredded to ribbons, and the raw force of the attack threw everyone but Christopher, Anna-Marie, and Maxwell back.

Luciana rolled lifelessly along the floor, coming to rest on her back and lying eerily still.

“Luciana!” someone roared.

The assailant—Bjork Quichel—rose to his feet, wielding his black blade. He stared down the prince with icy confidence and said, “So it begins.” The assault on the Spring Ball had commenced.

Chapter 18:

Unbalanced Encounters

“GUARDS!” THE KING BARKED.

Armored sentries rushed forth, but Bjork Quichel was ready. “Imprison—*Prigione*.”

A dark, semi-opaque dome dropped around him and the prince, trapping Anna-Marie, Maxwell, and an unconscious Luciana inside as well. Christopher clicked his tongue. He’d hoped at least Luciana would fall outside the range of the magic. She needed medical attention—fast.

“Blaze ignite—*Bolide!*” A magically gifted guard launched a fireball at the barrier. Several more joined him, but the flames burst harmlessly against the dome, not so much as scratching it.

The king started to panic. “Ye gods. Sven!”

“At once, Your Majesty.” The archmage sprang into action. “Tempest rage and pierce the heavens—*Aria Giavellotto!*”

Onlookers shrieked as a cyclone whirled around the archmage.

Sven Shaykrode was the greatest mage in all the kingdom, and this spell was his mightiest. A single blast of this hyper-condensed hurricane could blow a hole through the royal palace from end to end.

Yet the dome held firm.

“I-impossible!” Sven gaped.

“You are the archmage, then,” Bjork said languidly. “A negligible threat.”

Every word that left his lips dripped with malice and poisoned the hearts of those around him with despair. If not even the archmage could pierce the barrier, what hope remained? Could they do nothing but watch as their prince fell into the hands of evil?

“Archmage Shaykrode!” Christopher roared. “Regroup with the guards and

continue your assault on the barrier!” The authority in his voice snapped Sven back to his senses. “Don’t let up! Do everything you can to draw his attention while I lay this villain low!”

Despite his plight, His Highness held his chin high. That his loyal subject, the archmage no less, would cower while comfortably outside the villain’s grasp was a shame among shames—one Sven could not tolerate.

“Mages, with me!” Sven commanded. “Focus your fire and free His Highness! All together!”

Their flames reignited, everyone threw themselves back into the effort. Those not assisting with the barrier escorted nobles to shelter. Bjork noted the commotion apathetically.

Ignoring me now, huh? All right. I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Christopher turned.

“Anna-Marie!” he shouted. “Get it together! You want this place to be your grave?!”

“What? N-no! Of course not!” Anna-Marie, still reeling from Luciana’s sacrifice, finally dragged herself off the floor. Her knowledge of this setting’s lore might be their greatest boon in this moment.

Bjork lazily regarded Christopher once more. “Made your peace yet?”

“Maxwell,” the prince said, “you’re unarmed. Stay back and cover me with magic.”

“Understood,” Maxwell said. “But aren’t you unarmed as well? Do you have a plan?”

Sort of. But this guy’s not going to just let me reach down for my dagger.

Christopher glanced at Anna-Marie. She nodded in understanding.

“Armed, unarmed. It makes no difference,” Bjork droned. “You struggle in vain.”

“You’re damn right we do. But guess what? I’m the crown prince of Theolas!”

He and Anna-Marie put their hands to their chests, and together they

chanted, “To me—*Draw!*”

In a blink, Christopher held a silver dirk, and a silver wand appeared in Anna-Marie’s hand.

“What manner of sorcery...?”

“I hope it keeps you up at night,” Christopher taunted.

The two of them had devised several spells for the eventual battle with the Dark One. One such invention was Draw, a largely incomplete spell that, at present, could only teleport something on their person into their hand. In the right circumstances, though, it proved quite expedient.

“Royal secrets... So be it.” Bjork pointed his sword at the prince. “One knife will not save you now.”

He was right. Christopher had no hope of winning this fight, and no amount of bravado could change that. Bjork leered at him in a way that set Christopher’s teeth on edge. Damn the villain for acting so smug and assured.

“Didn’t you hear me? I am the crown prince of Theolas!” Christopher thrust his blade upward. “You didn’t think all this silver on my uniform was for show, did you? Creation—*Alchemy!*”

The silver woven into Christopher’s garb wriggled free of his clothing to wrap itself around the tip of the dagger. It solidified, and the dirk lengthened into a sword of pure silver. For the first time, surprise flickered across Bjork’s face.



It threw caution to the wind. Never mind its brush with death only moments prior. What could one human without magic possibly do to it?

The Dark One suffused the window with magic, shattered it loudly, and strolled into the room. Once inside, it tore through everything—telekinetically, of course, on account of a lack of opposable thumbs. The Dark One got a sadistic kick out of seeing drawers fly from dressers, papers from the desk, books from the shelves, and knickknacks from chests. Entirely unrelated to its search, it took a particular liking to the girl's bed and went wild bouncing and rolling and overall making a mess of the clean sheets.

It was a successful romp. Not for finding any clues as to the new Saint's identity, of course, but it had been quite fun.

Still, the Dark One needed results. It fumed with frustration, but frantic footsteps pounding toward the room interrupted its grumbling. It sneered again. The filthy human was coming.

How I'd love to watch them bleed, but perhaps they'll know something about the Saint. A simple matter of hypnotizing them. I'll get what I want without even lifting a finger.

The door swung open, and a girl flew into the room. Her attire resembled what the humans called a "maid," as the Dark One recalled. It awaited her approach, wallowing in its hubris (and the bed's tousled sheets).

The girl gasped, putting a hand to her mouth as her body began to tremble. In fear, no doubt. Or so the Dark One assumed.

It eyed her, smug and assured, but when she met its gaze, *it* began to tremble. Most definitely in fear.

"You did this, didn't you? And just before my lady gets home too," the girl said, voice shaking, eyes full of tears and fury. Her furious aura hit the Dark One like an eruption, a veritable geyser of beautiful, shimmering silver magic. "What have you *dooooooone*?!"

Gods damn it all!

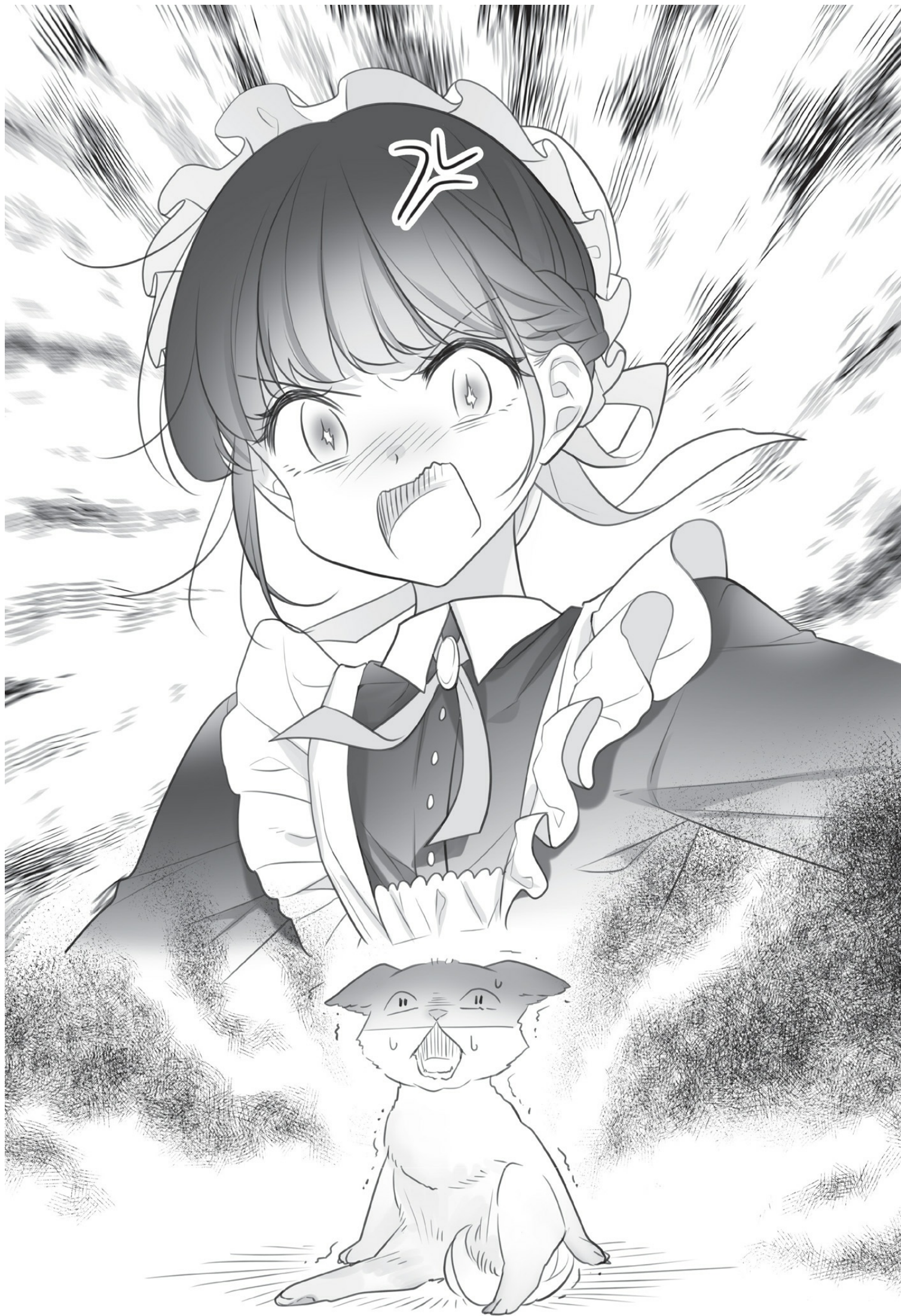
The Dark One knew terror well by then. It was, in fact, *intimately* familiar.

Where is all this mana coming from?! I didn't sense it before! Not a whiff! Is she the Saint?!

There was no question. Such power could only belong to the Saint of legend. So why had the Dark One not sensed it before now? Why and how and wherefore and every other interrogative, why, gods, *why* was this happening and when would the nightmare end?!

The Dark One was having a moment.

The answer was quite simple, really. Melody possessed both incredible power *and* the ability to control it. She kept every bit of her mana neatly contained when not in use. And she did it so perfectly that not even the Dark One could perceive its presence.



Unless, of course, something threw her into such a rage that the magic surged out of her control. Like right now, as a matter of fact.

“You’re not going *anywhere!*”

The Dark One whimpered like the pup it was.

A wild and very angry maid had appeared. There was no escape.

Chapter 19:

Tragedy Girl and a City of Silver

“GOD, I’M WIPE OUT.”

With the battle against the Dark One behind him, Christopher collapsed into his bed.

Luciana never reawakened. A physician looked her over, then they found a room in the palace where she could rest with her parents beside her. Bjork Quichel had received the same courtesy, though in light confinement outside of the palace proper. Light, because Christopher couldn’t bring himself to order anything worse for him, knowing the man’s backstory. He hoped it would make him a little more forthcoming about the Dark One.

Christopher sighed. He wished he could close his eyes and go to sleep.

“I can tell.”

But he couldn’t with Anna-Marie still around. He had found her lounging on his couch when he trudged into his room.

“I know you love those secret tunnels and whatnot, but could you maybe not use them to sneak into my room when I’m not around?”

“Oh, goodness me, my apologies. I forgot you boys need time to hide your unmentionables.”

“S-seriously?! As if I have any! Psh. Whatever.”

He couldn’t own any, even if he wanted to. Otome games didn’t often include the sort of media grown men crave. Never had Christopher suffered a greater tragedy.

Not only that, this world hadn’t invented the printing press yet, so the media men craved didn’t even have a chance of existing. Behold, an even greater tragedy.

“Yeah, okay, I shouldn’t have barged in,” Anna-Marie admitted. “I apologize.”

“Yeah, you shouldn’t have. And you better apologize.”

“Uh, right. Next time, I’ll be *extra* sure to ask first so that the *entire palace* hears that I’m coming over to your chambers in the dead of night. Alone. You do need a fiancée, after all.”

Christopher shot upright and prostrated himself on the mattress. “Sorry, madam! So sorry, madam! You know best, madam!”

“Yes, I do, but I don’t like the attitude.” Anna-Marie sighed.

“Anyway, how’s Luciana? What did the doctor say?” Christopher had been preoccupied, but Anna-Marie had stayed with Luciana while the doctor checked up on her.

“Same as me; totally unharmed. They think she’ll wake up tomorrow.”

“Good, but that’s not going to be the end of this.”

No one took a hit from the Dark One and walked away unscathed. There was more to the situation than they were seeing.

“I asked her family if they could explain anything, but I couldn’t get a straight answer,” Anna-Marie said. “They went through a lot, so they’re rattled. I hated having to ask them anything while they were still shaking so bad.”

Part of their fear likely stemmed from reasons beyond the obvious. Anna-Marie, however, simply assumed they were still addled with adrenaline.

“Can’t blame them for being a little out of sorts after seeing their own daughter nearly get cut in half. We’ll have to wait until morning and ask her ourselves,” Christopher said. “You think it’s got to do with the Saint?”

“Maybe, but I don’t think Luciana herself is the Saint. I didn’t sense much mana in her, and the heroine in the game has boatloads. She just can’t tap into it right away.”

They sighed in unison. For nine years they’d poured over the memories of their past lives in service of preparing for this day only to have their plans dashed away in a single night. It was disheartening, to put it mildly.

“Oh, by the way, the Rudlebergs asked if they could summon their maid to help look after their daughter,” Anna-Marie said. “I allowed it. I assume that

won't be a problem."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure. She didn't have a chaperone at the ball?"

"They only have the one servant, apparently."

Christopher hummed thoughtfully. "Guess they don't call them the Ignobles for nothing. Didn't get that vibe from her dress at all, though. Like, did you see her? She was gorgeous, and Maxwell was escorting her. She knows her etiquette too. They called her the Fae Princess, for crying out loud. Not at all surprised she practically stole the ball." He nodded as if agreeing with himself.

Anna-Marie had stopped listening partway through. *He's right. I didn't get that vibe from her at all. So why don't I recognize her? She would've stood out in the game. I definitely would have remembered such a cute character. Luciana Rudleberg, just who are you? Wait. Luciana Rudleberg...*

It struck like a bolt of lightning. Asakura Anna *did* know a Luciana Rudleberg.

But how? Who is she? It's on the tip of my tongue... Anna-Marie scowled and frowned and twisted her lips, agonizing over that name.

"Glad she's okay, though," Christopher continued. "Girl has the night of her life and a bright future ahead of her, then bam! Tragedy. Dunno how I'd live with myself if she died for me, y'know?"

Anna-Marie shot off the couch.

"Whoa!" the prince yelped. "Uh, hello?"

"I don't believe it. Luciana Rudleberg. She's Tragedy Girl! The Jealous Witch! I didn't recognize her when she looked so pretty!"

"T-Tragedy Girl? Jealous Witch? What are you going on about?"

"Her sprite in the game looks so different that I didn't realize at first, but Luciana is the first main villain in the game! She gets possessed by the Dark One, the heroine defeats her, and then she's killed off for her uselessness. Hence, Tragedy Girl. But more importantly, she's the Jealous Witch!"

The following events are abstracted and consolidated from the lore book of

The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths...

With Count Rudleberg's appointment to the Royal Chancery and his daughter Luciana's enrollment in Royal Academy, the Rudlebergs planned to move to the capital. Trouble at home would delay these plans and force them to send Luciana to the capital alone, however. This would mark the first in a series of tragic events to befall the girl.

The count and countess arrived about a month after her.

"By god..."

"This can't possibly be the same manor."

The count and countess arrived at something closer to rubble than a livable home, a place entirely unfit for human habitation. The gate was rusted beyond recognition. The walkway's cobblestones were either missing or cracked, and where they were missing weeds and overgrown shrubbery dominated. Untrimmed trees cast ominous shadows over the grounds.

This was no estate. It was a haunted house.

The Rudlebergs were aghast that their daughter had lived in such a place alone for an entire month.

And the interior was as horrific as the exterior. Cobwebs and spiders reigned. The entire structure seemed ready to collapse in on itself any moment.

A scream tore through the estate.

"Luciana!" the count and countess cried.

"Mother? Father?"

The pair found their daughter soaked and standing next to a toppled barrel. Bags hung under her eyes. Her hair was a frazzled mess; her cheeks dark, sunken pits. The past month had not been kind to her. No flicker of emotion lit her face when she saw her parents.

Luciana explained how she had forced their only maid into an early retirement, and how no one had responded to her posting at the guild for a

replacement. Between her enrollment at Royal Academy and her attempt to maintain the estate, she hadn't had the time to send a letter.

That was the excuse anyway. Normally, busywork wouldn't be enough to keep her down. What really chipped away at Luciana's psyche was the whispers and comments and hushed insults that haunted her every step. The beginnings of an inferiority complex had taken root in her heart.

The Rudlebergs were poor, but never had she suffered such indignity back home. The capital was crueler. Far crueler.

"I hear the Ignobles' daughter came to the academy to enroll. The audacity. They say she wore rags for a dress. I'm embarrassed to be in the same year as her."

"I heard she looked like death. Nauseating to think we keep vagrants in the peerage."

"She's an embarrassment to countesses everywhere. Pluck any merchant's daughter out of the crowd and she'd make a far better lady than *her*."

The Ignobles and their house of ghosts gained infamy in the capital. Lower and upper nobility alike murmured whenever they caught a glimpse of poor Luciana.

Having been raised in a welcoming environment, she was a bright and friendly girl at heart, much like her friends and family. But constant hostility and scorn could chip away at even the purest of hearts. Try as her parents might to repair those fissures with love, the damage was done. Shadows would forever dull Luciana's shine.

Kindness lost its warmth for Luciana as her feelings of inferiority twisted darkly within her. She grew more and more distant from her friends as the shadows seeped deeper.

Typically, newly enrolled noblewomen at Royal Academy attended the Spring Ball on the night of the school's opening ceremony. Without a dress or an escort, however, Luciana could not go, despite all her parents' pleas to the contrary.

It hurt to miss the once-in-a-lifetime experience, but Luciana couldn't face the

whispers and scrutiny anymore.

Distracted by his daughter's suffering, the count was unable to put in his best work at the chancery, and he constantly made mistakes—and three months into Luciana's academic career, he made a fatal one. With the trust of the lord and vice chancellors lost, Count Rudleberg was dismissed. Yet he still had to provide for his family, and thus, out of desperation, he turned to illicit means. Unfortunately, so honest a man lacked the necessary proclivities for such an occupation. He hardly lasted any time at all before he was caught.

Her name now besmirched twice over, the cracks in Luciana's heart became chasms. Her despair made it all the easier for darkness to seep in, and it did. The light was well and truly gone.

"Why?" she lamented. "Why me? Why always me? It was never like this back home..."

Her school life was over. She could never show her face again, not with her father in custody. Anger, pain, resentment, negativity of all kinds swirled inside her, manifesting as dark magic.

Then, she heard laughter. Bright and cheery. When she turned toward it, she saw a beautiful girl with flowing silver hair like silk caught perpetually in a breeze.

Not like my dirty hair.

The silver-haired girl tripped, and the man walking next to her caught her in his arms. Her perfect, pale cheeks flushed pink.

She's so pretty; not like me and my pallid skin. I wish I had someone to walk with, to catch me when I fall...

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't.

Luciana clenched her fists and ground her teeth. Her gaze iced over as she narrowed her eyes at the girl—Lady Cecilia Leginbarth.

Why her and not me? What did I do wrong that she did right? Why is she a lady, and I'm an embarrassment? Why? Why, why, why?

Tears of anguish and jealousy flowed hotly down her cheeks.

“Such exquisite envy. Such delicious darkness. You have been wronged, and you crave justice. Justice I can provide, my new pawn!”

There was an instant of nothing, a blink, and when Luciana awoke, a black sword jutted from her chest, surrounded by an all-consuming haze of darkness.

That was the day the Dark One took her, and she became the Jealous Witch.

“So then the heroine beats her, and then the Dark One ‘disposes’ of her? Wow. Okay. Yeah, that explains the ‘Tragedy Girl’ part.”

“None of that is touched on in the actual game,” Anna-Marie explained. “It’s part of what the lead writer put in the extra supplementary lore book that went on sale later.”

The battle between Luciana and the heroine began with words. Luciana would frame the heroine for crimes she hadn’t committed in an attempt to lull her into despair and diminish her saintly powers. Anna-Marie, whose only talent seemed to be making things worse, unwittingly assisted in this.

The heroine had to gather evidence, make a case for herself, and prove that Luciana was the true culprit. Once she did, the battle could begin in earnest. The player would also gain a few points with whichever character had helped them in the investigation. Win, and the Dark One would use the very powers it had bestowed upon Luciana to end her life in a moment of rage.

“Their confrontation’s meant to be a sort of wake-up call for the heroine,” Anna-Marie said. “Luciana was an antagonist, technically, but she was still a victim of an even greater antagonist. She’s actually the only death in the entire game.”

The heroine’s powers would prevent the Dark One from taking another life after that encounter.

“‘Tragedy Girl’ is right,” Christopher said. “How’d you just totally forget about a character that important?”

“Ugh, I’m sorry, okay? Everything’s all topsy-turvy right now, and I could hardly even recognize her.”

“What if we don’t remember as much about our past lives as we think? What if we’re missing pieces?”

A concerning possibility, but Luciana’s our priority right now, Anna-Marie thought. *The Dark One’s not getting away that... Wait.* She cocked her head. Something was on the tip of her tongue again. Something that didn’t add up.

Once again, Christopher unknowingly came to the rescue. “Wait a minute, wasn’t Luciana supposed to be *absent* from the ball?”

“Yes! That’s it!”

This Luciana Rudleberg wasn’t at all like the game’s Luciana Rudleberg. Anna-Marie’s mind raced.

Cecilia Leginbarth never met the main route, Christopher, in this timeline. But *a* Cecilia (even if it was one who didn’t match the description) had been escorted to the Spring Ball by Lectias Froude, as the heroine should have been. She and Luciana danced, and she left immediately after.

The second route, Maxwell Reclentos, never fell in with the heroine, but he *did* fall in with Luciana. The third route, Lectias Froude, had escorted Cecilia, and considering that Luciana had partnered with Cecilia during the same-sex dance, he would have met her at some point in the night. In the game, the same-sex dance would affect things down the line, so it was telling that the (presumed) heroine had chosen Luciana as her partner.

The heroine should have been present for the encounter with the fourth route, Bjork. Instead, Luciana was. *Luciana* had been the one to defend the prince, but she was somehow unharmed. The Dark One’s sword was destroyed, the villain escaped, and Bjork was in custody.

Luciana was supposed to have been stabbed by that sword and thus possessed. With the sword destroyed, there was next to no chance of that happening anymore.

A beautiful dress. A beautiful epithet. A potential romantic partner. Every tragedy averted. And she was in the crown prince’s good graces to boot. The Fae Princess must have had a guardian angel.

Or maybe she didn’t need one.

Was Luciana...reincarnated like us?

Certain things made far more sense if that was true. If Luciana knew the trajectory of the story, she could avert her sad destiny from the game. Perhaps she even knew things from the fanbook that Anna-Marie had never gotten to read. Could the missing heroine and the off-color Cecilia somehow be part of some kind of master plan?

Anna-Marie stopped and considered. She'd met Luciana herself, seen her smile. She did not seem the scheming type, and Anna-Marie was exceedingly confident in her ability to read people. You didn't spend nine years "courting" the crown prince and navigating high society without solid judgment. Plenty of people feigned friendship as a means to an end. You could learn a lot from a person's smile if you knew how to dissect them. And Anna-Marie knew how to dissect them.

But beyond all of that, selfish people didn't generally throw themselves in front of swords to save others.

Anna-Marie liked Luciana. She couldn't bring herself to suspect her. *I want to give her the benefit of the doubt, so I suppose we'll have to wait and hear the truth from her lips.*

They would know for certain once she awoke. If she did come from Earth, all the better. That was another collaborator to help things along. None of them could leave here peacefully with the Dark One running around. They also couldn't avoid a war, and that meant they needed allies. Anna-Marie would have been thrilled to count Luciana among them.

"Christopher, when she wakes up tomorrow, we need to... Christopher?" He was out like a light. "Hey, idiot. I know you're faking. This is important, so quit it and list...en."

Anna-Marie's vision blurred. Drowsiness suddenly overwhelmed her. She forced her eyes open, but they grew heavier with each passing second.

What is this? Who's...singing? I soundproofed...the room. I shouldn't...be able to hear...

She staggered toward the balcony, the source of the sound, and when she

stepped outside, her eyes went wide.

It was beautiful.

Silver blanketed the slumbering city.

A geyser sat in the center of the Upper District, spewing silver radiance. The sheen shot upward, then spread out like the branches of a great tree forming a delicate canopy over the entire capital. The dreamlike spectacle reached all the way to the royal palace.

Particles drifted down like platinum snow. Anna-Marie held her hand out for one of the flakes, and her lethargy intensified.

Mana? Is this...silver light the cause? Her mind was fading rapidly. *Silver...*

The phenomenon was massive enough to cover the entire capital. If it was entirely mana, its source had to be immensely powerful. Unfathomably powerful. Anna-Marie knew of only one being with magic of this particular hue.

The Saint... It's the Saint!

It was exceptionally rare to encounter mana potent enough to be visible to the naked eye. Rare enough that there were only two possible explanations: the Dark One with its malevolent haze, or the Saint with her platinum brilliance. Nothing else could produce the geyser of light blessing the ignorant capital.

Anna-Marie could have watched that geyser forever, but her consciousness faded with every passing second. *There's only one person...she would use this much...power against... But I...can't...*

Anna-Marie threw herself back inside with the last of her strength. Everything fell into darkness. Whatever became of her after this, she felt safe. In her final moments, something reassured her.

And so the city slept.

Anna-Marie was Asakura Anna again.

"Ugh, I feel so bad for her, Anna-oneechan! Luciana didn't deserve all that!"

"I feel you, Maika-chan. I really wish they'd give her some kind of happy

ending, you know?”

“You two never shut up about her, do you?”

“Don’t you feel *anything*, Oniichan?!”

“I mean, sure, sucks for her, but it’s a game.”

“That’s just sad, Oniichan.”

“It is, isn’t it? Y’know, Hideki, maybe that girl in Class Three wouldn’t have shot you down if you weren’t so lame all the time.”

“How do you know about that?!”

“Oniichan doesn’t realize girls know about literally everything that happens at school.”

“You’re freaking me out! Please, seriously, just don’t go spreading that!”

“Don’t be stupid. Spreading’s no fun. Hearing’s the best part.”

Anna-Marie smiled as she slept.

Christopher was Kurita Hideki again.

“So where’s the fifth guy at? We’re halfway in and he still hasn’t shown up.”

“Yeah, most games make sure they at least all get an appearance before the intro’s over.”

“I’ve got it. It’s gonna be the Dark One. But you’ve gotta clear one route first before it unlocks.”

“That’s stupid, Oniichan.”

“Hideki, do you *not* know where the name ‘the Great Vanargand Wood’ comes from? That’s where the Dark One was sealed, in case you forgot. Oh, who am I kidding? Of course you did.”

“How would I know that? I didn’t even know it meant anything—hey. Dumb and Dumber. Stop sighing. It’s hurtful.”

“Vanargand is another name for a famous monster, Oniichan.”

“Fenrir, that giant wolf from Norse legend. It’s just another name for him.”

“So the Dark One takes the form of a wolf, you know, because Vanargand. Fenrir. Following, Oniichan? You gonna marry a wolf? Seriously, how have you not picked up on any of this during our whole playthrough?”

“Otome games aren’t my thing, for the hundredth time.”

“Fine then, be that way. I’m still gonna make you see the whole thing. If it has to live in my head, it has to live in yours too.”

“Oooh, I like that idea. Don’t let him get away.”

“Please just speedrun it or something.”

Christopher tossed and turned as he slept, but not without a hint of a smile.

Meanwhile, at the source of the geyser: the Rudleberg estate...

The song ended, and the magnificent light faded. A girl sitting in the servants’ dining hall gently opened her eyes and smiled.

“Fast asleep.”

A puppy with pretty silver fur rested on Melody’s lap, sleeping soundly, his little nose whistling with every peaceful breath.

Chapter 20:

An Angry Maid's Lullaby

“HERE YOU ARE, ME.”

A clone Melody placed a basket on the table in front of the real Melody. She carefully moved the pup from real Melody's lap to the basket.

Real Melody giggled. “Look at him, out like a light. And after all that fuss.”

“He's quite the howler, isn't he? I hope His Lordship lets us keep him.” The clone Melody smiled, then reassimilated with the real one.

Melody looked out at the full moon hanging high in a cloudless sky. “They're awfully late.”

It was nearing two in the morning. Her master and mistresses should have returned, but the estate lay still and quiet aside from herself. A little too still, in fact. It was as if the entire city had fallen asleep all at once.

Which it had, of course, but Melody didn't know that, much less that she had anything to do with it.

She let out a cute yawn. “Gosh, I'm getting sleepy. I don't normally stay up this...late...”

The moment she rested her head on the table, exhaustion took over. Just like that, Melody slumbered along with the rest of the city.

The late hour wasn't the true culprit behind her sudden drowsiness. Exhaustion was merely a symptom of acute mana deprivation, but Melody would not have known that, being entirely self-taught. Plus, up to this point, she'd never experienced the side effects of depleting her magic.

And so fell the last wakeful person in the capital. She dreamed of the little pup in the basket.

Some time earlier, after Lect dropped her off, Melody was hard at work

preparing the estate for her lord and ladies' arrival. She fluffed pillows, prepared tea and alcohol, and set out snacks, all in anticipation of their return. The palace had food, of course, but finger foods served at a party could leave one wanting for a real meal. Melody readied the estate for every eventuality.

The clock had just passed midnight. The ball would be winding down soon.

Just then, something shattered upstairs. The sound came from her lady's room. Melody hurried upstairs to investigate, only to encounter a disaster. It was as if a twister had torn through the room. Furniture and trinkets and tea and snacks lay strewn about, destroyed and worthless. All of Melody's hard work, all of her careful preparation for her lady's return—all for nothing.

She clapped a hand over her mouth, unable to bear the tragedy, when she noticed a smug little puppy rolling around on her lady's bed. She understood at once.

The little devil.

"You did this, didn't you? And just before my lady gets home too." Melody shook with righteous fury, letting loose a flood of (what others would consider enormous) magical energy. The pup ceased his rolling and trembled instead. "What have you *doooooone*?!"

The maid could have broken down sobbing. Luciana would return any minute, and she had to redo her entire chamber. Her lady might not even have a bed ready by the time she got home. Unacceptable. Entirely unacceptable.

Rage unlike anything Melody had ever experienced blinded her to the world around her. The pup—and the Dark One secretly inhabiting him—understood their predicament well.

Th-this is no Silver Raiment! It's worse! And I am most certainly not going to stick around to find out what it is! The Dark One swallowed its fear as whatever semblance of a fight-or-flight response a collection of mana could possess kicked into action.

It chose flight.

The pup leaped for the balcony.

“You’re not going *anywhere*! Reach—*Allungare la Mano*!”

The pup yipped. Translation: *What in the hell is this?!*

The Dark One froze in midair. Something held it firmly in its grasp, the force easily on par with the telekinesis the Dark One had used to disturb the room. It was force magic acting as a makeshift, invisible hand.

“Think you can get away after what you’ve done?! Bad dog!”

Oh gods, this is the end for me!

It shook like a cheap massage chair. The Dark One couldn’t hope to win against a fully awakened Saint while its own powers were sealed. It was a pig for the slaughter.

But the terror in the poor puppy’s eyes touched Melody. She regained some of her senses, quelled her rampant magic, and cooled her temper. Then she sighed wearily. “One become many—*Alter Ego*.”

“Yes, madam! What can I do for you, mad...” The clone took one look at the room. “Ah. Sorry. Silly question.”

“Start straightening up, please. The family will be here any minute, so things need to be in order.”

“Yes, madam! If time is of the essence, I’ll whip up some magic to have it done in a flash!” The clone rushed to her task.

Melody scooped up the pup and left the room. “You’re not off the hook, so don’t get too comfortable yet.”

The pup whined. (Translation: *Wh-what manner of torture awaits me?!*)

Melody carried him by the scruff of his neck, leaving the little creature helpless in her grasp. She carted him all the way to the bathroom, grinning sardonically the whole time.

You fiend! You villain! You’ll scrub my very mana from existence! The pup yipped and struggled.

“No, no! None of that! You stay still while I clean you up.”

Melody thought it only proper for Lord Rudleberg to be the one to punish the

whelp. In the meantime, the pup desperately needed a good lather after making such an awful mess of Luciana's bed.

This was the torture the Dark One feared.

Melody's powers seemed to react to the Dark One on their own, by instinct. Her sentiments, her desire to clean the little puppy, manifested as her literally scrubbing away its dark magic via her touch. What was a normal bath for Melody scraped the Dark One raw, down to its very core.

By the time Melody finished, the Dark One possessed hardly a drop of mana. It couldn't resist when Melody toweled off its limp body.

"There we go. Wow, look at you. You've got an awfully pretty coat when it's not caked in dirt." The pup wasn't gray at all but in fact a pleasant silver. "Doesn't lie very well, though, I have to say. Hold on a minute, when did you get so...?"

The pup felt strangely lighter after his bath. Rather gaunt as well. Curious. He hadn't been *that* skinny before, had he?

He hadn't. But thanks to a certain someone's thorough cleanliness, all the mana the Dark One would have spent maintaining the pup's vitality drained away. And so a mighty growl of hunger rumbled in his stomach as he returned to death's all-too-familiar doorstep.

The sudden change left Melody baffled and aghast. "G-goodness, are you okay?! Ah, you must be starving. O-one minute and I'll fix you something!"

Melody carried the puppy to the dining hall and set him on the table. The poor thing looked so emaciated that he must not have eaten in quite some time, which meant solid food would prove difficult. Instead, Melody nabbed some goat milk from a magic storage cabinet—it was closer to dog milk than cow milk.

When Melody set a saucer of the milk before the puppy, the creature dragged himself up, forced his tongue out, and drank. Like magic, vitality rushed back into the pup.

Relieved that he had the strength to eat, Melody returned to the cabinet for a link of homemade sausage, which she minced into minuscule pieces to make it

easier to chew and digest. A little goat milk, and she had a bit of rudimentary wet puppy food.

The pup, now on unsteady feet, devoured it immediately. Melody could almost hear him *nom-noming* as he gasped for breath between chowing down.

She giggled. *He probably found his way in here because he was hungry. He'd have had a better time finding food if he tried the kitchen. How'd he get all the way up to my lady's room anyway?*

The pup and the Dark One kept on gobbling up their sausage. *It's... It's "good." So very... "good." I've never experienced such a sensation before. I...*

An amalgamation of negativity had no need for food, so the Dark One had never eaten before in its entire existence. Just as it had never experienced joy or happiness or love. Or *anything* on the positive spectrum of emotion, for that matter. As the pup ate, his relief and elation spilled over into the Dark One, who could not comprehend why it did not dislike these strange sensations.

Its confusion left it ignorant to the flicker that lit deep within itself. Its seal shuddered, like a flame struck by a perilous breeze.

"All full?"

The little pup burped. He was indeed full.

The clone returned from Luciana's room. "All done, madam. Are you still in need of... Ah. I see a full belly."

"He was a hungry little fella."

"That would explain why he broke in, wouldn't it? He'd have had a better time finding food if he tried the kitchen. How'd he get all the way up to my lady's room anyway?"

Clone Melody echoed Real Melody's sentiment.

"In any case, I'm relieved you could fix up the room in time. That just leaves one more thing."

Both Melodys turned toward the pup. He swayed on his little feet like he was struggling to remain conscious.

“Madam, I managed to clean up the room. No harm done. Perhaps we shouldn’t tell His Lordship. What good would come of it?”

Melody chuckled in agreement. “I suppose it would be pointless. This little guy wouldn’t even know what he’s getting yelled at for.”

It was exceptionally difficult to remember her previous anger with the puppy sprawled innocently on his back, belly up. He was only trying to survive. She couldn’t punish him for that.

Also, more importantly, boy, was he cute.

But there was still the question of just what to do with the pup. If he could survive on his own, he wouldn’t have leapt through a window to find food.

While Melody hummed in consideration, the clone proposed something. “Madam, I’ve just had a thought. Imagine, if you will, our lady. Frolicking with a puppy. How lovely a sight would that be?”

The image came readily to Melody’s mind. The garden on a sunny day. Luciana throwing a stick. The pup giving chase. Him licking her face as she holds him. Luciana laughing in delight.

Melody could picture it so clearly. Her lady’s rambunctious energy would be a match for the mischievous creature sleeping on the table. But this idyllic vision was missing something. Yes, a maid to smile wryly and shake her head at Luciana’s unbecoming fits of playfulness.

Well, that sounded like a job for Melody!

“My lady, you and John (name TBD) are getting yourselves filthy. Come now, it’s almost tea time. I’ve fetched some water so you can wash up.”

“You think of everything, Melody! Come on, John (name TBD)! Last one to the terrace is a rotten egg!”

“Woof!”

“Goodness, you two. So unbecoming!”

Melody practically melted. “I love it.”

“I knew you would! Great minds think alike, huh?”

Especially when said great minds were one and the same mind. Melody was speaking to her own clone, after all.

Regardless, Melody set her sights on this new goal. Step One to making this fantasy a reality: Adopt the dog.

“I’ll go find something to use for a bed, madam.”

“Please do. I’ll keep an eye on him in the meantime.”

Melody cradled the pup in her arms as the clone left. The puppy snuggled her, even more content than before. Just for overkill, Melody began to sing a lullaby.

Never imagined my first nanny job would be for a puppy. Still, if I’m going to do it, I’m going to do it right.

Her angelic voice drifted through the hall. She lowered her voice to a whisper so she wouldn’t disturb the neighbors, but this only made her song all the more soothing. Selena would sing this very song to her when she was little. Every time she did, sweet dreams awaited.

The pup’s eyelids drooped lower and lower until they finally closed and he went limp. But a second later he blinked and started to stir. Melody didn’t understand why, but she kept singing anyway.

Again, his eyes drooped, again they closed, and again he awoke with a start.

What’s he doing? It’s like he doesn’t want to fall asleep. I wonder if he’s afraid to. He’s lived his whole life hungry and afraid, after all.

Bad things often strike when we’re least prepared. Perhaps the pup had experienced that firsthand, and now he was too traumatized to even sleep.

He can’t stay awake forever, though. Especially after everything he’s been through. He needs to rest. Oh well. Nothing magic can’t help with, I suppose. The hall fell quiet as Melody silently incanted a spell. *Sweet dreams—Fa in Bel Sogno.*

This new lullaby rang out as gently as the last, but was touched by a holy

power. Melody's target, whether she knew it or not, was the Dark One. Even sealed, it was not a being easily quieted, and subconsciously, Melody's saintly instincts knew this. Her magic swelled, and then swelled even higher in the face of the "threat." So great did the spell become that it consumed the entire capital, until every last soul slept.

The city dreamed pleasant dreams. Illusions, soothing and sweet.

Ah... the darkness moaned. You are a marvel, Saint. So this...is your true power...

Melody shut her eyes, too absorbed in the lullaby to notice the pale silver light that radiated from the pup for but the briefest of moments.

Chapter 21:

Rude Awakenings

MELODY FOUND HERSELF IN A LUSH, verdant forest. She didn't recognize her surroundings, but she somehow immediately knew she was dreaming.

She glanced around. One theory states that dreams are based on past experiences, that they serve to sort through and organize memories, so perhaps this was the forest where she'd gathered ingredients.

Silver shimmered at the corner of her eye. It was a girl, and the silver was her hair. She sat against the trunk of a tree, a great silver wolf resting his head peacefully in her lap. The wolf's extremities—his ears and tail and paws—were black. Next to him lay a second, smaller wolf—or perhaps it was a dog—entirely silver without a splotch of other color. He slept soundly nestled against the larger animal.

Melody recognized him. He was the pup she herself had put to sleep moments earlier.

"Thank you," the girl mouthed. Somehow, Melody could understand her without any volume behind her words. "You have accomplished that which I failed to in my struggle against the Dark One in ages past. You have done what the Saint was always meant to do: granted the darkness rest. And for that, I thank you."

Melody looked confused. What was this "Dark One"? Who was this "Saint"?

"The Dark One, the master of the Blight, is itself a vessel," the girl continued. "A safeguard against dark magic that has strayed from the natural order. Without it, the Blight festers and grows, bringing ruin and imbalance to the world. The Saint, bearer of the holy light, is its keeper. She is meant to cleanse the vessel of darkness, to purify it, so it can maintain the balance. I learned these truths too late, when the Dark One was no more, and blightlands and their monstrous denizens had already taken root in our world. I suppose this knowledge was lost to time and the powers that be."

The girl smiled sadly. “I am thankful you never found my memoirs. Had you read them and gone to battle as I once urged, my mistake would become yours, and history would repeat itself.”

Memoirs? Mistake? Melody’s head was spinning.

“Cleansing the Dark One requires a loving soul, a true and pure heart. My memoirs could only inspire thoughts of war, and the neglected negativity brimming within the Dark One would have surely spilled over. You wield the power to prevent the destruction it would bring about, but that peace is an illusion. Without the vessel, the Blight would fester, and one day it would touch every corner of every land.”

What the girl spoke of sounded like something out of a fantasy novel or a video game. Melody could not even begin to guess what sort of memory this dream was meant to process.

Before she could sort it out, the girl suddenly lit up and began to fade away. She touched one of the wolf’s blackened ears, and he shone too. When she let go, the ear was pure silver.

“I am only a ghost,” she said, “a phantom within the Dark One’s seal, manifesting in response to the great power within you. Even so, I thank you for the opportunity to be the Saint I was always meant to be, however briefly. I only regret that what little magic I have left won’t be enough to finish allaying the darkness.” She smiled. “But yours will, Celesty.”

This was only a dream, so of course she knew Melody’s true name. It shouldn’t have surprised her as much as it did.

Regardless, her shock amused the girl. “You’re very pretty, you know. Were this world all some tale woven by unknowable hands, I think you would be its heroine.” She turned solemn once more. “Again, I thank you, Saint Celesty, keeper of the Dark One. That you have uncovered the truth by your own volition gives me hope for the future. When one day the vessel is cleansed and the great balancer of the world can resume its role, only then will the Blight be purged and true peace may return to this land. If anyone can do it, it is you.”

The girl offered a final smile, one truly befitting a saint, and then she vanished in a sprinkling of light. Melody, the wolf, and the pup were left alone in the

warm rays of leaf-filtered sunlight. The canines did not seem to notice the girl's disappearance. Melody couldn't help feeling a little melancholic.

But not quite so melancholic as to overshadow how she *really* felt about all this.

"Heroine? Saint? What in the world was she talking about? I'm neither of those things! I'm Melody, all-works maid for House Rudleberg!"

The next instant, she was back in the dining hall, standing with her chest puffed out.

"Huh?" But why? She recalled falling asleep and having some kind of dream but not much else. "Weird."

Something yipped at her.

"Oh. You're up too." The little pup stirred in his basket. Melody lifted him free as his tail wagged enthusiastically. "Someone's happy. Good. And your fur's looking better than ever too. Er, wait, weren't you silver? But one of your ears is black... And your tail! And your feet!"

She could have sworn that bath last night had revealed a pure silver puppy. It *had* been fairly late, though. Maybe she had just been sleep-deprived.

Melody froze. Last night?

Morning light poured into the dining hall through the windows.

"M-m-m-my ladyyyyyyy!"

The pup yipped as he fell from Melody's hands.

She flew upstairs, her heart racing as she realized what she'd done. Sleeping on the job? When she was expecting her lady's family? Unacceptable. Unacceptable!

Upstairs, however, she didn't find her lady *or* her family. After a thorough search, she discovered the entire estate empty save for herself.

"They...haven't come home yet?" Melody broke into a cold sweat. She had a bad feeling. "I-I should go see if the carriage is parked outside."

She ran for the front courtyard. Surely, she would find the carriage there,

where her lord and ladies had left it last night.

Melody threw open the door with a *bang*, but it never opened all the way. A stranger stood on the doorstep, down on his knees as if he'd been lying there the whole time. Evidently, the door had slammed right into his head.

"C-can I help you?" Melody asked.

The man groaned. "Th-this is Lord Rudleberg's estate, yes?"

"It is."

The man identified himself as a royal guard. His story sent Melody reeling.

"My lady fell unconscious at the ball?! When did this happen?!"

"J-just at the very end, madam. Her father, Lord Rudleberg, requested that someone send for their maid to assist in her recovery."

"And why was I not sent for last night as soon as it happened?!"

"I, um... I'm sorry, madam. I'm not sure. It's all a blur. One moment I was awake, the next I was asleep."

"That has to be the *worst* excuse I have ever heard!" Melody howled. "You're a layabout is what you are! Lord, we don't have time for this!"

She rushed inside to gather her things, then she and the guard boarded his carriage. Or they attempted to, at least.

"Even the *driver* is asleep! And the horse too?! Up! Everybody up! *Now!*" Melody bellowed. Neither beast nor man stirred. They rested quite soundly, in fact. Sweet dreams, no doubt. "Rise and shine—*Arousal Dito!*"

Melody raised her hand and snapped her fingers. The spell sent vibrations through the air that could wake a giant. At once, the soldier in the cab blinked awake, as did the horse. And the entire neighborhood, which stirred back to life all at once.

"Up, up, up!" the maid urged. "Time to go! To the palace!"

"Wha...? I... Y-yes, madam!" The driver, more awake than he'd been in years, cracked the reins.

In her panic, Melody had put enough force behind the wake-up spell to rouse

not only the neighborhood but the entire capital. Little did she know that she was at the center of an extraordinary phenomenon. The entire city had fallen asleep all at once, then woken up again *all at once*. Someone had to stop the madwoman. Not that anyone would. Or could, for that matter.

When they arrived, they found the palace engulfed in chaos. Servants and soldiers alike sprinted through the halls. Melody alighted from the carriage with her bag, frowning at the frenzy buzzing around her.

Maids carried themselves with a certain dignity and pride, she thought. Doing their work behind the scenes was no excuse for doing it sloppily. All the more so in the case of the palace's retinue. Evidently, there was a pandemic of slackers. Sloppy. Very sloppy.

The cause of the disorder, naturally, was that everyone had only just snapped awake, and a dozen abandoned tasks awaited everyone in the palace. Perhaps it was not quite fair for the cause of their misfortune to judge them so harshly.

Melody waited by the gate until a parlormaid who had been seeing to Luciana came to meet her. "This way, madam," she said.

"Thank you."

On the way to Luciana's room, they passed several other maids scurrying to one place or another. Melody started to notice a pattern that laziness could not entirely explain.

"Everyone looks so rushed," Melody said. "Has something happened?"

"Well, yes, actually. There was an...incident last night. The palace was attacked during the ball."

"Attacked?! Oh lord, don't tell me my lady—"

"Worry not, madam. Our finest physicians have assured us she merely lost consciousness. Her life is not in danger."

"Oh, thank goodness." Melody sighed in relief.

The parlormaid sighed herself. The attack only explained half the truth behind the inappropriate commotion. She could not admit that (thanks to a certain someone, unbeknownst to all) the entire retinue had overslept and fallen

behind on their duties. What was she meant to do? Tell Lady Luciana's *actual* maid that she had snoozed through the night shift along with the rest of her colleagues, leaving her unconscious lady without supervision for hours?

They arrived in short time, and the parlormaid knocked on the door to Luciana's room. "Excuse me. House Rudleberg's maid has arrived."

"Enter," came Marianna's voice.

Melody did. She found the countess in a chair by Luciana's bed and Luciana herself sitting up, awake.

"You're here!" she cheered.

"My lady!" Melody flew to her, pausing only to bow to Marianna. "They told me you were unharmed. Is that true?"

"Yes. I only just woke up, but I feel fine, really, *Mother*. I've been trying to get her out of my hair all morning, Melody."

"You're not getting out of that bed, young lady," Marianna scolded her. "You were unconscious for hours. We need to be certain you're well."

"See?"

"I, um... I'm sorry, my lady," Melody said. "I'm in agreement with your mother."

"Oh, for the love of... Not you too! I'm *fine*!"

Seeing her lady pout, Melody relaxed at last. Hughes was apparently at the chancery assisting with the aftermath of the attack, so Melody got straight to work.

Melody had the parlormaid prepare breakfast while she saw to getting Luciana and Marianna fresh garments. They wore clothing the palace loaned to them, but trying to use an unfamiliar wardrobe was never comfortable for long.

"I've brought a change of clothes, my ladies," Melody said. "Let's freshen you two up."

The moment she set down her bag, it began to squirm. Luciana and Marianna eyed it suspiciously.

“Melody, what in the world is in that?” the countess asked.

“What indeed.” Melody threw open the bag. Immediately, something leaped free and bounded toward the bed. “You! How did you slip in there?!”

It was the pup from last night, barking cheerfully.

“Why, it’s adorable,” Marianna cooed.

“Where did you get him, Melody?” asked Luciana.

“He came to the estate looking for food. The poor thing was starving, so I fed him and gave him a place to sleep.”

“He’s so cute!”

The pup whined for attention and nuzzled against Luciana’s hand.

“Goodness, he really is,” Marianna said.

Just like that, the little thief stole the ladies’ hearts. Melody seized her opportunity.

“My ladies,” she said, “what do you think about keeping him?”

“Yes!” Luciana blurted. “I love that idea!”

“Keep him? At the estate?” Marianna thought about it. “I imagine he’ll get a good deal bigger. How much will he eat? How much will it cost?”

“I’m certain that needn’t be a concern, Lady Rudleberg,” Melody assured her. “I’ll simply procure his share from the same place I get all of my ingredients.”

“Father makes more money now that he works at the chancery, and we can’t just toss him out on the street.” Luciana clasped her hands and gazed up at her mother through thick lashes. “Please, Mother? Can’t we keep him?”

Marianna smiled and shook her head in defeat. She could not bring herself to tell her daughter no, especially in the wake of recent events. “You’d best take good care of him.”

“Yes!” her daughter cheered.

The pup yipped his approval of the decision. Melody quietly clenched her fist in delight as well.

“I suppose he’ll be needing a name,” Marianna said.

“Right. A name...” Luciana frowned at the pup, racking her brain.

Melody smiled, content to let Luciana ruminate, when suddenly a vision struck her. Strange memories of a sacred forest. A girl with beautiful silver hair. A wolf quite like the pup resting on her lap. The girl gently stroking the wolf.

A name popped into Melody’s mind.

“Grail...”

“Oh,” Luciana said, “does he already have a name?”

“Huh? O-oh, pardon me. Don’t mind that.” Melody blushed and looked away. Her mouth had moved faster than her brain.

Luciana grinned at the pup. “Grail. I like it. Nice to meet you, Grail!”

Grail barked his assent, and thus a new member of House Rudleberg had arrived.

He rolled and wallowed in the bed, almost as if in celebration. The ladies and the maid watched with tight chests and full hearts.

The tranquility lasted only as long as it took for Melody to notice Luciana’s tattered dress, however. Then screams shattered the celebrations.

After breakfast, the physician examined Luciana again, confirming her good health. The Rudlebergs, loath to impose upon the royal family further, gathered their things at once.

Marianna handled the formalities of excusing themselves from the palace. She enlisted the help of the parlormaid to seek out and update her husband on the situation, leaving Luciana in Melody’s care.

Fortunately, they did not bring much to the palace, so it took no time at all to prepare to leave. Faced with an abundance of free time, Melody assessed the damage to Luciana’s dress.

“I’m sorry, Melody. It’s all ruined.”

“It’s not your fault, my lady. Not even remotely. I’m simply overjoyed you

weren't hurt."

"Can you fix it?"

"It would be faster to have it resewn, frankly. Whatever hit you, it tore through nearly every layer of defense I cast on it. Those spells will only get in the way of mending the dress, so I'll undo the magic for now."

"I'm really sorry to add to your work." A forlorn Luciana frowned at the maid.

Melody shook her head. "I'm the one who should be sorry, my lady. I was too confident in my spellcasting ability and convinced myself I had nothing to worry about by sending you away with only those charms to protect you. I was certain that even were the entire ballroom to go up in flames, you'd come out unharmed. But look! Look what a single sword managed to do to you. It must have been a miracle you weren't hurt. I shudder to think what might have happened if we weren't so lucky." She sighed.

Luciana gulped. It was a good thing the maid did not notice her lady's sudden pallor.

Not one bit did Luciana think that Melody's magic lacked in any regard. If her spells had really been that powerful, then their breaking wasn't due to any defect. Rather, it was a testament to the sword that had struck her.

A knock sounded at the door. Luciana squeaked.

Only a visitor. But who?

Chapter 22:

The Universe Is Maidcentric

“WHO IS IT?”

“A maid with the royal retinue. I come with Marquess Victillium’s daughter, Lady Anna-Marie. She wishes to speak with Lady Luciana Rudleberg.”

“One moment.”

Exactly one moment later, Anna-Marie was invited inside. A good sign, considering her suspicions—suspicions she’d come here to put to rest.

Was Luciana reincarnated?

Anna-Marie could posit no other theory to explain the convenient series of events that had altered Luciana’s fate as the game’s first villain. Before she could follow that train of thought anywhere, however, she’d fallen asleep. And to make things worse, she’d woken up in Christopher’s bed. With her *arms* around him.

Beating the snot out of the prince had delayed her somewhat, but she was here now. She could be a little rambunctious like that. Part of her charm, she liked to say. It’d be fine. She hadn’t gone for the face, so no harm done.

In any case, the world’s dire state demanded her attention. The main narrative should have begun, yet they had no heroine. Things were happening that shouldn’t. Someone had to get to the bottom of it, and Anna-Marie was that someone.

She entered the parlor and immediately froze.

A girl stood off to the side of the room. The moment Anna-Marie spotted her, a wave of déjà vu nearly knocked her off her feet. The girl wore a maid outfit and had black hair. Their eyes met. More black. Dark hair or eyes were by no means uncommon, but both at once? That was rare indeed.

Is she a character in the game? No, I’d remember a maid with black hair and

eyes. Unless I'm forgetting, like I did with Luciana.

"Have we met before?" she asked the maid. "What's your name?"

"Melody Wave, my lady. This is the first I've had the honor of making your acquaintance."

"I see." Melody Wave. The name didn't ring any bells, but something nagged at Anna-Marie, even as she approached Luciana. "I'm sorry for the unannounced visit. I heard you were leaving, and I simply couldn't miss you."

A flush lit Luciana's cheeks. "I'm happy you thought of me."

Anna-Marie nearly overheated and fainted on the spot. The maid, Melody, had disappeared into an adjoining kitchen to prepare tea, and the older maid was busy slicing up the cake Anna-Marie had brought with her. That left Anna-Marie alone with Luciana as they sat across from each other at a table.

It was just the two of them. Anna-Marie had to seize her chance.

"Luciana," Anna-Marie said softly in Japanese, "are you one of us?"

If she was, she would understand. She would get the message.

But Luciana only tilted her head. "Pardon?" she replied in the common tongue.

"If you were reincarnated like us," Anna-Marie continued in Japanese, "then you must've come from Japan, right? If that's true, please, give me a sign."

Luciana shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "L-Lady Anna-Marie, I'm a little confused. What language is that you're speaking? I-I apologize. I'm not as cultured as you."

Huh... Maybe she's pretending? No, that can't be it.

Anna-Marie's gut, honed by years of delicate dances among the upper echelons of noble society, said Luciana spoke the truth. Anna-Marie's suspicions were wrong.

"It's nothing," she said. "Forget it. Tell me, do you know anything of *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths*?"

Luciana tilted her head again and hummed. No dice.

“Tea, my ladies.” Melody and the other maid returned.

Luciana beamed at her maid. “Hey, do you know anything about a ‘silver saint’?”

“The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths,” Anna-Marie corrected.

This time, Melody cocked her head, a perfect mirror to Luciana’s expression. “I’m afraid I’m not cultured enough to say I do, my lady. Is it the title of a story?”

“It’s nothing important,” Anna-Marie moaned.

Melody bowed, then excused herself to a corner of the room with the other maid.

All things considered, Anna-Marie was doing a great job maintaining her ladylike poker face. On the inside, however, she writhed in agony. If her gut was right, and it often was, Luciana did not understand Japanese, had no idea about the game, and was not reincarnated.

But Luciana might still have a couple of the answers Anna-Marie sought.

“Your dress last night was simply lovely,” Anna-Marie said. “Wherever did you buy it?”

In the visual novel, the primary factor in Luciana skipping the Spring Ball was her lack of a dress. She shouldn’t have been at the ball at all, let alone in such a magnificent gown.

“Melody made that for me from scratch,” Luciana said. “And she put her heart and soul into it!”

“How impressive. Do elaborate.”

“Well, she found two old dresses, took them apart, and thoroughly cleaned them. Then she used the components to piece together a brand-new outfit.”

Luciana’s account—conspicuously lacking any mention of magic—made Melody out to be a master seamstress. Granted, the version of the story that included all the magic made Melody some kind of master sorceress.

Anna-Marie glanced at the maid, who smiled genially. “Very impressive.”

“Melody’s just amazing! We hired her to replace our old maid, and everything’s been so wonderful ever since she came. And she makes the best cup of tea I’ve ever had!”

“It is rather delicious,” Anna-Marie said. “I’ve never tasted anything like it. What is it exactly?”

“I think Belleschwit is the name.”

Anna-Marie nearly spat out her beautiful tea. Belleschwit was the lowest of the low. No one bought Belleschwit, no matter how poor you were. It was that bad.

“Embarrassing as it is to admit, we don’t have much money,” Luciana went on. “It’s always been our tea brand of choice, but Melody makes it heavenly. I never knew tea could actually taste *good*.”

“The idea that Belleschwit could be so delicious... That could certainly shake up the market.”

The quality of any one variety of tea changed wildly based on the origin of the leaves, preservation techniques, and brewing practices. A maid like Melody could control the third factor, but not the first two, so how she’d taken a tea that utterly failed in the other categories and elevated it into something delectable stumped Anna-Marie.

“When I first came to the capital, our estate was practically a haunted house,” Luciana said. “But Melody’s done so much for us. I can invite friends over without being embarrassed now.”

The girl’s love for the maid shone through in every word she spoke. “Haunted house” may have been a bit hyperbolic, but Melody’s talents clearly warranted exaggeration. She must have been one fine maid indeed.

And that confused Anna-Marie. *The lore book says the Rudlebergs only have one elderly maid. Her retirement is one of the first tragedies Luciana faces. They don’t hire another one; at least, not according to what I read.*

Perhaps the secret to Luciana’s uncharacteristic good fortune was Melody. She’d fixed their estate and made the dress. As a result, Luciana never had a chance to feel quite so hopeless and inferior. Did this mean Melody knew the

events of the game and had taken steps to improve Luciana's fate? But she hadn't recognized the name of the game earlier. Then again, Anna-Marie couldn't suppress the tingle of familiarity that had thrummed inside her ever since she laid eyes on the maid.

Anna-Marie set the question aside in deference to a more pressing one. "I'm still amazed you took a blow from that sword and survived without a scratch. I almost couldn't believe it when I looked at you myself. Do you have any idea how that could be?"

She had to strike right at the heart of the matter—there was no getting around how absurd Luciana's survival was. A sword blow like that could kill anyone, especially when the Dark One inhabited the blade. Plus, Luciana clearly lacked the magical talent to defend herself, so who had protected her?

"I-I..."

Bullseye. Anna-Marie's gut urged her to press on. "You know something, then? Won't you please tell me? I'm dying to know." Beneath her smile lurked a confident smirk.

Luciana hesitated before finally saying, "If you promise to keep this between us, then yes. I do know something." She looked Anna-Marie dead in the eye, serious and grave. When Anna-Marie met her gaze with just as much gravity, Luciana nodded. "You see, Melody charmed that dress with defensive magic."

"Magic? What kind?"

"The kind that would keep me in one piece even if the ballroom were blown to smithereens. It's thanks to her that I'm alive right now."

By her phrasing, Anna-Marie thought she was joking. But *The Silver Saint* was more than just an otome game, and she knew that. It was an RPG, complete with spell-based buffs and similar mechanics.

There was one mechanic in particular the heroine would unlock at the end of the game, the strongest one available: the Silver Raiment. It was the closest thing Anna-Marie could think of to the kind of defensive power Luciana had described. Nothing else in the game even came close. Not even the talented Anna-Marie could dish out anything on that level. But for a maid to have made

it... Impossible.

Anna-Marie searched, but she didn't find a shred of falseness in Luciana. She had little choice but to believe the girl. That dress must have been special—how else could Luciana be alive right now?

"Could you show me the dress?" Anna-Marie asked.

"Certainly." Luciana laid it out on the table between them.

Anna-Marie focused mana into her eyes. "Reveal to me—*Analysis Vision*."

Analysis Vision was a spell of Anna-Marie's own making. It allowed her to alter her sight in such a way as to detect traces of mana, as well as its composition. The spell wasn't perfect, however. It took intense focus and a lot of her own mana to maintain.

Magic left footprints, visible much like luminol on blood splatter. It was nearly impossible to completely hide it, even if someone bothered to try. And the more powerful the magic, the harder it was to hide. Anna-Marie would have no trouble finding the traces if Luciana's claims were true.

Her hopes plummeted.

The dress was barren of any magic whatsoever, much less any vestiges of what might have been a Silver Raiment. Anna-Marie turned her arcanelly enhanced eyes on Melody next. Nothing. Not a drop of energy. Mages always betrayed something—a flicker, a ripple, *some inkling* of the mana flowing through them—but not the maid. Anna-Marie was left with one conclusion: Melody was not a mage.

How could she conclude differently? If Melody could fool the Dark One, she could fool one girl. What's more, Melody had said it herself: *"It would be faster to have it resewn, frankly. Whatever hit you, it tore through nearly every layer of defense I cast on it. Those spells will only get in the way of mending the dress, so I'll undo the magic for now."*

Melody was the exception to the rule of magic leaving footprints. With her superb control over the arcane, she easily wiped away all trace of it when she wished. Lingering magic would only make future spells harder to weave, so it was just good practice to tidy it up thoroughly.

Anna-Marie had arrived to the truth mere minutes too late.

“Thank you,” Anna-Marie said.

“Of course.” Melody retrieved the dress from the table.

Luciana fidgeted. “U-um, Melody? Don’t be mad, but I told Lady Anna-Marie about the magic.”

“The magic? The magic on the dress?!” Red flushed into the maid’s face, and she turned away.

“Something the matter?” Anna-Marie asked.

“I’m just... Oh, I’m so embarrassed. My silly little charms are nothing compared to your talents, Lady Anna-Marie. I’m still so new to everything, and—goodness, I’m getting flustered.”

Suddenly, it clicked. “Silly little charms,” she’d said. Perhaps she meant literally. Perhaps the “magic” Luciana said enchanted her dress really was just a silly little charm meant for good luck. Luciana seemed the trusting sort to Anna-Marie. She could have misconstrued Melody’s meaning and blown the whole “defensive spell” thing out of proportion. Hence the maid’s embarrassment.

That had to be it. Mystery solved. Unceremoniously. How Luciana escaped the Dark One unharmed still very much demanded an answer, but at least Anna-Marie could rest assured that Melody had nothing to do with it.

Anna-Marie sighed. Back to square one. But she was getting ahead of herself. “Oh dear, I’m sorry. There I go asking this and that when you’ve only just recovered. How are you? Well, I hope?”

“Oh, yes. The doctor says I made his job very easy,” Luciana replied.

“I bet you did.” Anna-Marie laughed. She found it easier to do so without suspicion hanging over their relationship. Aside from suspicion about Melody’s very existence, that is. “Ah, and the prince sends his regards and an apology for missing this meeting. It’s been chaos since last night, you understand.”

“Of course! I wouldn’t expect His Highness to make time for me, of all people. *Especially* after last night.”

Last Anna-Marie had seen Christopher, he was on his way to interrogate the

fourth route: the man who'd perpetrated the assault on the ball, Bjork Quichel. Well, "hobbling on his way," more like, after what she put him through.

The trauma of that morning's incident notwithstanding, Anna-Marie was glad of the secret passage connecting his room with hers. It prevented any unfortunate, messy scandals that might arise from a marquess's daughter emerging from the crown prince's chamber early in the morning. Assuming anyone would have noticed, what with everyone scrambling in the aftermath of the entire palace falling asleep and waking at once. Silver linings, Anna-Marie supposed.

"He'll appreciate that," she said. "And another thing. I wanted to thank you. Truly and from the bottom of my heart, thank you for saving his life."

Luciana blushed and refused her gratitude. "I was glad to do it. I owe so much to His Highness."

Anna-Marie cocked her head in confusion. They had only met last night. How much could she have to be thankful for?

"I wouldn't be here without him," Luciana continued. "It was his staging service that brought Melody to me, after all."

Anna-Marie's teacup slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor.

"Lady Anna-Marie! Your dress!"

Her mind hummed with static. She could not tell who'd called out to her. A million memories flashed before her eyes.

The staging service was a transportation system of stagecoaches across the kingdom that she and Christopher had put in place some seven years ago. It was still going strong. But perhaps more importantly, it was not part of the game.

The royal family sponsored the service. They maintained its routes and ensured timely and affordable service for the common man. It was a popular service, and safe to boot, as few bandits were bold enough to antagonize royalty directly. That safety led to more travel, more trade, and a better economy for the whole realm—and a rich realm was a powerful realm.

In the game, the player had to make certain choices, under the assumption

that those choices would carry over to the game world and impact potential endings as well. Step onto the wrong path, and the player could find themselves on a bad route. Monsters could overrun the capital; the Rordpier Empire, puppeted by the Dark One, could invade. These were only a couple of the disasters that could unfold on a bad route.

As closely as this world resembled the game, however, it was still the real world for them. There were no guard rails in the real world. They had to take every measure possible to ensure they were headed toward one of the *happy* endings.

Hence the push for economic prosperity. More money meant a more prepared military. Better roads meant easier dispatchment of forces and supplies. Safer travel made it easier and faster to call upon important people and send and receive important information.

There were risks, of course. A stronger standing army bordered precariously on militarism. The enemy could use the improved roads just as easily as allies. More travel meant more people coming and going, some of whom could be spies. But they could mitigate the risks, and this was a positive change they didn't need the heroine for.

The staging service brought prosperity. Anna-Marie could only make educated guesses as to Theolas's standing in the game, but in their world, the kingdom was thriving.

This was a departure from the narrative.

It hit Anna-Marie all at once. How could she not have anticipated this?

Luciana never hit rock bottom because Melody was there to help her. And Melody was there to help her because of the staging service. So it wasn't Melody who altered the story... It was the staging service?

Anna-Marie was right. Melody would not have made it to the capital without the stagecoach. Not easily, at least. Certainly not in time to meet Luciana at such a pivotal moment. If she had waited even a little longer, Lect would have found her in the village and forced her to face her father whether she wanted to or not. She very well may never have become Melody at all but Cecilia Leginbarth instead.

A single drop of cold sweat dripped down Anna-Marie's cheek. Every strategy, every plan, every contingency against every bad end raced through her mind.

Even she herself was not safe from the divergences. Game Anna-Marie Victillium was the boisterous, loud, haughty, selfish, and frankly brainless villainess. *This* Anna-Marie Victillium would not suffer such a life. She was proud, idealistic, and beautiful. The perfect lady. In hindsight, she should have followed the narrative more closely. She should have gone along with the stupid engagement with Christopher instead of being difficult about it.

She was not *the* Anna-Marie. Not by a long shot.

Something inside her had clung to the false hope that things would slot into place once the stage was set for the main story. All those years, she had operated under the optimistic assumption that things would work out. So when they hadn't, and the heroine was nowhere to be seen, she panicked.

She'd had nine years. Nine long years she could have used searching for the heroine. A single girl with silver hair surely would have turned up in that time. But she chose to trust that the heroine was *supposed* to turn up later. She was *supposed* to enroll in Royal Academy. Anna-Marie never gave much thought to their actions beyond the script of a video game.

She knew *The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths* like the back of her hand and was an otome gamer through and through.

But that was all she was.

Knowledge of a video game didn't make her anything more than a teenage girl with an obsession—try as she might to pretend she was technically thirty-two. She wasn't thirty-two; she was a seventeen-year-old who'd died, been reborn, and lived from zero to fifteen again. She was a child. Numbers don't make a childish adult any less of a child. Adulthood is earned through experience and maturity. Mashing together two separate childhoods doesn't equate to adulthood.

She and Christopher had been reincarnated into a game. The problem was it never stopped being a game to them.

Anna-Marie shot up from her chair. "Apologies, but if you'll excuse me. I must

go and change.”

“O-of course,” Luciana stammered. “You look ill. Are you okay?”

“I will be. Just a little shaken by regret.”

“You only spilled a bit of tea. You’ve nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Yes, I... I suppose that’s true. Thank you. Excuse me.” Anna-Marie made to leave.

“I enjoyed seeing you, Lady Anna-Marie. Thank you for your company.”

“It was a pleasure. I’ll see you at the academy?”

“Absolutely!”

Anna-Marie managed her escape, but her complexion never quite recovered.

“My lady,” her maid said, “let us return to your room. I’ll prepare a fresh change of—m-my lady?!”

Anna-Marie ran. Propriety and grace be damned. She ran with all she had. *What have I done? What have I done? What have I done?! The narrative was ruined the moment we started making our own plans! Why didn’t I see it? Why? How?!*

In chaos theory, the butterfly effect states that a minor, seemingly meaningless change in the state of one thing at one point in time can have major and lasting effects at a later point in time. Their impetus had come long before their own volition had any effect on the system.

If the system was the game, then the change in state came simply from Christopher’s and Anna-Marie’s memories returning. That alone had the potential to produce a knock-on effect, and there had been nine whole years for that effect to manifest.

The staging service bringing Luciana and Melody together proves that we’ve already diverged. The missing heroine, the strange Cecilia at the ball, Luciana somehow escaping the Dark One unharmed, its blade shattering—we’re already so far off track I can’t make heads or tails of it all. The dominoes are falling the wrong way, and it’s all our fault!

To be fair, a good deal of the credit went to a certain oblivious maid, but a similarly oblivious Anna-Marie had no way of knowing that. She had only herself to blame. How was she to know that the true heroine had reincarnated completely unaware of the setting's origins, awoken to her powers early, and subsequently put them to use as a maid of all things?

Perhaps she'd learn the true identity of Cecilia Leginbarth one day. Today was not that day, though. She'd missed her chance. Too bad, so sad.

The reasons for that were threefold. First was Anna-Marie's conceit. She and Christopher had reincarnated into their roles with complete knowledge of what they were meant to do. She had naively assumed every character would know their respective role and adhere to it.

Second was Melody's appearance. Facial features aside, how could Anna-Marie realize the black-haired, dark-eyed maid was the silver-haired heroine? Could one admire a cosplay, for example, with different eyes, different hair (color *and* style), and different clothes, and *truly* claim to recognize the character? Keeping in mind, of course, that Melody also took all the traits Anna-Marie was supposed to recognize and brought them into the three-dimensional world.

The third reason was perhaps the most central. The reason why a girl striking enough to be titled the Angel of the Spring Ball had managed to avoid Anna-Marie's scrutiny thanks to what was essentially a different coat of paint.

It was, in fact, her maidliness. Melody was, after all, a woman of appearances.

She was a master of her craft. A savant at assimilating. The best at blending in. Not even her natural beauty could hinder her talents. No amount of heroine privilege could make this maid a blip on anyone's radar—not even Anna-Marie's. Melody was the maidliest of maids. So maidly that Anna-Marie would never consider that such a girl could *possibly* be her precious heroine. It was as simple as that.

Perhaps she might have made the connection had the two met at the ball. Alas, that was not this timeline.

Anna-Marie rushed through the halls and toward Bjork. If the narrative was as broken as she suspected, what she needed more than anything now was

information. Normally, she wouldn't have access to Bjork or his knowledge this early in the game. The heroine was supposed to drive him and the sword back with her new, fledgling saint powers.

On the way to the annex where the guards were keeping Bjork, Anna-Marie crossed paths with Christopher, who should have been busy questioning the prisoner. He even had Maxwell with him for some reason. They ran toward her.

"Anna-Marie!"

"Christopher?!" she said. "And Lord Maxwell?"

"I had some questions of my own to ask the culprit, so I came along," Maxwell explained. "How was Lady Luciana?"

"Well. Now what has you in such a rush? What of the prisoner? Were you not questioning him?"

Maxwell frowned.

Christopher scowled. "Gone."

"Gone?"

"As in he's gone!" the prince shouted. "The room was empty! The bastard wasn't there, and neither was the sword! We don't have a damn clue where he is!"

Likely someone had put the guards to sleep (anyone's guess as to who), and Bjork had woken up first and slipped away while he had the chance. He most likely took the Dark One's blade with him when he did.

"Lady Anna-Marie?" Maxwell watched her with concern. She shook, her hanging head concealing her expression. Likely frightened by the criminal on the loose, Maxwell presumed.

"Damn it, damn it, *damn it!*" Anna-Marie roared. "Are we following the story or *not?*!"

Chapter 23:

House Rudleberg's All-Works Maid

“**Y**OU'RE SURE YOU DON'T NEED TO BE AT work, Father? Isn't the chancery in a frenzy right now?”

“Oh, but I *am* working, my love. The lord chancellor himself anointed me with the esteemed duty of seeing the selfless Hero Princess home safely.”

“Hero what now?”

“It's *Fae* Princess, dear,” interjected Marianna. “That's what they were calling her at the ball.”

Hughes chortled. “Well, at the chancery, they're calling her the *Hero* Princess, in deference to her bravery in protecting His Highness.”

“Why, that's lovely! Do you hear that, Luciana? You're a hero!”

“I wish I wasn't!” Luciana said. “I want to crawl under a rock!”

“Oh, please,” Marianna said. “I'm sure most everyone knows you as the Fae Princess first and foremost. That was the name I caught on everyone's lips.”

“I wouldn't be so sure,” said Hughes. “The lord chancellor coined this new ‘Hero Princess’ moniker himself. It's sure to gain traction.”

“In that case, I wonder which they'll call you at Royal Academy!”

Luciana howled. “I don't even want to think about it!”

In the box seat of the palace-provided carriage, Melody snickered to herself. Hughes and Marianna had returned soon after Anna-Marie left the parlor, and the Rudlebergs set off for home at once. Luciana had insisted Melody sit with them inside the carriage, but the maid staunchly refused. It was improper. And she had something to take care of anyway.

“Sir, what's that?” Melody pointed ahead.

The driver followed her gesture, off ahead and away from the maid. “What's

what now?"

In the span of a blink, Melody vanished from the box while the driver's attention was diverted, then reappeared just as he turned back toward her.

"Not quite sure what it is I'm looking for, madam," he said.

"Never mind. I think it was just a bird." Melody smiled. The driver smiled back and shrugged the whole thing off.

Within the carriage, Luciana took in the resplendence of the interior in awe. "This is way fancier than our carriage. I should save the prince's life more often." She pressed at the plush seats, and her hand sank into lush padding.

Hughes gave her a tired grin. "Please don't make a habit of getting yourself hurt. I'd much rather have you than a fancy carriage."

"Your father's right," said Marianna. "No amount of lavish compensation could make up for it if the unthinkable happened."

"Y-yes, ma'am." Their daughter blushed, taken aback by their serious response.

A moment of awkward silence filled the carriage, broken by a rumbling growl. A growl very much like an empty belly.

"Th-that wasn't me! It was Grail!" Luciana shouted.

Next to her, the poor pup was lying limp. He whined, for he was being starved. Tortured most grievously, even.

Marianna giggled. "I suppose it is about lunchtime. I'm feeling peckish myself. Aren't you, Hughes?"

"I am, as a matter of fact. Let's eat once we're home."

"But Father, Melody's with us," Luciana said. "At least give her time to cook."

"I'll give her time."

Marianna smiled. "The three of us can pass the time together while she prepares something, yes?"

The carriage trundled to a stop, and Melody opened the door for them.

“We have arrived, my lord and ladies.”

Hughes alighted first, offering his wife his hand as she stepped down after him. Luciana handed Grail to Melody, and then she exited as well.

The carriage departed, leaving the four of them (plus one pup) in front of the Rudleberg estate. A modest estate, as far as manors went, but stately and proud nonetheless.

The first time I came here, I thought I was going to have to live in a haunted house all by myself, Luciana reminisced. *But it’s not a haunted house anymore. It’s home. It’s got Mother, Father, and now Melody and Grail too.*

She’d put on a brave face in those early days, but the truth was she’d been terribly lonely. The journey to the capital alone left her exhausted and frazzled. Living in the estate in its previous condition nearly undid her.

Luciana took a moment to admire the profile of the girl who’d changed everything for her. Melody had improved far more than Luciana’s living conditions and dresses—she’d saved her friendships and given her the night of a lifetime. Luciana wouldn’t have been able to go to the Spring Ball without her, and she wouldn’t have met the prince, or Anna-Marie, or Maxwell. So many wonderful people.

It left Luciana optimistic about the future. In truth, she couldn’t wait to get to the academy now.

“Thanks, Melody!”

“For what, my lady?”

Melody seemed oblivious to just how incredible she really was. Luciana figured she’d fill her in one day. Maybe. But then again, maybe Melody was better off never knowing. She was happy; why risk changing that?

Luciana beamed. “Oh, nothing.”

Melody giggled. “You must be the strangest noblewoman on the planet.”

“Wh-who are you calling strange?! Let’s just go inside already. Not that there’s anyone waiting for us, I suppose.”

With everyone accounted for, there was no one waiting with a “welcome

home” when they stepped through the door. Luciana figured she’d manage without for now.

Melody smirked. “My lady, I’d sooner hang up my apron than let my mistress walk through the door of her own estate ungreeted.”

“Huh?”

“Wow, something smells good,” Hughes said.

“My, it does,” said Marianna. “It can’t be us, though, can it?”

An enticing aroma met them in the entryway, wafting out of the kitchen. But that couldn’t be right.

Melody set Grail gently on the floor and knocked on the kitchen door.

“What are you doing? No one’s—” Luciana gasped. Suddenly, Melody was gone. As if she’d never been there at all.

The door opened slowly.

“Welcome home, Lord Rudleberg. Lady Rudleberg.” Now on the other side of the door, Melody performed a perfect curtsy. “Lady Luciana.”

A maid’s life ran on a schedule, and Melody never neglected her duties. Lunch *would* be ready at lunchtime. To that end, she had portaled to the estate and left a clone with the distracted coachman, allowing the real Melody to get straight to work.

The count and countess stared, mouths agape. They had gotten used to the clones but not to Melody’s ability to teleport seemingly at will.

This was news to Luciana as well. “Gosh, Melody! You don’t *always* have to surprise us, you know!” Tossing aside propriety, she made a leap for the maid.

Melody shrieked. “My lady! Nobles do not throw themselves at their maids!”

“Well, this one does! Lady Luciana, eldest of House Rudleberg, orders you to shut up and let me hug you!”

“Who in the world taught you to speak like that?! Let me go this instant, my lady!”

“Sorry, Melody, but this is the job you signed up for. Cuddling is hard work,

you know. And it's like you said—the best maids put in the work to do the works!”

Laughter filled the foyer. What a beautiful spring afternoon it was to commemorate the beginning of our humble maid's story.

“This is not at *all* what I meant!”

The Epilogue to the Prologue

SPRING. THE SEASON OF BLOSSOMS AND mild sun and cool breezes.

One week had passed since the incident at the Spring Ball. Prince Christopher and Lady Anna-Marie were enjoying afternoon tea in the palace garden. They had much to discuss. Plans to remake, contingencies to reconsider.

They sighed. It was a very productive meeting in that it was not productive at all.

“We really screwed up, huh?” Christopher said.

Anna-Marie was getting tired of hearing him say that. “What’s done is done. We did what we could to keep ourselves from stumbling head first into a bad end.”

“I get that, but I just can’t help feeling like...it was all for nothing, you know?”

“I know. I know.”

The welcoming spring weather demanded they set aside all this doom and gloom, yet their sighs filled the air as often as birdsong. At least they were only ruining their own afternoon. Anna-Marie had erected a soundproof barrier around them to prevent the servants from overhearing anything.

“Look, we can keep beating ourselves up over it, or we can do something actually constructive,” she said.

“Constructive. Right.”

“Would you rather wallow? We’re still here, which means there’s a future worth preparing for. Yeah, we may have messed up the narrative without realizing it, but not *every* change has been bad.”

The staging service was a prime example. It deviated from the future Christopher and Anna-Marie were preparing for, but it also led to prosperity throughout the realm. Aside from the empire, Theolas was surrounded by friendly nations. They could call for backup in the case of an emergency.

And there was, of course, Luciana. The staging service had brought Melody to her and averted needless tragedy. Tragedy the narrative called for, true, but Anna-Marie didn't particularly mind that divergence from the game.

"You've got a point," Christopher admitted. "Screw letting Luciana die."

"Exactly. The world needs cute girls like her! And now we get to be friends with her at the academy!"

"Or maybe her fiancé if I play my cards right."

"Wow. You'd really step on your *best friend* Maxwell's toes like that? Do you even have a chance? You can hardly tie your own boots."

"Crap, you're right! That guy's a noble through and through! I'm cooked!"

Finally, things were beginning to settle back into normal. Refreshed by familiar banter, Christopher and Anna-Marie returned to the task at hand.

"So... Plans. Any ideas on how to deal with *that*?" Anna-Marie flicked her eyes in the general direction of Royal Academy. "We're kind of way off course now."

"Right. That. I told Father he was being paranoid, but he won't budge, unfortunately."

"I suppose I can't blame him. But the narrative at this point is just..."

Another sigh. Time was a flat circle for these two.

"A compulsory dormitory system?"

"Historically, students have commuted to Royal Academy, but the attack at the ball has the peerage scared. Now, everyone must live in assigned dorm rooms. They're building them swiftly too. They're on pace to finish the dorms in two months. I imagine word's reached the students by now."

Lect, gentleman that he was, insisted on carrying Melody's bags while they chatted and walked. She had been out shopping at the market when she bumped into him, and now they were on their way back to the Rudleberg estate together.

Obviously, their meeting was no coincidence, but Melody didn't know that.

“I’ll have to make preparations,” Melody said to herself. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You would have learned sooner or later.”

Lect’s heart had enjoyed not a single beat of rest this past week. The Rudlebergs’ maid, Melody Wave, was in fact Celesty—the daughter his lord, Count Cloud Leginbarth, was desperately searching for. And to make matters worse, Lect was in love with the girl.

The decidedly...questionable age gap aside, the knight was torn between his love and his lord. His lord yearned to find the gift his late lover had left for him, but said gift yearned for nothing more than the simple life of a maid. These competing desires could not coexist. If Lect reported what he knew to the count, Melody would lose her dream. If he held his tongue, his lord would never know his daughter.

There was no right answer, and that tore Lect up inside.

“Melody,” he said, “I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Have you no ambitions beyond being a maid? Do you not, say, imagine what it might be like to live as a noblewoman, with all the luxury and privilege that includes? You couldn’t be a maid, but you might become a lady-in-waiting at the palace. If serving is your passion, you could certainly do so under better circumstances.”

He was reaching for any way out of this conflict. This was his final hope for a compromise between his lord’s wishes and his love’s aspirations.

A lady-in-waiting could be both noble and subservient. They were a kind of attendant noble ladies of higher standing took on, similar to a maid but only for titled women. As a lady-in-waiting, Melody could be both Lady Leginbarth and a maid to someone in the royal palace. It was perfect. If it appealed to her, Lect would not have to betray anyone.

Melody thought for a moment. “I can’t say it’s ever crossed my mind. I like being a maid. It suits me, I think.”

How willing she was, however, to betray *him*.

“Why do you say that?” he asked. “You serve as a maid. You could serve as a lady-in-waiting. What difference is there? You would be free as a noblewoman. You could do anything you want. Most would leap at such an opportunity.”

“It’s nothing against ladies-in-waiting specifically,” Melody said. “It is an aspect of servitude that interests me, but its similarities with being a maid are surface level at best. Think of it like a...knight compared to a foot soldier.”

Lect flinched. He understood that metaphor very well. The duties and responsibilities of a knight were worlds apart from those of the common foot soldier, though to the layman, all martial professions surely appeared identical.

“Also, I made a promise to my late mother,” she went on. “I swore to her I wouldn’t merely be a maid. I’m going to be the most perfect maid the world’s ever seen. And I’m only just getting started!”

Melody’s eyes glittered like gemstones, leaving Lect entranced by their brilliance. He could have admired them forever. He saw hope in them. Ambition. And he fell in love all over again.

He could not snuff out that light. He didn’t have it in him.

“I hope your dream comes true,” he said.

“It will! Just watch! After I find out *how* exactly to make it come true, that is. It’s a work in progress.” Melody smiled shyly.

Lect smiled back, defeated though he was. *They say love is a poison, and now I see why. Forgive me, my lord. Please, give her some time.*

He had found his answer.

“I’m back!”

“Melody! Welcome home! And hey, listen to this! They’re building dorms at the academy!”

Luciana accosted the maid the moment she stepped through the door.

“My lady!” Melody shrieked. “For the love of all that is holy, release me

before I drop everything!”

“Oh, sorry. I got excited.”

“I can see that. The eggs will appreciate a gentler approach next time, my lady. And yes, Lect told me about the academy establishing a dormitory system. There’s much to do. Dresses to pack, things to gather.”

“Er, *Lect*? You’re still talking to him? What’s he leading you on with this time?”

“Leading me on? The only place he led me was back to the estate. He helped me carry my things.”

Luciana scowled, and Melody had to hide a chuckle at her lady’s continued distrust of Lect.

“I really do think he could use a proper smacking,” Luciana said.

“And what about that would be *proper*, my lady? If the definition has eluded you, we can always return to your *lessons*.”

Luciana squealed. “I-it was but a jest, of course!” She put on her best and most ladylike laugh. “Okay, anyway, listen! Turns out you get to go to the academy with me!”

“Me? Go to the academy?”

“Amazing, I know! Apparently, we’re allowed a few servants to join us as attendants. And, well, you’re our only one, so I really want you to join me.”

“It would be my pleasure, but what of the estate? I suppose I could leave a clone behind.”

“You may do that if you wish, but do you recall when we were offered that money as a reward for me saving the prince? Well, it’s quite a considerable sum. We should be able to hire new help while you’re with me.”

“In that case, I’ve no reason to refuse. I’d be glad to attend with you, my lady.”

“Yes! These two months can’t go by fast enough!”

“Exciting, isn’t it?”

They smiled at each other with genuine eagerness.

The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths's Royal Academy had no dorns. The game offered no guidance for this turn of events. In two months, they would fill the blank pages of a wholly unwritten adventure.

The Kingdom of Theolas's royal capital, Paltescia, was a hub of economic growth, thanks to Christopher and Anna-Marie's policies. The streets were clean, the people glowed with happiness, and the city bore a joyful air befitting the setting of an otome game.

But this was reality, and it extended beyond Paltescia's walls. Those not lucky enough to live within their protection—those who lived on the outskirts of the city proper—lived in squalor.

The slums were another world. No matter how much gold or silver filled the pockets of the Upper District rulers, safe in their comfortable estates and sprawling manors, their wealth did not improve the lot of the poor man. Where they gathered, the filth of society thrived—the thieves and the murderers and the swindlers.

There, in the splendorous Paltescia's seedy underbelly, a man lay in wait. He lurked in the shadows, crouched on his haunches. It was dark. A deeper darkness than even the slum's most hardened residents would risk. The man melded with that gloom, however, invisible to all but the most perceptive of eyes.

He was a ghost, the shattered blade in his hand a memory. From its fractured cross section, a dark haze trickled, a twisted shadow even blacker than the darkness around him.

The Silver Saint and the Five Oaths had only just begun.

Bonus Story:

Lady Luciana's Hectic Housemaid Happenings

THREE WEEKS AFTER THE SPRING BALL, THE Rudlebergs enjoyed after-dinner tea on a quiet, sedate evening. Luciana broke the silence with a request: "Melody, I want to try on a maid uniform."

Who could blame her? Those pitch-black uniforms were so simple and elegant with their sheet-white aprons. Moreover, Luciana had the lovely Melody to serve as a model of how maid uniforms could be both modest and alluring. Luciana had been smitten with the uniform since the very first day she saw Melody don it, like a young girl trying to emulate the fashion of her favorite idol.

Melody smiled sweetly. "Absolutely not."

She dashed Luciana's humble dreams in an instant. Luciana blinked at the maid, doubting her ears. Melody? Say no to her lady? Was it even possible?

"B-but why?"

"The maid uniform is sacred. It is donned not in the name of frivolity but in the name of service to one's master or mistress. It is as armor to a knight, a gown to a lady, a crown to a king. I'm sorry, my lady, but I can't allow it."

Melody bowed. "Please understand. Our uniform is for maids only."

Luciana was speechless. Silence blanketed the gathering until the Rudleberg patriarch, Hughes, broke it. "I see a simple solution to this problem."

"You do?" Luciana said.

"You want to wear a maid uniform?"

"Well, yes."

"Then simply become a maid."

Luciana's eyes flew wide.

"Only for a day," said her father. "Just for a day, don that uniform and be a

Rudleberg maid.” He wore a proud smirk, confident that he had just saved the day with his brilliance.

Luciana looked at him like he was insane.

“Why, that’s a lovely idea!” Marianna said. “I bet you’d look so cute in a maid outfit, sweetie.”

“Of course she would! She’s our daughter, Marianna! All the clothing in the world exists merely to frame her beauty!”

“How you love to dote on her.” Marianna giggled.

“She’s your child too, you know.”

Luciana could only watch her parents flirt in mortified silence.

“Melody,” Hughes said, “if Luciana agrees to work as a maid tomorrow, would you then allow her to wear the uniform?”

“Well, I suppose there’d be no issue in that case,” Melody said. “Very well.”

I can think of a few issues! Luciana lamented. *Don’t I get a say in this?!*

“Oh, I can’t wait to see her in that dress,” Marianna tittered.

“Neither can I, my love,” said Hughes.

I... I just wanted to wear the uniform. Fine, whatever. I guess I can work with this.

Her parents could go indulge in their little fantasy if they wished. More importantly than that, Melody had perked up at the idea, and her excitement sparked mild interest within Luciana.

So it was decided that Lady Luciana would become a maid for a day.

“Rise and shine, my lady.”

“Melody...? Isn’t it a little early for that first part?” Luciana struggled up with a yawn. It was half past five in the morning—far too early for either rising or shining.

“We’ve much to do before His Lordship and Ladyship wake.”

“Oh. Right.”

Luciana had helped out around the house plenty of times thanks to the family’s poverty, but that was back home when she was still the daughter of a count. No lady had any business being up before dawn.

“I have your tea right here,” Melody said. “Have a cup before we begin.” She rolled in a trolley with a tea set on it. Melody gracefully poured a cup and presented it to her lady.

“Thank you.”

There was nothing like a bit of early morning tea to shake off the drowsiness. Luciana had inherited this long-held and vaunted English tradition when Melody officially became her maid. This tea offered a fuller flavor than most thanks to the addition of a bit of milk, just as Luciana preferred. The milk softened the flavor profile, hid the leaves’ natural bitterness, and made for a more wakeful beverage.

Something about this cup tasted different from the others, though.

“This is good,” Luciana said. “Better than usual. Richer.”

“That, my lady, is royal milk tea.”

“Wow. Sounds fancy. Not that the usual is bad at all, but I think this is the best one yet.”

“You’re too kind, my lady.”

“Royal milk tea” was actually a bit of a Japanism. What it actually referred to was a kind of stewed tea.

One can make normal milk tea by simply adding milk to already-brewed tea. Royal milk tea differs in that it requires adding milk and water to a small pot, heating it up, adding some pre-boiled tea leaves, lightly stirring, allowing the whole thing to sit for a time, and then transferring all of it to a tea through a strainer. One had to be careful not to let it boil over or for too long. Literally letting it stew would make it bitter too, and that would not suit a royal palate.

“You’re the one who taught me that technique can make a world of difference when it comes to tea,” Luciana said. “But I guess that goes for all

kinds of things.”

“I’m pleased it’s to your liking. Shall I make this the usual?”

“Let’s save it for special occasions. It’ll feel less fancy if I have it *every* morning.” Luciana beamed at Melody, finally fully awake.

“As you wish. Now, let’s get you changed so we can begin the day’s work!”

“Right!” Luciana was raring to go now. At last, the maid uniform lay within reach! “Wait. This isn’t what I had in mind.”

The dress Melody had prepared looked cheap, for lack of a better word. A flimsy thing with a floral design.

“Today, you will be engaging with housework. As such, you will be a housemaid. This is a typical morning uniform.”

One could divide maid work into two broad categories: the estate and the kitchen. Matters of the estate included cleaning, laundry, and generally being of assistance to your lord or lady. Kitchen duties had to do with, well, anything related to the kitchen. Both involved obnoxiously time-consuming tasks, such that anyone with the money and will (typically the bourgeoisie or anyone of notable standing) would hire a housemaid to handle the more menial chores.

“Morning uniform?” Luciana parroted. “It changes in the afternoon?”

“It’s for cleaning. You would not want to dirty your good clothes, now, would you?”

“Oh. I see. But hey, how come you’re still in your usual dress?”

“Because a maid does not wear her work clothes in front of her mistress, my lady. Normally, I would be in that same uniform.”

Aside from chores and cleaning, a housemaid had one other important duty: attending. Once they completed the morning tidying, a housemaid’s next responsibility was waking the house and providing the family with refreshments, as Melody had just done for Luciana. At times, they would even have to prepare baths. There was no end to their work, honestly.

At any rate, it was unbecoming of a maid to present herself in an unkempt manner. Thus, housemaids generally had two uniforms: one for cleaning and

another for attending.

“I bought cheap fabric at a local textile shop and used it to sew this dress myself,” Melody said. “I have an apron and cap for you as well, of course.”

Luciana accepted the uniform. It was certainly humble. Practicality clearly dominated its design thesis, unlike the flashy dresses of lords and ladies. It seemed to Luciana like the kind of thing that would typify a commoner’s wardrobe. The apron and cap weren’t any better.

It was nothing like Melody’s outfit. There was no pitch black or sheet white, but a lot of brown, boring old brown, so as to hide the stains better. The fabric was as coarse as burlap to boot.

“It’s not very cute,” Luciana grumbled.

“It will be on you, my lady. Now chop-chop. Let me help you.” Melody held her hands out.

Luciana shook her head. “Thanks, but not today. I’m supposed to be a maid, remember?”

“Right,” said Melody. “Yes, I suppose that’s true. Then I’ll leave you to it and go get changed myself. Wait right here for me when you’re done.”

The maid left, and Luciana saw to donning the bespoke uniform. She was used to it, having dressed herself often back home, and finished quickly.

Melody returned just as Luciana was scrutinizing herself in the mirror. “Goodness, my lady, it suits you as perfectly as I imagined.”

“Th-thanks.” Luciana waffled over whether to smile or frown at that. Was it really a compliment to say an outfit meant for menial labor “suited” her? Ultimately, she decided to take the compliment. After all, Melody was wearing the same thing and looked absolutely adorable in it.

“Now a word, my lady. However temporary, you are about to become a maid. As such, it would be improper to refer to a colleague as ‘my lady.’ I will thus be referring to you by your name for the time being. Likewise, keep your place in mind and carry yourself accordingly.”

“Yes, Madam Melody!”

“Very good. Let’s get started.”

At six in the morning, Luciana’s maid experience officially began.

“His Lordship and Her Ladyship typically wake around eight,” Melody said. “We have until then to complete our duties for the morning.”

“And what are those?”

“Cleaning the appropriate areas of the estate.”

The only visible part of a good maid’s work was the result. They should never allow their master or mistress to witness the *act* of cleaning, only the spotless aftermath. Thus, a housemaid’s duties had a time limit. It was crucial to complete those duties before the estate awoke, and that included making every area of the manor that someone might use—the dining hall, the parlor, or the library for example—spotlessly presentable. Only the bedrooms were exempted from this, of course.

“And then there’s the front courtyard and breakfast,” Melody went on, “and morning tea.”

“And we’re doing all that...in two hours?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“M-Melo—*Madam* Melody, you do this every morning?”

“Every morning.” Melody tilted her head. “Is there a problem?”

One could say that. Luciana struggled to process what she was hearing. It took everything to maintain her composure. Melody was no maid—she was a monster.

They came to the dining hall first and threw open the curtains and windows.

“What is that in your hand?” Luciana asked.

Melody proudly lifted up a wooden receptacle she carried by the handle. “This? Why, this is a housemaid’s box. It’s for carrying all of our cleaning essentials. You’ll find anything and everything you could need inside, so you’ll become quite familiar with it soon enough.”

Luciana nodded. “Would you mind teaching me how it’s done?”

“Certainly. We’ll begin with the stove.”

“The stove? At this time of year?!”

“It can get rather chilly in the mornings during spring. I use it to warm the hall before breakfast.”

Now that she mentioned it, Luciana did recall arriving at this room first thing in the morning only to find it warm and pleasant. Melody truly thought of everything.

“Let’s begin,” the maid said.

First, they cleaned out any lingering ash or cinders. Leaving them unchecked was a frequent cause of house fires. Next, they scrubbed to remove mineral and soot buildup, then polished the stove until it shone. It was hard work, especially for women, and the process could change depending on the type or make of stove. Thankfully, with Melody’s trusty housemaid box, everything went smoothly.

Everything except the grate where the wood and coal lay. Here, they had to scrape and polish each individual prong. To call it tedious would be an insult to tedium.

Once they finished cleaning, they could light the stove and clean the rest of the hall in earnest. They had to be thorough, however, as stove heaters spewed particulates that could hide in every creak and crevice.

“Luciana, I’ve finished the other rooms.” Melody returned after swiftly completing her share of the cleaning, only to find the maid-in-training down on all fours, shoulders heaving. “Luciana?!”

“Dining... Dining hall’s done,” Luciana panted.

“Let’s take a break, shall we?”

Luciana dragged herself into a chair to catch her breath. The small hand on the clock on the mantle pointed just past seven. It had taken her a whole hour to clean the hall.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed. “I’m awful at this.”

They still had a mountain of tasks ahead of them, and she’d used half of their

time on a single room. Her “help” was only slowing them down. How was that even possible? Wasn’t two supposed to be better than one?

Luciana had been flying high lately, so this failure hit her hard.

Melody giggled. “It’s your first day, Luciana. You’re still in training. If I may be honest, I was already anticipating you wouldn’t be of much help.”

Luciana groaned. She couldn’t deny that, but it still hurt to hear.

“The best piece of advice I can give you is this,” Melody went on. “Persist earnestly. Persist, and you’ll learn the techniques in time. Do it earnestly, and your work will shine.” She glanced around the hall. “I can see you’ve persisted earnestly here, Luciana. You have the makings of a fine maid.”

It wasn’t professional work—there was plenty for Melody to nitpick if she’d wanted to—but it was passable work, and it was clear Luciana had done her best. That was worth more than anything.

“You mean that?”

“I do not compromise when it comes to my profession, Luciana.”

“That’s true.” Luciana blushed. “Not when it comes to maids, that’s for sure.”

“In any case, you’ll not be doing much work in that state.”

“Huh? Oh. Right.” Soot blackened Luciana’s dress. She would only spread it around if she attempted to clean like this. “Do you have anything I could change into?”

“Hmm. Normally, I would allow it, but seeing as we’re short on time, let’s do something easier. Spick-and-span—*Lavanemergenza*.”

“Huh? Whoa!”

Light poured from Melody’s hand and enveloped Luciana. It then popped like a soap bubble, sparkles glistening in the air like a fine mist. When the light dissipated, Luciana’s dress was good as new.

“Wow,” Luciana breathed. “Thanks.”

Melody had invented this particular spell in the event that her lord or lady’s outfit was dirtied away from home. Even a professional launderer couldn’t

produce a cleaning spell this powerful. “Shall we continue outside?”

“Yes, please!”

With the interior clean, they moved on to the exterior. For a noble, appearances were everything, so the face of the estate was arguably more important than its interior. One of the housemaid’s most vital responsibilities was maintaining this outward appearance. The act itself also served a purpose as a public performance. Maids visibly tending to the front courtyard sent the message that this was a family who could afford help.

“M-Madam Melody, may I have a coat? You were right about it being chilly.”

“You may not.”

When in public, they represented the estate. If someone saw them in anything but their uniform it would besmirch the dignity of the family they served.

Most of the time—frankly, always—a maid set aside practicality to maintain appearances. Plus, to Melody at least, a little cold was no bother. She was thriving doing what she loved.

Luciana kept quiet and got to work, starting with polishing the brass doorknobs and knockers, not forgetting to tend to the mailbox and keyholes as well. She then swept the stairs leading to the front door and fetched some water from the well so she could shine the stairs with a pumice polishing. It all sounded very quick and easy on paper, but rest assured it was hard labor.

“The water’s cold, the wind is cold, my knees hurt, my back hurts, everything hurts, the water’s cold...”

“You’re spiraling, Luciana! Stay with me! You’re doing great!”

With Melody’s encouragement, Luciana completed her tasks and at last completed all the cleaning. All that remained was making breakfast and preparing her mother and father’s morning tea.

“Some warm water, Luciana.”

“Oh, gosh, thank you.”

They took a short break in the kitchen to warm up after working outdoors.

Luciana felt frozen solid. Melody would normally never suffer such indulgences as “breaks” during her work, but she allowed this special courtesy today. Luciana was still technically her lady, after all. She didn’t have to survive the grueling gauntlet of a *true* maid’s morning.

The cookstove was already lit and ready for breakfast, warming up the kitchen before they arrived. Luciana sipped her water and let out a relieved sigh. A clone was handling the cooking, since Melody had been supervising Luciana most of the day.

The clock read fifteen to eight. They would just barely make it in time.

“How are you feeling?” Melody asked.

“I’m okay now,” Luciana said. “Thanks.”

“I realize I may have piled too many tasks on you at once, and I apologize for that. I should not have expected so much of you on your first day.”

“I appreciate it, though. I got to learn a lot about all the work you do for us every day, so let’s call it even.”

“You truly are too kind.” They giggled at the absurdity of the situation. “It’s almost time, you know.”

“Time for what? Wait, you don’t mean...”

“Let’s get changed, shall we?” Melody produced a flowing black dress seemingly out of nowhere.

Luciana lit up. “Really?! I can finally wear it?!”

There it was at last—the attending uniform she knew and loved so much.

“Do you need my help getting dressed?” Melody asked, laughing.

“No way! I’m a maid today! Be right back!”

Luciana zipped off to her room, and a few minutes later she returned in the black dress.

“You look lovely, Luciana.”

“Y-you think?” She chuckled nervously, a blush lighting her cheeks as she fiddled with the two long braids draped over her shoulders. “Thanks.”

“You’ve braided your hair.”

“It was easier than, um, putting it up in a bun.”

“You look positively adorable.”

“C-come on, stop it.” Luciana hid her face behind her hands as it burned even hotter. She’d never tried braids before, so she was a tad shy about whether she’d gotten them right.

“What a fantastic morning it’s been, getting to spend it with you.”

Luciana peeked between her fingers. “Fantastic? What’s been fantastic about me constantly messing things up?”

“To tell you the truth, I was so excited last night I hardly slept.”

“Excited about what?”

Luciana was stumped. All she’d done was complain about a dress, force Melody out of her routine, and make herself such a burden that Melody needed a clone just to make sure breakfast was ready on time. What did Melody have to feel excited about in all that?

Melody’s cheeks flushed. “I was excited about having a colleague. It may only be for a day, but that was thrilling enough, to say nothing of getting to teach someone about what I do. That it was my own lady whom I got to share this with made it that much better.”

Granted, Melody had become a maid of all work specifically to avoid colleagues and keep the whole job to herself, but she saw no contradiction in this sentiment. She could want the full experience *and* work with others.

Most noble estates operated thanks to a complex retinue of servants, with the housekeeper at the top of the hierarchy. Those below her—housemaids, parlormmaids, nursemaids, kitchen maids, scullery maids—worked in tandem to see to the upkeep of a grand manor. Melody had gotten just a little taste of that this morning, and she was thankful to her lady for the experience.

“We’ve still a full day ahead of us, but thank you, my lady—pardon. Thank you, Luciana.”

Luciana about exploded. *Wh-wh-why is she so cute?!*

The maid wore the blushing, lovelorn smile of a heroine, and Luciana could hardly bear to stand in its presence. Her stomach churned with things she dared not name, things that paid no heed to the fact that they were both women.

Her cheeks burned hotter than ever.

“Something wrong?” Melody asked.

“Wr-wrong? Nope! Nothing wrong here!” She frantically waved her hands, desperately trying to maintain some sense of normalcy. It wasn’t going well. Her face could light the coals in the stove on fire.

A clone Melody pushed a trolley into the room just in time to end Luciana’s suffering. “The morning tea is ready.”

“Perfect,” said the real Melody. “Shall we, Luciana? Oh, but first—”

“On it! Leave it to me!”

“Er, perhaps I should explain—”

“No need! I’ll just copy the way you do it every morning!”

“Well, the process varies slightly, and—L-Luciana! Wait! I beg you!”

Luciana took the trolley and darted for her parents’ bedroom like a bat out of hell. If she couldn’t hide her fluster, maybe she could outrun it.

Melody didn’t get a chance to react. Perhaps she could have prevented the oncoming tragedy with magic, but hindsight and all that. She gave chase on foot instead.

“My lady, wait! Listen to me! I *implore* you to listen to me! My lady, please, you *must* knock first—”

A knocking rang down the hall. “Mother! Father! I’m coming in!”

“Knock first, and then *wait*, or else you’ll—”

A scream shook the estate, loud enough for all to hear.

“L-Luciana?!” Melody sputtered. “You *must* wait after knocking, or you’ll not like what you...”

“M-Mother? Father?” Luciana stammered. “Wh-wh-what are you two *doing*?!”

And in broad daylight?! No, do *not* stand, Father, for the love of God! Please do not! Don't—"

Another scream. *Thwack!*

How long had Luciana had that harisen?

"*Bwah!*" the count croaked.

"Sweetheart!" cried his wife.

Melody arrived at the scene of the crime and her shoulders slumped. "Too late."

There was an important ritual to entering the lord and lady's bedroom: knock, then *wait* for them to invite you inside. Open the door too soon, and you would learn firsthand just how healthy the Rudlebergs' marriage was. Fifteen years and going strong—perhaps too strong for their fifteen-year-old daughter. It was a wonder she didn't have a little brother or sister.

And so it was that, at eight in the morning, Luciana's maid experience met an abrupt end.

"I can't do thiiiiis!"

Unfortunately for her, a good maid was a prudent maid.

A few days later...

"Melody, would you mind washing Father's laundry separately from mine?"

"L-Luciana! My love!"

Hughes endured an icy reception from his daughter for some time after that. They would repair that relationship soon enough, however.

Afterword

HELLO TO READERS NEW AND OLD! I'm Atekichi, and I want to thank you ever so much for reading my book, *Heroine? Saint? No, I'm an All-Works Maid (And Proud of It)!*

I also have to apologize for something. You see, I've taken to calling Melody's occupation an "all-works maid," as you may have noticed. This is not, in fact, the correct term. Technically, the correct term is "maid of all work."

Naturally, the original title of this series was actually *Heroine? Saint? No, I'm a Maid of All Work (And Proud of It)!* but that doesn't quite roll off the tongue, does it? Also, how come all the other maids get it so easy—housemaids, parlormaids, *et cetera* maids—while the maid of all work is stuck with that mouthful? It didn't make sense to me. Like, come on, English! I'm sorry, English. It's not actually your fault.

So, long story short, I portmanteau'd it into my own original "all-works maid." Just please don't call them that if you ever actually meet one.

Anyway, where was I? Oh right. How in the world did my weird story about a maid-obsessed protagonist make it to store shelves...? Dumb question. Why, it's thanks to the lovely people at To Books and our fabulous illustrator, the great Yukiko-sama, of course. I can't thank you enough for bringing Melody and Luciana and all these characters in my head to life. Seeing them take shape in this world is a truly indescribable feeling.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without all the love and support from my original readers back when this was just a web novel on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. Thank you to you too. I hope you'll enjoy the published version, as I've made a few adjustments to the story here and there.

Once again, you have my humble gratitude for reading this book, and I hope to see you again in the next chapter of Melody's maid madness. Until then!

From the Creators

ATEKICHI

A tea lover who writes about a maid lover. A *casual* tea lover, I should specify. Please don't actually try to talk to me about how it works. To love and to know are two different things. As long as it tastes good, I'm there. So it is with maids. As long as they're cute. And the skirt is long enough. But then again...

YUKIKO

TWITTER: [aoiyukiko](#) WEBSITE: <https://www.yukicocco.com>



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