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Let's Get to
Villainessin':
➤ Stratagems of a ➤
Former Commoner

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SA, AKUYAKU REIJOU NO OSHIGOTO WO HAJIMEMASHOU

MOTO SHOMIN NO WATASHI GA IDOMU ZUNOUSEN by Hiironoame

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"BECAUSE...
MS. SAKURAZAKA I...
I ADMIRE YOU!"

WHY IS THIS
GIRL STILL HERE
IN FRONT OF ME
TELLING ME SHE
ADMIRE'S ME?

Prologue

“I can help you save your sister’s life, but only if you become the villainess in my stead.”

That had been the fateful proposal that changed my life, a promise of certain doom offered to me by one Shizuki Sakurazaka, a prominent lady of the powerful Sakurazaka zaibatsu. I often pondered why she chose me, someone seemingly ordinary, save for my younger sister and her fight with an incurable disease.

“The world we live in is based on an otome game,” she continued, following up her initial shocker with something even more unbelievable. I knew extraordinary claims required extraordinary evidence, and to my amazement, Shizuki had provided just that. Compelled by her words, I accepted her offer and assumed the mantle of villainess.

It was now three years later. Initially, I floundered, unversed in the ways of high society. But I adapted, guided by Shizuki’s instructions and her knowledge of the future. I managed to connect with Ruki Yukishiro, one of the male love interests, and, just like in the game, fell in love with him.

That night, I stood in the penthouse ballroom of a towering skyscraper, adorned in a resplendent evening gown that signaled my status as the lady of a powerful conglomerate. Gazing out of the floor-to-ceiling windows, I looked down upon the ordinary people below. Their cars and shops twinkled in the night, tiny emblems of their mundane existence.

“Mio, there you are,” came Ruki’s refined voice from behind, a timbre I had grown familiar with over the years. Instinctively, my hand tightened on the fabric of my dress, squashing any hint of vulnerability.

There was no time for weakness now. It was time to get to work.

When I felt my grip loosen, that elegant, practiced smile I’d so painstakingly

cultivated floated naturally onto my lips. I turned, and there they were: Ruki standing beside Nonoka, the original game's heroine, just as Shizuki had told me.

"Hello, Ruki, Nonoka. This is turning out to be quite the night, isn't it?" I asked, my arrogant smile hanging off my face as I dramatically brushed a lock of hair from my shoulder.

"Mio, you haven't been yourself lately," Ruki began.

"Whatever's troubling you, we're here to listen!" Nonoka added.

"No, nothing is troubling *me*," I countered. "But I wonder—perhaps it is you two who have something to share?"

Tonight marked a turning point in the game. Here, Ruki would level an accusation against me, and I would accept the blame, paving the way for him and Nonoka to unite. This was the denouement, the key to unlocking the game's "good ending". Yes, my downfall was scripted, but it was necessary. To rescue Japan from an unprecedented financial crisis, to save my beloved little sister, my ruin was the only path.

I was all right with that. The weight of many lives rested on my shoulders. This was my role, my duty, the persona of the villainess was mine to embrace until the very end.

"Now, let's get to villainessin', shall we?"

Episode 1

I would stop by the hospital every day after school.

"Thanks for coming again, Mio," the soft voice from the bed in the small private room said. There, propped up against the pillows was Shizuku, my dear baby sister. She suffered from an incurable illness and has lived in and out of hospitals ever since her diagnosis years ago.

"How are you feeling today?" I asked, taking a seat beside her.

"Pretty good, actually," she replied, her smile unwavering despite everything.

While her disease had no known cure, it wasn't exactly a death sentence either. Whether one's condition improved or deteriorated was primarily down to luck. Yet in recent days, there had been a noticeable lightness in her demeanor, a sign of recovery, or so I hoped.

"When you're better, we'll go out just like old times." I reached out to gently tuck a strand of her jet-black hair behind her ear.

She giggled slightly, her eyes crinkling in delight. "Sure, when I get better."

I then launched into a recount of my day, filling her in on the latest school gossip and trends. We then leafed through her favorite fashion magazine, a simple yet precious routine that brought us both joy. Our peaceful moment was interrupted by the ringing of the phone alarm I had set. Glancing at the time, I realized I needed to leave soon for my part-time job. It was a bit early, but I also had some errands to run beforehand. "Okay, well, I should get going," I told Shizuku.

"Already? Did you change your shift?" She looked up at me, a hint of disappointment in her eyes.

"No, it's just that I need to do some shopping before work," I commented, feeling a twinge of guilt.

"Oh, I see," she said quietly, looking down. "Sorry."

“Sorry for what, being my adorable baby sister? I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

With that, I left Shizuku’s room and was promptly accosted by her attending physician. He was a middle-aged doctor, slightly younger than our dad, and one of the finest, according to one of the nurses I’d gotten to know.

“Doctor, hello, did you need Shizuku for something?” I questioned, a bit surprised to see him waiting for me.

“No, Mio, it’s you I was looking for, actually. Could we have a moment, please?” His tone was serious, lacking its usual warmth.

I suppose I could do my shopping tomorrow, I thought, a sense of foreboding creeping over me—since when did good news ever start with a request for private conversation? I quietly agreed and followed him along with the nurse to a secluded consultation room near the reception area.

The nurse gestured for me to sit down, her expression solemn. Across from me, the doctor settled into his chair, his gaze meeting mine with a weighty seriousness. I clutched the hem of my skirt, bracing myself. “Yes?” I inquired.

“It’s about Shizuku,” the doctor began grimly. “I must speak frankly, Mio, I’m in a difficult position. Your parents have requested that I be completely transparent with you, while Shizuku herself has asked that I refrained from disclosing this.”

I felt my chest tighten with anxiety. “Please, tell me.”

He hesitated, choosing his words carefully. “Your sister’s condition is progressing more rapidly than we anticipated.”

My vision went dark. “But...how? She’s been doing so well—I’ve seen it with my own eyes!”

“She’s been making a commendable effort to appear well, especially for you. But the reality is she shouldn’t even be sitting up straight let alone conversing with you.”

“You’re kidding...” I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t want to believe it. But at the same time, a part of me had always sensed something amiss. Every time I sought after Shizuku about her well-being, there was that slight, unnatural

pause before her smile emerged. It made sense now—if she was masking her pain with those smiles...

Before I realized it, I found myself grasping the doctor's white sleeve. "Doctor, please. What exactly is happening to her?"

A sigh escaped his lips. "Well, nothing, as of yet. However, based on her current trajectory, I estimate she may have around three years left."

The room seemed to sway around me. I teetered on the edge of my seat before the nurse's swift intervention steadied me. *So, this was why she insisted I sit...* This fleeting thought was all I had to keep me grounded as my mind raced, processing the doctor's words. Shizuku, only a year younger than me, might not even live to see her high school graduation...

I bit down on my lip. I knew the grim statistics of her disease—over half of the sufferers don't survive. There were cases of recovery, none linked to a definitive cure, but still, Shizuku had been stable all this time. She looked fine, on the brink of overcoming this. She couldn't...decline just like that, right?

Right?

"Doctor, please, there has to be something you can do!" I pleaded. "If you need an organ from me, just take it. Just make her better, please!"

"I'm sorry, Mio. Organ transplants will do her no good, I'm afraid. There's no known cure at present. There is a trial underway overseas, and a breakthrough could be made in no less than five years, but..."

His expression said it all. Shizuku didn't have five years. Only a miracle would save her now.

"She doesn't deserve this..." I whispered under my breath. Shizuku was a kind girl—a wonderful girl. Despite her own suffering, she wore a brave face for me, even ran interference with the doctor, all to spare me the burden of worry. Her selflessness extended beyond her own pain, always thinking of me, our parents. How could such an angelic soul be denied the chance to even see adulthood?

My vision blurred over, the doctor's voice reached me through the veil. "It's not quite time to lose hope yet, Mio. What I've outlined is only the likely scenario if she doesn't improve in the next three years. There is still ample time

for her to prove me wrong.”

Sure, the probability of her recovering wasn't zero, I knew that. But the very fact that he felt compelled to pull me aside and prepare me for the worst spoke volumes. I could tell what he said just now were empty words of comfort that unfortunately did little to ease the pain in my heart.

I managed a quiet “Thank you” and a half-hearted smile. The doctor looked at me in sympathy. “We'll give you some privacy,” he said gently, exiting the room with the nurse in tow.

Left alone, I slumped in my chair, my thoughts swirling around Shizuku. She had always been the brave one. Whenever my confidence waned, it was she who took me by the hand and pulled me forward. When the neighborhood boys picked on me, Shizuku was the one who rose to my defense. She was a part of me—and she was going to die in three years. My chest tightened at the thought, a tidal wave of grief threatening to overflow.

I longed to rush back to Shizuku, to bury my face in her embrace and let my tears flow freely as I had in our childhood. But I couldn't, not now. How could I crumble when she stood so valiantly against despair? I had to mirror her strength, be the rock-solid older sister she needed now more than ever.

But the bitter truth gnawed at me—I could do nothing to save her. All I could do was keep working, to earn enough to ensure her treatment continued.

Gathering myself, I stood up, hastily wiping away my tears with the sleeve of my uniform. I passed by the doctor, bid him farewell, and headed to my job.

I was only fifteen. A third-year middle school student like me typically wasn't allowed to work, but given our family's circumstances, I'd been granted special permission to work part-time at my cousin's café. I stood at the crosswalk just outside the Plaza Sakurabana department store, with the café located on the top floor, rubbing my hands together to ward off the biting December chill.

As I waited for the signal to change, an exceptionally well-dressed girl caught my eye. Her long, blonde hair wasn't exactly uncommon in this neck of the woods, but her attire was anything but. She wore a flowing, high-waisted skirt topped with a luxuriously warm-looking fluffy coat and clutched the straps of an elegant handbag. Her ensemble felt like high fashion, so distinct and opulent

that I hesitated to even call them *clothes* if only to avoid associating them with the plainness that I wore.

Would I be cute in that same getup? I wondered before the horrid continuation, *if only Shizuku wasn't sick...* popped up in my mind for a second before I shook it from my head, utterly disgusted at my own indecency.

What could be more important to you than Shizuku? I was in the middle of admonishing myself when I suddenly noticed a man approaching the well-dressed girl. She seemed preoccupied, perhaps searching for someone, completely oblivious to the man inching closer. His movements were furtive, almost calculated, but I hesitated to jump to conclusions—he could just be a friend planning a surprise.

That assumption crumbled in an instant when, in a swift, unexpected move, he snatched her handbag and bolted—straight to me. Instinctively, my hand shot out, guided by some inner reflex, and I somehow managed to firmly grasp one of the bag's straps.

"Wh-What are you...?!" the thief stammered. "Let go!"

"You let go! That's not your bag!" I yelled.

"I said let go!" He shoved, and I fell hard on the pavement. Despite the tumble, I felt the bag secure in my possession. Thwarted, the would-be thief clicked his tongue in frustration and fled into the crowd.

As I gathered myself, a new voice, poised and unmistakably refined, reached me from above. "Excuse me, are you okay?" I lifted my eyes to see the girl whose bag had been targeted looking down at me in concern. She was awfully pretty, around my age or perhaps a bit older, with a figure straight from a fashion magazine—slender, elegant, with impeccably balanced curves. Her blonde hair framed striking violet eyes. An elegant nose sat atop a pair of glossy pink lips. Despite her mature appearance, there was a hint of youthful charm in her expression. *What is she, a model?*

"Oh, dear. You didn't hit your head, did you? Shall I have you taken to the hospital?" she continued.

Crap, I was staring. "No, I'm fine, thank you," I replied. "Oh um, your bag,

miss, here you—" I gasped as I rushed to my feet. Extending her handbag toward her, I suddenly noticed one of the straps was nearly torn off. "I'm so, so sorry!" I exclaimed, bowing deeply in apology. *This is name brand, isn't it? What'll I do if she asks for compensation? I can't afford this!*

"Sorry? For what?" Her response was a mix of curiosity and nonchalance.

I hesitantly raised my head to look at her; she took the damaged bag from my hands.

"Thank you for your brave intervention. Had it not been for you, my predicament would be far worse. I am not so ungracious as to seek damages from someone who acted so selflessly. That responsibility lies with *him*." Her amethyst eyes narrowed, glancing beyond me. Following her direction, I saw a group of men in black and a woman in a maid's costume approach. They had the thief in their custody.

"Your instructions, milady?" the woman asked.

"Interrogate him," the girl replied promptly. "Determine if this was a mere act of opportunism by a pickpocket who didn't know any better or a targeted attempt against me. Inform the police they may have him once we have what we need."

Wow. Her presence was commanding, her demeanor like that of a true aristocrat talking down to her servants. I was so caught up in her imposing aura that I almost missed her turning back to me. "Thank you again for rescuing my handbag."

"Oh, I...I didn't really do much," I offered. In my mind, her bodyguards seemed more than capable of handling the situation. They could've probably detained the thief and retrieved the bag without my help, sans destroyed strap and all.

Dismissing my doubts with a graceful shake of her head, she smiled at me with poise and magnanimity. "But you did. Your actions prevented his escape. It's the intention that matters, and for that, I am grateful." Her eyes closed softly in a gesture resembling a contented feline. "I would like to thank you properly. Do you have a moment?"

“Time!” I gasped, whipping out my phone. My face paled. “So sorry, I’m going to be late for my shift, maybe another time!”

Luckily, the signal was green. I didn’t even wait for her reply, just made a mad dash across the street and into the plaza. I bolted into the elevator, rode it to the top floor where the restaurants were and continued to run, not stopping until I reached the café. Glancing at my phone, I had just five minutes to spare. “Kaede, sorry, I’m late!” I panted, trying to catch my breath.

“Oh, there you are. You didn’t have to sprint, you know, you’re still early.” Kaede, my older cousin and proprietor of the café, smiled at me kindly. She poured me a glass of water, which I gratefully accepted and downed in a single gulp.

“Thanks. But I should aim to be early to start my shift on time,” I replied, catching my breath.

Kaede giggled. “Well, look at you. Who would’ve thought the girl who once stuttered in front of customers would become my most dependable employee.”

“K-Kaede, can you not!” Hiding my heating cheeks with my hands, I pushed past her and into the back area to change. As I slipped out of my school uniform, the doctor’s words from earlier swept back into my mind, the grim news pulling my chest tight. Forcing those thoughts aside, I changed into my work uniform—a neat, ribboned blouse and a pair of slacks while the other waitresses here wore skirts. I was the odd one out, Kaede’s exception for the lone middle schooler on her team to ensure I stayed comfortable and out of any potential trouble.

My early days working here had been rough. Being constantly pulled aside for an earful, being terrible at handling customer issues—my performance had been far from stellar. But a year later, I could almost call myself proficient. Kaede still didn’t trust me with the register, but I could handle pretty much everything else besides that—taking orders, running food, bussing tables, and assisting the rest of the waitstaff.

A little while later into my shift when the flow of customers began to ebb, a party of two waltzed through the door: a silver-haired woman in around her mid-twenties and a blonde-haired girl in her late teens. From their apparent

ages, they could almost be sisters, but not them—they were the same individuals I'd encountered earlier at the intersection just outside. The recollection of the afternoon's events sent a jolt through me.

What are they doing here? I thought, only a little panicked, when suddenly, Kaede's hushed voice brushed past my ear. "What are you doing? Go greet them."

Shaken from my reverie, I quickly composed myself and approached the two ladies.

"**THIS** way, please," I requested with a warm smile, leading them into the café.

"Could we possibly get a table by the window, if it's not too inconvenient?" the maid inquired politely.

Normally, I wasn't keen on accommodating customer seating requests, especially during a rush, but with the café quieter now, it seemed reasonable to oblige. Eyeing an unoccupied four-top by the window, I nodded. "Of course. How about this one right here?"

Once they were comfortably seated, I excused myself to fetch them some water. As I was filling glasses behind the counter, the maid from earlier approached me.

"Excuse me. Could I speak with your manager?" she asked.

"The manager?" I repeated, glancing in Kaede's direction. "Kaede, our manager, would be happy to—"

"Hello, I am Kaede Matsuyama. How can I help?" She must have overheard, flitting over quickly.

"A pleasure to meet you," the maid greeted. "My name is Shannon. I serve Lady Shizuki of the Sakurazaka Group."

The name sent a ripple of surprise through both Kaede and me. Known as a titan in Japan's financial and industrial landscape, the Sakurazaka Group was a part of the nation's esteemed "Big Three" zaibatsus. I was sure there wasn't a

domestic soul alive who hadn't heard of them.

Kaede shook off her surprise first. "Well, I'm certainly honored. What can I do for a, ah-, maid of the Sakurazaka Group?"

"Earlier today, your employee here found herself involved in an incident with Lady Shizuki, which the Lady wishes to acknowledge. With your permission, we would like a moment of her time," Shannon detailed.

"Mio got involved with a member of the Sakurazaka Group?" Kaede echoed, her voice filled with disbelief. I could feel her gaze boring into the back of my skull. *Explain yourself*, I could almost hear her say.

"It's a...long story," I mumbled, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

Kaede's expression transformed to one of barely concealed irritation, her eyes almost pleading for the full account. *Oh, I've got all the time in the world, sweetie*, she seemed to signal silently.

Shannon stepped in smoothly, clarifying the situation. "Please, allow me to explain. This young lady heroically thwarted a pickpocket earlier, successfully retrieving and returning Lady Shizuki's handbag. Our intention is to express our gratitude, nothing more."

Kaede's expression lightened. "Oh, is that what happened?" But then she turned to me again, her eyes sharp. "Seriously, Mio? You could've gotten hurt." I shuffled awkwardly, avoiding Kaede's glower. She sighed and turned back to Shannon. "All right, I think I understand the situation. Mio, why don't you go ahead and take your break now?"

"Are you sure? You'd be managing the front all by yourself," I protested, aware of the bustling dining area. I was the only server present; even without a rush, managing the café single-handedly was no small feat.

"We wouldn't want to inconvenience your establishment," Shannon inserted quickly. "I would be happy to assist with customer service while Ms. Mio is engaged with Lady Shizuki."

Kaede looked at the woman dressed in the actual maid outfit, then me; she let out a resigned sigh. "Just go. I think I'll manage."

Sorry, Kaede! I apologized in my mind as I made my way to the waiting table. “Hi there,” I began, feeling somewhat out of my element.

“Ah, there you are. Please, take a seat,” the young lady said, gesturing to the chair diagonally across from her. She had chosen the *kamiza*—the most prestigious seat traditionally furthest from the entrance—for me, while she occupied the worst seat at the table. I could hardly imagine an eminent young lady of a powerful conglomerate and her maid making such an amateurish mistake unless she specifically wanted to honor me?

Deciding not to question her motives, I cautiously took the offered seat. She greeted my decision with a pleased smile. “Very good. You made the right choice without hesitation. This bodes well for what I have in mind.”

“Um, what exactly are you referring to?” I inquired, completely at a loss.



“Your reward,” she responded promptly.

Uh, okay? I thought, alarm bells going off in my head. But it was too early to jump to conclusions. I sat quietly, and my patience was rewarded as she began to clarify.

“I’ve been remiss in introductions, haven’t I? Shizuki Sakurazaka, a pleasure.”

“Oh, hi, I’m—”

“Ms. Mio Sato, yes, I know all about you. I hope you’ll forgive my prying; I took the liberty of learning a little about my rescuer. Your sister, she’s hospitalized, isn’t she? Has been for some time.”

All right, I thought. *In the hour that’s passed since the incident she’s done all diligence that was due, and then some.* Her efficiency had me a little unnerved, but I still maintained a calm facade—a facade that shattered with her next line.

“Shizuku’s not doing too well, is she?”

Irritation flared up within me. Who was she to talk about Shizuku so casually? The anxiety I had shelved away to focus on work now burst forth, mingling with my sudden resentment toward her and showing on my face.

But she didn’t care. She continued, her voice steady, her gaze unwavering. “I can help save your sister’s life, but only if you become the villainess in my stead.”

An incredible statement to make out of nowhere. Devoid of any context, her words should’ve seemed absurd, but my mind couldn’t help but latch on to one clause: *I can help save your sister’s life.*

I eyed her warily. “You can *save* my sister?”

She nodded. “If you become the villainess in my stead.”

Twice, she’s repeated that phrase. If she’d said, “make a deal with the devil,” I might have been less hesitant—at least that evil was familiar. But this talk of a “villainess” left me utterly perplexed. In my confusion, I blurted out a question, unfiltered and brash: “Is that what you are? A villainess?”

“I am,” she replied immediately.

I was astonished. She had the aura of a well-to-do young lady, sure, but nothing that screamed “evil villainess” as it applied to my understanding of the term. If this was some cruel joke, I wouldn’t be able to keep my pent-up emotions in check for much longer.

“I’m sorry, but could you explain? Preferably from the beginning?” I implored, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Of course, my apologies for being abrupt,” she said. “I simply wish to express my gratitude for your bravery earlier by offering a potential lifeline for your sister, conditional upon your acceptance of my proposal.”

“You know what my sister is suffering from?”

“Yes, I am familiar with her ailment and the treatment she’s receiving. She’s been getting worse, hasn’t she?”

“But you believe *you* can help her?”

I swallowed, the weight of her potential answer pressing heavily on me. While I didn’t have any way of saving Shizuku, I also was no progeny of the Sakurazaka Group with near limitless resources at my disposal.

“Your doctor mentioned the trials happening overseas, correct?” she finally posed.

“Yes, but he said we couldn’t expect a breakthrough for another five years.”

“Mostly true, but with an important caveat: it might take that long for the treatment to be approved here, but overseas, that could happen in as fast as three.”

“And what does that mean for Shizuku?” I dared to ask. The timeline she proposed—three years—aligned alarmingly with the doctor’s prognosis. *Could it... Could it be possible?*

“Not much, I’m afraid. An ordinary citizen wouldn’t be prioritized for such cutting-edge treatment abroad. However, with the right financial backing and connections, this scenario could change.”

“Money and connections, right...” I mumbled dejectedly. My family had neither. I could tell she was stringing me along here, but my desperation to help

Shizuku overshadowed any caution. I looked at her, my eyes harboring a blend of expectation and anxiety.

She nodded knowingly. “You would do well to know that I have given a substantial grant to the institute spearheading the research. One word from me, and I could have your sister placed at the top of the list.”

And there was the bait. But what was the catch?

“Don’t get me wrong,” she continued. “I am beyond grateful for your actions today, but you’ll understand that saving a mere handbag isn’t quite enough for me to call in such a large favor or cover the substantial costs of the treatment.”

“I... Yes, of course,” I responded. We were already paying several hundred thousand yen a month to keep Shizuku in the hospital, and that was with insurance. To shoulder the full cost of going cash pay and overseas—both of us knew I couldn’t ask that as thanks for holding on to one measly handbag. I bit down on my lip. I felt so powerless. There lay a path to Shizuku’s treatment, and yet I couldn’t tread on it.

“But that is exactly why I would like to give you, my Good Samaritan, a chance to earn that favor.”

I looked up at her. “A chance. By becoming the villainess in your stead?”

“Yes. Become the villainess, achieve your objective, and I will see to it that Shizuku gets treatment the moment it becomes available—all at my expense.”

Her proposal begged more questions than answers—there was no guarantee the treatment would even materialize, and yet I couldn’t turn my back away from the slightest hope that Shizuku might live. Still, the critical issue remained in timing. Three years was a precarious timeline; my agreement would serve no purpose if Shizuku couldn’t hold on until then.

“That, however, is just a proposal for you to mull over. For my actual token of gratitude for your actions today, I propose to transfer your sister to an exclusive hospital, one reserved for the country’s most rich and powerful. Naturally, I will take care of all associated costs.”

“Why?” The question escaped my lips before I could stop it. While generous, her offer seemed to miss the point. Shizuku needed to live for longer, not better

in some fancy hospital.

“She will have access to state-of-the-art medical facilities and the finest physicians. Around the clock, top-tier care.”

“And?”

“Better care often translates to better outcomes. That is to say, she has a better chance to live longer there.”

My eyes flew open. That glimmer of hope suddenly turning into something more concrete and substantial. “Tell me what you mean by ‘become the villainess.’”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” She lapsed into thought for a moment. “Are you familiar with the concept of a villainess, as depicted in popular culture?”

“You mean the stuck-up, malicious young lady as seen in dating sims?”

The archetype that sprang to mind was the disagreeable lady who wielded her social standing as a cudgel, antagonizing the kind-hearted heroine in otome dating sims. They were scapegoats, written solely to earn the player’s ire before facing their eventual comeuppance in a grand, satisfying moment of catharsis.

“The one and the same. I want you to be that stuck-up, malicious young lady in my stead,” she emphasized.

“What do you mean by ‘in your stead,’ Ms. Sakurazaka?”

“Please, call me Shizuki.”

“Ms. Shizuki, are you asking me to take on a role, like in a play?”

“It’s interesting you put it that way. Yes, in a sense, you will be playing a role, and the world itself shall be your stage.”

“Um...”

“For you see, the world we live in is based on an otome game.”

Her humor was beyond me. Because that was what this was, right—a bad joke? Those earnest violet eyes of hers, they were just part of her act. Any moment now, she would burst into laughter, revealing the punchline.

No?

Her phone alarm sounded. “Ah, it’s time. Mio, can you see the crosswalk where we first met from where you are?”

“Oh, um, sure,” I replied, slightly bewildered. Peering out the window, the familiar crosswalk appeared much smaller from our elevated viewpoint.

“An elderly man with a cane will start crossing as soon as the signal changes. You know how short the signal is. A young girl will approach to help him with his luggage, and they’ll cross together.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“This is how the game starts. The prologue, so to speak.”

“You’re serious?” I shot back.

“Deadly,” she countered, an ironic smile playing on her lips. “It’s all right, take your time. It took me a while to accept it myself—that I have memories from a past life, and that in this life I am a character from a game I once played.”

She could say that with a straight face all she liked, but I was still skeptical. “You’ll excuse me for finding this hard to believe.”

“Why not? Stranger things have happened. But I get it, there’s no acceptance without denial. You’ll see, the events in this world unfold exactly as they did in the game. Look, the light is about to change.”

Shizuki was fixated on the crosswalk below. Despite my doubts, a part of me couldn’t resist joining her in observation. The far side of the street was visible from our vantage point, and there, just as she had described, was an elderly man with a cane being assisted by a young girl carrying luggage.

“Am I dreaming?” I muttered in disbelief. This was definitely some elaborate ruse a rich girl concocted to try and pull a fast one on little ol’ me. But to what end? Lacking context, I decided to play along, seeking more information while feigning belief. “What happens next?”

“That man is the head of the Nagura Group, a name you might recognize. And the girl is Nonoka Hiragi, the protagonist of the otome game that this world is based on. She’s his granddaughter, though she’s unaware of her lineage.”

“How is that possible?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Nonoka is an orphan. Her mother—her blood relation to the Nagura family—married a commoner and left her high-society life behind. As a result, Nonoka grew up ignorant of her heritage. Her grandfather knows she exists, but that’s about the extent of his knowledge. Look, he’s about to give thanks and ask for her name.”

As if on cue, the pair began to converse. From our distance, their words and expressions were indecipherable, yet the elderly man’s reaction was distinctly recognizable—a look of profound surprise. It was surreal, as if the scene below was being directed by Shizuki herself.

“The scene goes a little something like this,” Shizuki continued before slipping into her best impression of a seasoned storyteller. “And so, it came to pass. On that fated eve, when the chimes tolled thrice and thrice again, a Christmas miracle unfolded.” Exactly then, the nearby clock tower rang six times, marking six o’clock in the afternoon. *A Christmas miracle?* I glanced at my phone—it was the 24th. How had that detail escaped my mind?

As I returned my focus to the elderly man and young girl below, the scene really did take on an almost cinematic quality. “Is this world really based on an otome game?” I wondered aloud, my skepticism waning in the face of these uncanny coincidences.

“I can make several more predictions about the future if you’d like,” she replied nonchalantly.

Was her confidence a natural extension of her personality, or was it something I projected onto her because I was so desperate for her to be right? “So, your knowledge about the cure...”

“Is derived from the game,” she confirmed with a knowing smile. “In the game, there’s a character who suffers from the same condition as your sister. She is cured by the treatment I spoke of.”

My very soul shook. If Shizuki’s claims were true, then her foresight wasn’t just a vague prediction—it was a precise, prophetic vision. It implied a tangible hope, a real possibility that Shizuku could be saved.

I couldn’t ignore this chance. But I needed clarity on one critical aspect.

“This...villainess of yours. Does something bad happen to her at the end of it all?”

“Yes. Ultimately, she meets a...less than desirable fate, let’s say.”

“But can this fate not be avoided? If the game has just begun, why not simply avoid the actions that lead to her downfall?” It seemed illogical. I understood trying to find a person to take the fall for wrongdoings already committed, but for wrongdoings *yet* to be committed?

Her smile widened. “Indeed, I intend to do just that. In fact, I’m leaving for overseas. I won’t even be enrolling in the school where the main events of the game take place.”

A hint of skepticism crept into my expression. “Yet you’re still looking for a fall guy?”

Shizuki nodded. “Simply put, if the game’s protagonist does not end up with one of the love interests, Japan will be devastated by a financial crisis the likes of which the country has never seen. And if that happens, there will be no cure.”

“So, the goal is to ensure our heroine finds her happily ever after?”

“Indeed. Nonoka needs to end up with one of the male leads to secure her happy ending. And for that to happen, she needs her foil.”

The logic in Shizuki’s explanation was now clear, albeit harsh. If she assumed her role as the villainess, her downfall was inevitable. Controversially, if she abstained, the whole of Japan would suffer. As a member of a financial empire, she couldn’t allow the latter. Yet, to avoid her own grisly fate, she needed someone to take her place. “Ms. Shizuki, if I understand you correctly, you are asking me to give up my life and face certain doom, all to hook Nonoka up with her boyfriend of choice?”

“Essentially. You will be trading your life for your sister’s,” she replied without a hint of sentimentality. “As the saying goes, there’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

But her words, stark and unapologetic, were the greatest assurance I could have asked for. “Oh, that’s a relief,” I sighed, a hint of a smile finally finding its

way onto my face.

Shizuki's eyebrow quirked in surprise. "What's a relief?"

"If I may be honest, Ms. Shizuki, your proposal seemed too good to be true; I wondered if you weren't trying to swindle me. But now, with the true cost to me revealed, I feel a lot better about the whole premise." There was no free lunch, as Shizuki had so aptly put it. The transparency of the trade—my life for my sister's—made the proposition seem more genuine, made her seem more trustworthy. And if I could trust her words, then I no longer had any reason to refuse.

"I'll do it. I'll be your villainess."

I didn't hesitate. Any opportunity to save Shizuku was an opportunity I had to seize—even if it resulted in my own death.

UPON agreeing to Shizuki's terms, I committed myself to the role of villainess—a role that necessitated me becoming an adopted daughter of the Sakurazaka family to fulfill, a piece of information Shizuki conveniently divulged only *after* my agreement.

What? I thought, at a momentary loss before she quickly clarified that a villainess is defined by her status, a status that I currently lacked.

This explanation made sense, and while I was convinced, I wondered how my parents would react. *Goodbye Mom and Dad! Thank you for everything, but please give me up for adoption so I can join one of Japan's most powerful families and become their scapegoat! At least Shizuku will live!* That would definitely convince my family... *Not.*

I would need to come up with a better plan to that. First, I paid a visit to my little sister the very next day.

"What do you mean I'm transferring hospitals?" a very confused Shizuku questioned.

"Like I said, the lady whose handbag I saved belongs to the Sakurazaka Group. When I told her about your situation, she just wanted to help you no matter

what.”

I went on to emphasize the superior care and coverage of all medical expenses at the new facility, hoping to paint a positive picture, but none of it could erase that look of doubt on her face. She just stared at me, eyes squinted and brows furrowed, as if trying to read between the lines of my sanitized version of events.

“Mio, I know I humor you a lot, but even I’m not gonna believe that,” she finally confessed.

I took out my phone. “I thought you might not believe me, so I brought proof.” Bringing up my photos, I opened up a shot of me and Shizuki I took earlier.

Shizuku peered at the image. “Wow, she’s really pretty—but there are a lot of pretty girls out there. How can I be sure she is who you say she is?”

I quickly switched to a browser page I had readied, displaying a search for “Shizuki Sakurazaka.” The top result showed the same girl at a high-end function of some kind.

Shizuku studied the new photo for a second before typing away on her laptop. “Show me that last photo again,” she demanded, now sounding more eager.

“This one?” I asked, bringing up the photo of me and Shizuki again.

She squinted at my phone, then down at her laptop, then back to my phone. This went on for about ten cycles before finally she muttered, “Holy cow, that really *is* her.” She sat back, absorbing the reality of the situation. “So, I’m actually changing hospitals?” she murmured, more to herself than to me.

“Yeah, like I said the first time,” I replied, a little exasperated. Then, smiling warmly at her, I added, “But isn’t that great? It’s like a Christmas miracle. You’re going to get the best care now, Shizuku.”

And with that, the matter of transferring Shizuku to a superior hospital was settled and closed. However, the other, more profound part of the agreement—my departure from our family to join another as the story’s antagonist—I kept close to my chest. My reasoning for this secrecy was simple: I didn’t want

Shizuku to misunderstand.

The whole reason I started working my part-time job was to afford Shizuku the privacy of her own hospital room. At only fourteen, the thought of her sharing space with strangers, under the constant bustle of hospital staff, seemed unfair. Our national health insurance covered most of the treatment costs, but expenses for a private room had to be paid out of pocket—a several hundred thousand yen per month privilege. And with the long-term nature of Shizuku's condition, the cumulative cost had to be envisioned in terms of years, not weeks or months. There was no arguing against cold, hard math, and our parents' incomes alone were not able to cover these costs.

Shizuku was a clever girl, perhaps too clever for her own good. She likely understood the financial burden early on and never broached the subject of a private room. Convincing her to accept it was a task in itself, one that led me to take up the waitress job. She never once looked happy as I left for work, just guilty, as if I were obligated or forcing myself to do this, when the truth was, I simply wanted to. If this was her reaction to a simple part-time gig, how would she respond to the knowledge of the immense sacrifice I was about to make?

It was then that I decided to keep the full extent of my agreement with Shizuki under wraps. The part about me getting adopted and becoming a villainess, I'd keep a secret for as long as I could. Plus, the promise of a new cure in three years, at least for a little while.

Drawing myself out of my thoughts, I looked at Shizuku again. Her expression as she absorbed the news of her impending hospital transfer was anything but straightforward. There was a flicker of hope at the prospect of enhanced care in the new facility, a dash of disbelief at her sudden stroke of luck—and a sprinkle of suspicion that her sister was making unseen sacrifices for her sake. I wouldn't put it past her to suspect I was paying some sort of price for this arrangement, but I doubted she could fathom the extent of the deal I had struck—the idea of her sister being adopted and becoming a “villainess” was surely beyond her wildest imaginings.

I averted my eyes. This was how things had to be. What Shizuku didn't know couldn't hurt her—or so I reassured myself.

I spoke again, wanting to confirm that she was on board with the plan. “The transfer’s set for next Monday. You’ll get everything ready beforehand...right?” My voice faltered as my attention drifted over to Shizuku again—there were tears in her eyes.

“Thank you, Mio, thank you so much. I’ll never forget what you did for me—not in this life or the next.”

“Right,” I managed to respond after a beat. “Well, I should get going. Don’t forget to pack.” With that, I turned and left the room, my steps quickening as I moved down the corridor. Once I was certain I was out of Shizuku’s hearing range, my pent-up frustration found release as I slammed my fist against the wall.

In this life or the next... Shizuku’s phrasing echoed hauntingly in my mind. Her acceptance of what she perceived as a limited lifespan was more than I could endure. She didn’t yet know the lengths I was going to in order to save her—that her seemingly resigned acceptance of fate was something I refused to allow.

Shizuku, your older sister isn’t going to let you die. Not while I have anything to say about it.

INSTEAD of going to my parents after leaving the hospital, I headed to my soon-to-be former job. I no longer needed to work; Shizuki had promised to arrange temporary help for Kaede until a permanent replacement could be found, but I had requested to work one final shift, motivated by a mix of sentimentality and the special occasion—it was Christmas day, after all.

After changing into my uniform, I stepped out onto the café floor where I saw Kaede by the register closing out a check. Picking up a tray, I went to clear the recently vacated table. I bussed the dishes, wiped the surfaces down, and was in the middle of checking for dropped trash or forgotten items when I noticed a white scarf draped over a chairback. Seizing it, I hurried over to Kaede.

“Kaede, I think the customer you just closed out forgot this,” I announced, holding out the scarf.

“Oof, they just left. You can just put it in the lost and found for now,” she answered.

“Can you tell me what they looked like?” I pressed.

On any other day, I would’ve been more than happy to stick the scarf in the lost and found and make it the owner’s problem, but this was my last day; I wanted to leave no loose ends. Fortunately, Kaede provided a distinctive description of the scarf’s owner.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, excusing myself as I dashed out of the café, scarf in hand. It didn’t take long to spot a young girl a bit away from the café entrance who matched Kaede’s description. She seemed about Shizuku’s age, delicate and endearing. “Excuse me,” I called out, approaching her cautiously.

“What do you want?”

The response to my approach came not from the young girl, but from a somewhat older boy beside her. He stepped protectively in front of her, his expression guarded, almost defensive. Both of them were beautiful people, looking like they were whisked straight from a movie set.

“Hi, I’m from the café you just visited. It seems this young lady left her scarf behind. I wanted to return it,” I explained, holding out the scarf.

“Hm. Ruri?” the boy replied, turning to the girl.

Her name is Ruri, then. Ruri glanced down, noticed something amiss and gasped. *And that is indeed her scarf.* I stepped forward and carefully draped the scarf around her neck. Taking a peek at her face as I pulled away, I caught the slightest hint of a blush.



“Try not to lose it again, okay?” I expressed with a playful smile.

She returned a bashful one. “I won’t. Thank you so much for bringing it back to me.”

On closer inspection, her blush seemed...unusual. But before I could dwell on it, I was rudely interrupted. “What do you think you’re doing?” the boy challenged, jerking my arm away.

“I was just returning her scarf,” I replied, taken aback by his reaction.

Ruri then looked up at him, disapproval forming on her lips. “Are you really hitting on a girl in front of your own little sister?” she chided.

Oh, they were siblings.

His stern glare on me instantly wavered, replaced by a hint of chagrin. “No, I was just...” He swallowed whatever he was about to say. “I apologize. That was uncalled for. Thank you for going out of your way. That scarf is very special to Ruri; she would’ve been devastated if she lost it.”

I flashed him my best customer-service smile. “No problem at all. I’m just glad I caught you two in time.” My concern turned back to Ruri, still concerned about the earlier observation. As I suspected, her reddened cheeks did not seem like they were from embarrassment. “I don’t mean to be a busybody, but I think your sister might have a fever,” I pointed out cautiously.

“What?” His expression transitioned from surprise to concern in an instant. Quickly, he placed his hand on Ruri’s forehead, comparing her temperature against his own before furrowing his brow in worry. “We’re going home right now, Ruri.”

“It’s just a little fever. I’m fine,” she pleaded.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” he responded firmly before in one, fluid motion, scooping Ruri into his arms.

Wow, a real-life princess carry... I couldn’t help but be impressed. He couldn’t have been much older than I was, yet he picked her up like she was lighter than a feather. His dedication to his sister was evident and admirable—a trait I felt uniquely qualified to praise.

Watching this endearing sibling interaction, my smile became genuinely warm. The boy then turned to me with gratitude in his eyes. “Thank you for that. My sister doesn’t like to admit it, but her health isn’t the best.” He glanced at my café uniform then at the café itself behind me. “I’ll visit again to return the favor. You have my word.”

Did he intend on coming back here to thank me? If so, I was reluctant to tell him he would never see me in this uniform ever again. “Really, it’s fine. You don’t need to go out of your way.”

“I insist,” he replied sharply. “Acts of kindness must be repaid.” Seizing the final word for himself, he turned and walked away. Ruri was still cradled in his arms, much to her displeasure. Despite her protests of embarrassment and insistence to be put down, he didn’t so much as flinch. I watched them until they disappeared from view before turning around and making my way back to work.

“How’d it go?” Kaede inquired. She was posted outside the café entrance, awaiting my return.

“Okay, I think. She got her scarf back.”

“Fine, fine. Well, it’s your last day. Let’s make it a good one, shall we?”

“Of course, I plan on finishing strong.”

Masking the bittersweetness of the occasion with a touch of determination, I faced down my last day with Kaede and her café. Christmas day meant the department store was abuzz with excited couples and bustling families, and the café was no exception. We were unusually swamped with guests as the tables filled and emptied at a dizzying pace. Kaede was up to her eyes managing the place while I darted about the café floor, attending to an endless stream of tasks and chores. The afternoon slipped by in a blur. Before I knew it, night had settled in, and the rush of customers began to wane. The moment loomed over me—soon, I would be clocking out for the last time ever.

Standing across the counter from Kaede, I took a moment to express my gratitude. Bowing deeply, I said, “Kaede, thank you for taking a chance on this good-for-for-nothing middle schooler. This job meant a lot to me.”

“Thank *you*, Mio,” she resounded with a kind smile. “You’ve been an exceptional employee, and I mean that. Anytime you want to come back, I’ll have a uniform ready and waiting for you.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” I dipped my head again.

But suddenly, Kaede’s brow creased in worry. “And um, I heard from Shannon about what’s going on. You sure you’re not getting in over your head?”

“The offer was too good to pass up,” I answered, trying to sound more assured than I felt. “And, this *was* supposed to be a secret, so...”

“I know, Shannon was *very* explicit about that. I’m not one to make an enemy out of the Sakurazaka Group. I guess I’m just surprised your parents agreed to it.”

I diverted my gaze away.

“You haven’t told them, have you?”

“I have a plan.”

“It better be a good one.”

I nodded, a bittersweet smile crossing my face as I thought of my parents. “My parents are good people. They’ve always put Shizuku’s and my well-being above everything. That’s why they would never willingly put either of us in a difficult position.”

“And giving you up for adoption isn’t a ‘difficult position?’” Kaede prodded, working through the logic in her head.

I shook my head emphatically. If the deal had been a ticket to a hospital bed and nothing more, then maybe I would agree, but this was so much more. This was a chance to save Shizuku’s life. “They’ll come around—I know it. If it’s for me or Shizuku, no sacrifice will be too great.”

Her expression scrunched up even more. “Even if that sacrifice is *you*?”

“They won’t see it that way,” I stated decisively. In fact, my entire gambit hinged on the hope that they wouldn’t.

“All right, just wanted to make sure you thought this through,” Kaede

conceded, her tone softening. “Just know I’m always here to lend an ear if you need. No matter what happens, you’ll always be my cousin.”

Grateful for her support, I bowed deeply to Kaede. Her gentle smile offered a semblance of comfort amid the whirlwind of emotions and decisions that enveloped me. Her reassurance was a reminder that, despite the daunting path I had chosen, I wasn’t entirely alone.

IT was time.

I met up with Shannon on the way home from the café. The legwork was done. Now, the daunting task awaited: convince my parents of Shizuki’s intentions and have them give me up for adoption—without letting them know the part where I become a villainess and die.

Negotiations were going as smoothly as could be.

“Are you out of your mind, Mio?!” my dad’s voice thundered in disbelief.

“How could we possibly agree to that?!” my mom wailed in distress.

They were, I promise.

Their reactions were intense, but not at all unexpected. I steeled myself, understanding that their resistance was rooted in deep love and concern. “But this could save Shizuku’s life,” I countered, my voice steady despite the tumultuous emotions swirling all around.

At the mention of my sister’s name, there was a visible switch in their expressions, a mixture of pain and shock.

I pressed on, undaunted. “I know. She’s not doing well. But there’s hope—a cure is being developed overseas. It could be ready in as little as three years.”

“We’re aware. The doctor spoke to us as well,” Dad interjected, his voice strained. “But who knows how long it could be before Shizuku...” he faltered, his frustration palpable as he bit his lip, unable to finish the thought.

“It could take much longer before Shizuku gets her turn; I know. But with Ms. Shizuki’s help—if I’m adopted by the Sakurazaka family—she can be pushed to the top of the list.”

“But how can you be so...” Dad’s voice broke off, choked with emotion.

Even as his words failed him, I knew of the turmoil swirling in his mind, as I had experienced the same doubts just yesterday. Here, Shannon stepped forward, exactly as we’d discussed beforehand. “Ms. Mio is correct. If you consent to her joining the Sakurazaka family, we guarantee your daughter will access the latest treatments immediately.”

My parents looked at each other, a silent conversation in their eyes. Seizing the moment, Shannon pressed on. “Moreover, we can secure your daughter’s transfer to an exclusive hospital, providing round-the-clock care, seven days a week. And rest assured, this will be at no cost to you.”

Originally the reward for my actions in the handbag incident, this promise was now pivotal to my plan. I needed my parents to believe that everything—the transfer, the care, and the cure—were all contingent on my adoption.

“They’re willing to do all this for us, and all I have to do is take their name,” I implored. Of course that wasn’t all there was to it, but I had to make my parents believe like Shizuki made me believe. Her plan was meticulously crafted, covering every angle. There was a clear path to Shizuku’s survival, and all they had to do was agree. Naturally, I could feel their reluctance. Perhaps the choice presented them was too stark: surrender me for Shizuku’s sake, or keep me and lose her.

The expression on my parents’ faces at that moment would be etched in my memory forever. They looked utterly torn, a blend of hope and despair in their eyes, facing an impossible choice. Shizuku’s life, my adoption—both hung in the balance, an unbearable decision, as what parent could truly claim to favor one child over another?

But I wasn’t just a variable in their equation—I could sway the outcome by reframing the situation.

“I want to help Shizuku,” I declared with all my sincerity. “Please, Mom, Dad, let me do this—for her.”

Instead of them choosing between their daughters, they’d be supporting one daughter’s decision to save the other. In this light, their consent was not just a sacrifice but an act of support for both of us.

An earnest plea from me was something they couldn't easily dismiss. The decision would weigh heavily on them, the sorrow of my departure possibly lingering forever. But this way, Shizuku would be saved.

Tears filled their eyes, and apologies tumbled from their lips as they gave me their blessing. With profound respect, they bowed deeply to Shannon. "Please, take good care of our precious daughters."

And with their consent, my fate was sealed: I would adopt the name Sakurazaka. Things unfolded smoother than anticipated; my parents agreed, and I didn't even need to play the ace up my sleeve.

Next came the erasure of my family history. A mere commoner given a fancy new last name wasn't a very compelling backstory for an otome's transgressor. To that end, I was to be portrayed as the granddaughter of the brother of the former family head. From what I was told, this wasn't a total lie. This brother was a real Sakurazaka who had eloped with a commoner. The family had covered up the scandal, making any investigation into my supposed lineage a dead end. With the existence of my supposed grandparents and parents meticulously painted over, I was positioned as the sole heir in this reconstructed lineage.

It was in this way that my identity transformation went beyond mere paperwork. Shizuki had meticulously crafted an unassailable backstory, grounding how important it was to keep my true origin a secret. I would never again be able to call the two before me Mom or Dad, nor could I openly claim my bond with Shizuku. To say I felt no sadness would be a lie. Yet, this didn't waver my resolve. As I signed the adoption papers, I fully embraced my commitment.

This Christmas would be my last as Mio Sato. The following day marked the beginning of my new life as the noble, yet infamous, Mio Sakurazaka.

Episode 2

ON the day I was reborn as Mio Sakurazaka, I stood at the threshold of the only home I'd ever known, clutching a small tote and nothing else. Slipping into my shoes, I stepped outside to find a limousine idling, Shannon waiting, and, unexpectedly, Mom and Dad. They must have wanted to bid me farewell one last time.

I tried my best to remain detached all of last night and this morning, but the sight of them standing there finally broke something within me. With clenched fists, I mustered a forced smile and approached them, pretending to be fine.

"Hi, uh, you two," I greeted, my voice shaking. They remained silent, their faces softening with understanding. They knew I was struggling not to call them Mom and Dad.

Shannon glided up beside them. "Lady Mio, may I take your luggage to the car?"

"Luggage?" I replied, slightly bewildered. "But this is all I have." I hoisted up my tote bag. Had I made a mistake packing light? I was told clothes, toiletries, and all other essentials—all of a quality befitting that of a scion—would be provided, but perhaps I'd been a little too minimalist in my approach?

As confusion played across my face, Shannon bowed slightly. "Lady Mio, please accept my apologies for any delay. I'll check on our departure preparations. Kindly wait here momentarily." With a respectful nod, she took my tote and strode away.

Watching Shannon's retreating figure, her intention dawned on me. I whispered a silent thank you and turned back to my parents. "Mom, Dad, I love you."

"I love you t—" Dad began, then caught himself before dropping his voice to a whisper. "Is it all right for you to call us that?"

"I think we're okay," I answered playfully. "It's just us here, after all." In this

private moment, I could still be Mio Sato, a small connivance on Shannon's part. "I'll be sure to call. So, try not to miss me too much, okay?"

"Right." Dad smiled. "You're not really leaving us. You'll always be our Mio."

"Mio," Mom began gently. "If things ever become too much, you're always welcome back home."

We embraced tightly, a cocoon of love and mutual understanding. I held onto them so tight, as if trying to commit the sensation to memory.

"Thanks, Mom, Dad. I love you both so much."

MY parents' tearful goodbyes lingered as I climbed into the limousine. Inside, the comfort and expanse of the space made me question if I was really in an automobile. I made myself comfortable on the plush seating and noticed Shannon seated across from me. "We're en route to the Sakurazaka Estate. Caffè latte to start?" she inquired.

A caffè latte? Like the drink? My mind struggled to keep pace with the rapid changes. Sure enough, she handed me a glass of that familiar, fragrant drink of espresso and milk. Beverages served in a moving vehicle—and my favorite one at that—was a level of luxury I wasn't quite used to.

I suppressed a sigh, registering Shannon's already uncannily accurate grasp of my preferences, and sipped the latte. "Thanks. Were you, um, looking out for me earlier?" I asked in an awkward attempt to kick-start the conversation.

"In our world, it's not unusual for someone your age to be separated from their parents. I can somewhat grasp the turmoil you might be feeling, especially with no time to prepare," she replied.

I chuckled awkwardly; she made sure to adjoin her words of comfort with a cruel barb of critique. She was trying to tell me that I was still too naive. To thrive in this ruthless world of titans, to become the villainess I was destined to be, I had to detach myself from my emotions.

Awkward silence was my worst enemy, so I looked for a harmless change in topic. "How long have you been a maid?"

“This is my fifth year. Lady Shizuki recruited me at an event during my undergrad years. I started working for her immediately after graduation.”

“Five years, wow,” I murmured. But that would put her close to thirty, way past the age I pegged her for.

Shannon caught my curious look and continued, “I graduated early.”

“Oh,” I remarked. “Then you must have been quite the honor student. Why did you choose to work for Ms. Shizuki, if you don’t mind me asking? Were you drawn to her in some way?”

“In retrospect, perhaps I was. But at the time, it was the job’s financial prospects that enticed me.”

That had been a slightly, well, *quite*, an unexpected response. I hadn’t considered servitude as a potentially high-paying career. “Do maids make good money?” I wondered aloud.

“Maids for the Sakurazaka family do,” she replied promptly. “But my comment on financial prospects wasn’t about the salary. If that were my only goal, I would’ve pursued my career on Wall Street.”

“Wall Street?” I echoed, the term unfamiliar.

“I had several offers lined up.”

I later learned Wall Street was a street in New York City often touted as the financial capital of the world. To work on Wall Street was to mingle with the most elite financiers in the world.

“So, what made you choose Ms. Shizuki?” I continued in my line of questioning.

“Lady Shizuki was a precocious child, particularly with her almost prophetic grasp of stock market trends. Barely ten at the time, I remember her foresight was quite remarkable.” Shannon breathed in sharply, catching herself. “However, perhaps it’s best to leave the rest of this story for another time.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” I uttered sheepishly, but frankly wasn’t entirely sure which sensitive matter I’d stumbled upon.

“Indulging your curiosities is no issue, milady. But I would caution you to

remember that you are now a Sakurazaka, and I am your servant. It is not fitting for you to speak so meekly or apologetically.”

“Sure, but...” I trailed off. I wasn’t a real lady of wealth; I’d never had servants. Just the notion of treating anyone as a subordinate felt wrong to me. The thought of abandoning everything I knew about respecting others, to treat them as lesser, was a challenge I wasn’t prepared to meet just yet.

Suddenly, Shannon rapped the table between us with her fingertips. “I realize that this is a big adjustment, and there’s certainly no expectation for you to fully embrace your new status right away. But surely, your decision to become a part of the Sakurazaka family wasn’t made lightly, was it?”

Shannon’s words sent a jolt through me; she was right. I had set my sights on becoming the Sakurazaka villainess, and my peers were the future political and financial leaders of the country. How could I, aspiring to such a role, address my own maid with deference?

I took a deep breath, searching for the right response. Then, it came to me. “Of course, Shannon. Just who do you think I am?”

The words were lofty, arrogant, I hated myself just for saying them—perfect, so I thought. Shannon studied me for a moment, opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it.

That must mean my line was satisfactory? I hoped so. Breathing a sigh of relief, I absentmindedly cast my gaze out to the passing scenery outside. Through the tinted window, I was met with a stark contrast to the city streets I was used to. “All these mansions... Is this a wealthy neighborhood?”

“This is no neighborhood, but Sakurazaka-owned land. That is to say, everything you see here belongs to them.”

My breath left me. As I continued to marvel at the endless stretch of mansions with sprawling yards, elaborate gardens, and shimmering pools whipping past outside, I realized my concept of wealth was far too limited. I tried to count on my hands the number of properties but soon lost track when I ran out of digits.

Was all of this *really* owned by the Sakurazakas?

I broke out of my stupor as the car approached a particularly grand mansion. “Is that Ms. Shizuki’s home?” I asked.

Shannon confirmed with a nod. The mansion was larger than my school’s main building, its grounds more expansive than the school itself. I was left speechless by the sheer fact that this was someone’s private residence. The drive from the gate to the front door seemed to take an eternity, giving me time to shift from shock to numb awe.

When we finally stopped, Shannon stepped out first and offered me her hand. A bit bewildered, I hesitated before accepting her help and alighting from the car. Following her lead, we entered through the grand front door, passed the opulent entrance hall, and walked down a corridor. The plush red carpet underfoot was the softest I’d ever experienced, muting our footsteps and enveloping the hallway in an almost eerie silence.

“I can’t imagine living here,” I whispered, more to myself than to Shannon, as we traversed the grand corridor.

“You won’t have to imagine. From today, this will be your home too.”

I managed a subdued “No kidding...” as my mind struggled to grasp the reality of my new life. Shannon was handling all the adoption formalities, and I hadn’t even met my new parents. Yet, here she was, declaring this...hotel lobby my new home, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Lost in these thoughts, we rounded a corner and there she was—Shizuki, engaged in conversation with a young man I didn’t recognize. He was striking, with jet-black hair and eyes to match, exuding a stoic air. His resemblance to Shizuki was uncanny, minus her distinctive golden hair. I wondered if he could be a cousin or some unrelated doppelganger barring that, given that Shizuki was an only child.

The moment we laid eyes on them, Shannon smoothly stepped to the side of the corridor and turned to face the opposite wall, her head bowed low in a deferential posture. I instinctively started to mimic her gesture but then halted. Shannon’s warning in the car echoed in my mind—my demeanor mattered here. If this man was from another powerful family, any misstep could be costly. Though I couldn’t shake the feeling that he and Shizuki were related, I

chose caution.

I straightened up, taking deliberate, confident steps toward them. “Shizuki, sister dearest, I’m home,” I announced with as much authority as I could muster.

She blinked, a hint of surprise in her eyes. “Hmm,” she said, clearly impressed with...something. The young man, however, arched a perplexed brow. “‘Sister dearest?’ Shizuki, who is this?”

Shizuki smiled. “Cousin Kyosuke, allow me to introduce you. This is Mio, my new darling baby sister.”

“Your *new* baby sister?” Kyosuke reiterated.

Shizuki then turned to me. “Mio, meet Kyosuke Sakurazaka, your new cousin.”

It seemed my initial fears had been unwarranted. Had I known he was my cousin, I wouldn’t have had to ham up my introduction as much, but what was done was done. Composing myself, I offered a respectful bow of my head. “Mio Sakurazaka, a pleasure to meet you. I am Ms. Shizuki’s second cousin and her new sister by adoption.”

Now Kyosuke looked downright confused. He scrutinized me, assessing me in silence. Caught in this uncomfortable silence, I searched for words, but thankfully Shizuki intervened. “You remember granduncle, the one who eloped with the commoner? Mio is his granddaughter.”

Kyosuke’s response was brusque. “Yes, I remember. Don’t tell me you picked up some random stray off the street just because she had some Sakurazaka blood running in her veins?”

Harsh, but not at all uncalled for. After all, I was, in essence, an outsider thrust into their world. Yet while I understood his dismissive attitude, Shizuki’s reaction suggested she saw things differently. With hands defiantly on her hips, she playfully yet sternly challenged him, “Is this how you talk about the future of our family?”



My heart skipped a beat. I wanted to clarify the situation, but Kyosuke's incredulous response overtook my thoughts. "This unrefined, undistinguished girl is the future of our family? You're serious, Shizuki?"

"Dead serious."

All remaining hope that Shizuki had been joking now lost, Kyosuke's expression hardened even more. "Just what about her has you so enamored, Shizuki? Or has the success of your little pet project fund finally gone to your head?"

"Perhaps, but since when did you doubt my judgment?" Shizuki countered.

Kyosuke scoffed. "Since when did you become such a fool? Your ability to assess facts and figures might be solid, but I question your grasp on the human element. Try not to be the cause of your own undoing, Cousin."

As Kyosuke arrogantly seized the last word and made to leave, something within me stirred. "Wait," I heard myself voice.

He paused, turning back to face me. "What? Want to defend yourself?"

It wasn't that. He had been truthful, if not polite. But if it wasn't his comment about my background that compelled me to speak up, then what was? It was then that my eyes inadvertently drifted over to Shizuki.

Of course. That was why I stopped him.

"Apologize," I demanded, meeting his eyes squarely.

He scoffed again. "Apologize? For stating the obvious?"

"Not to me—apologize to Shizuki. My origins may be as you say, but she is *not* a fool. She is a kind person who extended her hand to someone in need."

A part of me screamed internally, warning me of the folly of challenging Kyosuke, of making an adversary in the family on my very first day. Yet I persisted, driven by an irrepressible force.

"Apologize," I insisted again, my resolve unwavering.

"And if I refuse?" Kyosuke's gaze hardened, his posture exuding the authority and severity of an emperor reprimanding a defiant servant. The weight of his

potential wrath was not lost on me; I knew all too well that he had the power to turn my life into a nightmare. I felt the hallway grow colder, the air heavier, as if reflecting the gravity of the moment. Fear gripped me, my legs trembled uncontrollably, but I held on as my fingers tightly clutched the fabric of my skirt.

“Please apologize,” I repeated, my voice quivering. “Shizuki is *not* a fool.”

Kyosuke remained silent, only continuing to stare at me before his intense eyes flared, he clutched his stomach and he...doubled over, exploding into... laughter?

My mind stalled, struggling to make sense of this unexpected turn of events. I glanced at Shizuki for some hint of understanding; she only wore a smug smile. “Well?” she asked Kyosuke. “Still questioning my judgment?”

Kyosuke straightened up, his laughter subsiding. “I apologize. I apologize, all right,” he conceded to Shizuki, a hint of amusement still lingering in his voice. “She’s unwise, unaware, reckless beyond belief, but that’s precisely what drew you to her, wasn’t it? I concede—she does have spirit.”

That exchange did little to clear up my confusion. Were these two *not* on bad terms with each other? Had I misunderstood something?

“Mio, was it?” Kyosuke turned to me, his tone now less harsh.

“Um, yes,” I affirmed, still reeling from the turn of events.

“Fond of Shizuki, are you? Won’t tolerate any disrespect against her?”

I gathered my thoughts, replying with newfound confidence. “I am. She reached out to me when I needed it most.”

“I see. In that case, a word of caution. While I do not know what compelled Shizuki to advocate for you, know that while you stand as her sister, every action of yours will reflect upon her.”

“I’m not quite sure I understand,” I admitted.

“Shizuki has vouched for you. Excel, and she gains prestige. Fail, and she is the loser.”

A quiet gasp escaped me. Normal siblings would never be held responsible for each other’s action, but because Shizuki *chose* me to be hers, there existed a

degree of accountability. I couldn't believe I'd failed to consider something so obvious. "I...I apologize," I mumbled.

Kyosuke harrumphed. "Good. Humility is a virtue. Do try not to tarnish Shizuki's reputation. Fail her, and I'll personally ensure your elimination."

With these ominous words, he turned to leave again. I didn't stop him this time. As soon as he was out of sight, my knees buckled, and I slumped against the wall.

"Mio, are you all right?!" Shizuki's voice was laced with concern.

Breathing heavily, I managed a weak smile, "I'm fine. The tension just kind of left me all at once."

She giggled. "Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry," I moaned.

"But really, confronting the Sakurazaka heir apparent so boldly..."

"The Sakurazaka what now?" I blinked in surprise. Each word made sense individually, but together they formed a reality I refused to accept.

"You didn't know?" Shizuki sounded genuinely surprised. "Kyosuke is the son of our current family head."

"How would I know that unless you—!" I began to retort but stopped myself. Of course, everyone here knew this. It was only me, the outsider, who was clueless. A sudden thought struck me, "And you, Shizuki? Who are you?"

Shizuki's response was casual, almost offhand. "Me? Oh, I guess I haven't fully introduced myself. I'm the granddaughter of the former family head. Kyosuke and I are cousins, remember?"

"R-Right..." I stammered, my mind racing. I hadn't considered Shizuki's lineage at all. In fact, I'd thought *she* was the heiress this whole time! "I, um, didn't do something incredibly stupid just now, did I?"

"Well, let's just say if you made an enemy out of Cousin Kyosuke, you would've made an enemy out of the entire family."

Of course. Kyosuke's status was higher. Any misstep on my part could have

reflected disastrously on Shizuki. His warning—what had it been again? *Don't tarnish Shizuki's reputation, or I will end you?*

Suddenly, the hallway began to spin.

“Mio?!”

“Lady Mio?!”

Their voices were the last things I heard before everything went black.



AFTER ensuring Mio's well-being, Shannon returned to Shizuki's room, finding her perusing an economics magazine.

“How's she doing?” Shizuki asked, lifting her eyes up from the page.

“Exhausted by the ordeal, but otherwise fine. She's resting now.”

Shizuki let out a sigh of relief. “That's good to hear. She really had me scared for a moment there.” The thought of Mio's reaction to Kyosuke's identity—and the subsequent loss of consciousness—lingered in her mind. She had anticipated surprise, but not to the extent of fainting. If Shannon hadn't been there to catch her, her head would've met the ground hard, a gruesome injury even with the plush carpeting.

“Well, what do you think?” Shizuki posed to Shannon. A smile flit onto her face as she recalled Mio's intense loyalty, her fearless confrontation with the Sakurazaka heir. Noticing Shannon's hesitance, she added, “Whatever's on your mind, ask away.”

“I was only wondering what it was about Lady Mio that captivated your interest,” Shannon answered demurely.

Shizuki knew Shannon understood more than most. It was Shannon she first recruited half a decade ago, when she came to realize the world's true nature and began her rebellion against fate. Shannon was no stranger to Shizuki's hypothesis of the otome game and the quest to find her own substitute. Yet, the rationale behind Shizuki's choice of Mio, a seemingly average girl, was something she hadn't deciphered.

Shizuki put down her magazine. “Shannon, do you also find Mio unworthy of

the family name?”

Shannon pondered her recent interactions with Mio. Initially, she had deemed Mio’s decision to inform her sister before her parents as thoughtless and rash. But as events unfolded, she realized this decision had been a cornerstone of Mio’s plan. Mio had crafted a deceptive narrative for her parents, framing the adoption instead of the handbag incident, as the condition for Shizuku’s hospital transfer. With Shizuku already on board and looking forward to the new arrangement, Mio had planned to exploit their parents’ guilt. Should they have objected, she was ready to argue that to rob a terminally ill girl of her newfound hope would have been an act of needless cruelty. That had been the “ace up her sleeve”—the one she didn’t have to use.

From Shannon’s standpoint, Mio’s plan had not been the most astute. She herself, or Shizuki, or any zaibatsu-raised child could have devised a more sophisticated scheme. Yet, therein laid Mio’s uniqueness. Unlike those raised in luxury, Mio, an ordinary girl, had spontaneously developed this plan, earning Shannon’s respect for her quick thinking and resourcefulness.

That meager amount of respect, however, did little to offset Shannon’s other reservations. “I simply find it concerning that she confronted the heir without verifying his identity. Such impulsiveness, if indicative of her future behavior, could lead to significant trouble for you.”

There were situations in the real world where pleading ignorance offered no escape. The incident with Kyosuke was a glaring example. Mio’s unawareness of Kyosuke’s identity was irrelevant; any conflict she might have caused would have implicated Shizuki, just as Kyosuke had cautioned.

“Yes, Mio is unpolished,” Shizuki accepted. “And now that she is a Sakurazaka, her lack of a sophisticated upbringing can no longer be an excuse. She’s bound to create her share of trouble.”

“Then you have made a mistake, milady.”

Shizuki waved her hand dismissively. “Not at all. Mio is the right choice.”

“Because of her ‘potential?’”

Shizuki smiled, eyes narrowed in pride. “Tell me, Shannon, why do you think

Kyosuke labeled Mio as unpolished?”

“Because of her inability to observe even basic social courtesies?”

As far as casual greetings in hallways went, Mio’s hadn’t been entirely inappropriate. The issue lay in her self-introduction as a Sakurazaka, which betrayed a level of immaturity unbecoming of her new status. This subtlety, crucial to their interaction, was where Mio had faltered in Kyosuke’s eyes.

“Kyosuke’s displeasure was not unwarranted,” Shizuki admitted. “I hadn’t briefed him about my plans beforehand. But consider this: would his reaction have been the same if Mio hadn’t presented herself as a Sakurazaka?”

“I suppose not. There was nothing wrong with her greeting, per se...”

“Exactly, which leads to my point. What if Mio had revealed her true background, and the person beside me was an outsider?”

“It would’ve jeopardized our entire plan right from the start—I understand that, milady, but know that I...” Shannon tapered off, unsure of how much to divulge.

Shizuki tilted her head. “Oh. Did you say something to her in the car?”

“I only reminded her of her commitment.”

“Did you now?” Shizuki crooned knowingly. “Then you must *really* like her.”

Shannon looked away. “She is indeed likable, but that is irrelevant to her fitting the role.”

“No need to worry about that. Mio is more than suitable for the role.”

“May I ask what evidence you have of that?” Shannon questioned pointedly, her tone more inquisitive than doubtful.

Shizuki understood Shannon’s curiosity intuitively and answered freely. “It was in the way she introduced herself as my sister just now.”

“But that was because—”

“You cautioned her beforehand, yes, I’m well aware. But her decision to present herself as my sister wasn’t entirely due to you.”

“What else could she have possibly considered?”

“Kyosuke’s identity. Despite not knowing him, she sensed he might be a relative. She had to make a decision on the fly—either offend a family member or expose herself to an outsider. She smartly chose the lesser of two risks.”

“She evaluated all of that on the spot?”

“Surprising, isn’t it? The look of relief on her face when I told her Kyosuke’s identity—it was as if she realized her worst fears were unfounded.”

“Not that I question your judgment, milady, but perhaps I am not as quick to trust.”

Shannon, as Shizuki’s retainer, prided herself on her ability to improvise in any situation, a skill honed through rigorous training and experience. Without this training, she recognized that navigating the unpredictable would be a daunting task. Mio, however, had managed to intuitively address a problem she didn’t even know existed prior to that moment. That took talent, Shannon couldn’t help but admit. Mio was like a diamond in the rough, and Shizuki had taken upon herself the task of refining Mio to reveal her true brilliance.

“She is the one to execute my plan. Mio may be unrefined, but she is far from foolish. What lies beneath is unmistakable and indispensable—undeniable strength of will and a compassionate heart.”

As Shizuki reminisced about the moment Mio had boldly stood up for her once again, her face lit up with another smile.



“**HOW** do you feel, milady?”

The gentle inquiry pulled me from the depths of sleep. My eyelids fluttered open, revealing the ornate canopy of a four-poster bed above me. Turning toward the familiar voice, I saw Shannon sitting calmly by my bedside. “Shannon? Where am I? What happened?” I asked, my mind struggling to piece together the events.

“You fainted, milady, upon learning Mr. Kyosuke’s identity,” she informed me softly.

“Kyosuke’s identity... Ah!” The memories rushed back, filling me with a

sudden jolt. I glanced around quickly, but neither Kyosuke nor Shizuki was in sight. It seemed I had been brought to the nearest bedroom to recover. “What happened after I fainted?” I queried hesitantly.

“Nothing of significance. You may rest at ease.”

A wave of relief washed over me—swiftly followed by a tide of regret. In my mind, I replayed the moment I had lost my temper, a rash act in response to thinking Shizuki was being disrespected. But now, with a clearer head, I realized Kyosuke had only been concerned for Shizuki, trying to eliminate the only thing that might cause her harm—me. My impulsive reaction certainly hadn’t helped prove him wrong, and worse, might have even jeopardized Shizuki’s standing.

“Shannon,” I started, my voice breaking the silence. “I have a request.”

A pause lingered in the air before Shannon responded, her tone heavy with suspicion. “Yes?”

“Teach me. Teach me everything I need to know so I don’t cause any more problems for Shizuki.”

I caught a flicker of surprise in Shannon’s eyes, perhaps even respect. During my time as a server, Kaede had instilled in me a few valuable lessons: always recognize your faults, seek help fearlessly, and learn hungrily so that you never repeat the same mistake twice.

“Very well,” Shannon relented finally. “Perhaps you’re not as naive as I thought. I was contemplating how to broach the topic of Lady Shizuki’s assignments for you, but it seems you’ve preempted that.”

“She has assignments for me?” I restated, intrigued.

Nodding, Shannon motioned toward a nearby sofa and coffee table. “Let’s discuss it there.”

Quietly, I slid out of bed, donned the slippers by its side, and joined her on the sofa. Shannon placed a sleek smartphone on the table. “Nice phone,” I remarked, admiring the design. “Is that the latest model? Yours, Shannon?”

“That is your phone, milady.”

“Come again?”

“That is your phone, milady.”

She came again.

“As in, Mio *Sakurazaka’s* phone?” I confirmed, feeling the familiar weight of my own, much simpler phone in my pocket—a gift from my mom.

“Correct. Dual sim, so you can incorporate your current number with ease. I suggest setting up distinct ringtones for each to avoid any confusion.”

Dual sim—how practical. It meant I could manage both Mio Sato and Mio Sakurazaka’s contacts in one device. The thought of juggling two phone plans did pinch my budget-conscious self, but the practicality was undeniable.

“We’ll delve into that later,” Shannon resumed, redirecting my attention. “For now, please open the app.”

The home screen was almost barren, save for one icon marked with the emblem of the Sakurabana Group. I tapped it, revealing a menu reminiscent of an otome game, complete with a cute little chibi character. She was distinctively familiar, with blue-black hair and dark eyes tinged with purple, her expression haughty in a crisp school uniform.

“Doesn’t she look a bit like me?” I joked, amused by the resemblance.

“That’s because it is you,” Shannon responded with a dry tone.

“Really? Then, why is there a mini-me in this app?”

“This app, developed by the Sakurabana Group as per Lady Shizuki’s instructions, mirrors the character screen from the original otome game,” Shannon explained. “May I draw your attention to the statistics panel on the side?”

Pushing past my initial astonishment at Shannon’s apparent knowledge of the otome game theory, I focused on the UI element she indicated. “These stats here?” I asked, pointing to a comprehensive array of figures. They were familiar yet more extensive than typical game stats. At a glance, I spotted stamina, charisma, etiquette, morality, math, Japanese language, cooking, geography, history, fine arts, foreign language, and knowledge. Some, like endurance, even broke down further into substats like running and energy.

As I scrutinized the numbers, a realization dawned on me. “Do these reflect my actual grades?”

“They are placeholder values estimated from your middle school records, but should be fairly accurate nonetheless.”

I couldn’t help but fixate on one particular stat. “My charisma is *this* low?” I felt a twinge of teenage self-consciousness.

“The charisma tab can be expanded for details, but in brief, your fashion sense, or lack thereof, impacts this score. You also cut your own hair and neglect cosmetics. Understandable, given your personal circumstances. Rest assured; improvements will be made.”

“Improvements...will be made?” I repeated, puzzled.

Shannon excused herself, took my phone, and deftly navigated through the app. When she handed it back, I noticed new figures beside my stats. “And whose stats are these?” I asked.

“The higher numbers are the villainess’s initial stats in the game, based on Lady Shizuki’s recollections. The lower ones belong to Ms. Nonoka,” she explained.

I scanned the numbers. Except for morality-based metrics, the original Shizuki’s—the original villainess’s—scores eclipsed mine, particularly in fine arts and foreign languages. As for Nonoka and me, it was a mixed bag; we each had our strengths and weaknesses.

Shannon continued to explain. “In the game, the heroine’s stats, Ms. Nonoka’s in this case, were designed to raise in tandem with the villainess’s. Needless to say, high stats are essential for her to achieve the game’s good ending.”

“Then why not just get *her* a tutor?” I asked. If high stats were all that was needed, why waste time and effort doing all of this with me?

“There existed a mechanic in the game dictating that the heroine’s stats increase faster when there’s a significant gap with the villainess’s. We’re not sure if this applies to our reality, but there is likely an element of motivation there.”

“Never mind,” I muttered. A formidable opponent is a staple in any narrative—a role suited best for none other than the antagonist destined to crash and burn.

“Therefore, we request that you strive to match the villainess’s stats before the entrance examination.”

Shannon’s words took me out. “You want me to match them?”

“Yes,” she replied flatly.

“Before the entrance exam?”

“Correct.”

My apprehension escaped me in a sharp gasp. I didn’t hate studying, but because I devoted so much time to my server job, I was a solid C-plus, B-minus student. The villainess, on the other hand, was an A-minus student at worst. I might’ve had a fighting chance had the stats been purely academic, but with topics like etiquette, charisma, and the fine arts included—especially with the entrance exam barely a month away—Shannon’s request seemed nearly Herculean.

“Do you concede defeat, milady?”

I looked up at Shannon. Her provocative stare sparked something wild inside me, like a flame suddenly roaring to life. This was for Shizuku. It didn’t matter how rocky the road ahead appeared—backtracking was out of the question. “No, just wondering if I’m expected to do all this myself,” I countered nonchalantly. If she dared to question my resolve, then I would question her dedication in turn.

Shannon seemed to like that, her expression sharpening, a raptor locking onto its prey. “Naturally not. We have experts in every field at your disposal. In a mission of this magnitude, nothing is left to chance.”

Caught up in the moment, I couldn’t help but retort, “Then we are on the same page. And to be honest, I doubt I’ll even need the full month.”

My words, meant to be a bold flourish, seemed to echo back to me with a twinge of overconfidence—one I would soon come to regret.

“That’s reassuring to hear,” Shannon responded, her gaze intensifying, a hint of amusement in her tone. “That was merely one of several tasks I planned to discuss today. Had you expressed that it would take all your time, I wonder how we would have proceeded,” she added with feigned concern.

I gulped. “Wait, what?”

Her words unraveled my false bravado. I’d intended to project confidence, but the reality was I had no clue whether I could match the villainess’s stats in time. Surely, she wasn’t serious about adding more to my plate...was she?

Unperturbed by my look of growing panic, Shannon deftly navigated through the phone again. She then thrust the device toward me, revealing an interface resembling an agenda. “Here are the other critical objectives you need to address. Please, take your time to familiarize yourself with them.”

With trembling hands, I took hold of the device. On the screen, three distinct tasks were listed. The first, as we had discussed, was to elevate my stats to rival the villainess’s. But the challenge didn’t end with the entrance exam. The app outlined a series of escalating checkpoints: first semester midterms, finals, and beyond. This path of self-improvement was clearly meant to be ongoing.

The second task was quite unexpected. I was to become the brand ambassador for the Sakurazaka Group’s fashion line—be a model, essentially. This feat relied heavily on my charisma stat. The app detailed a pivotal event in the first semester, where the heroine would emulate the villainess’s style from a fashion magazine, spurring a competitive response. Naturally, the success of this event hinged on my ability to secure the modeling role.

The third task, marked as “NEW,” piqued my curiosity. Titled “Sudden Mission: Gain the Approval of Your New Parents,” it seemed an unusual addition. I tapped for details.

“It appears that Master Kyosuke has already advised Lady Shizuki’s parents they assess your suitability to be their adopted daughter personally,” Shannon clarified.

“H-He sure works fast...” I stammered, recalling how very recently I found myself acquainted with him. To his credit, he’d warned me that he would try to run interference, so perhaps I shouldn’t be so surprised. *Whatever, I had*

anticipated challenges like this. There was no point in dwelling on it; instead, I needed to focus on the way forward.

Given that etiquette and manners were essential for the villainess role, it seemed this new task of gaining parental approval wouldn't differ much from that initial objective. I resolved that by diligently improving my stats, I could simultaneously address this challenge. But then a curious thought struck me: *Why was Kyosuke so invested in Shizuki's welfare?*

"Are Shizuki and Kyosuke close?" I asked Shannon.

"Technically, they're adversaries, considering Lady Shizuki's role as the original villainess and Master Kyosuke's as a love interest. Their interactions may suggest closeness, but Lady Shizuki maintains her distance."

"Technically?" I repeated, the phrasing catching my attention.

"Lady Shizuki and I hold different views on the matter. She expresses caution toward the game's original plot, whereas I'm inclined to suspect the dynamics here might not adhere strictly to that script."

Shannon had a point. Recalling Kyosuke's earlier behavior, it definitely seemed he held some regard for Shizuki, evidenced by his standoffish treatment of me. "Thank you, Shannon. This is all very helpful info."

Shannon nodded, a hint of seriousness in her tone. "I'm glad to assist. Best of luck with your studies. Lady Shizuki has high expectations of you. I can only hope you'll meet them."

FROM that day onward, I dedicated myself to my studies like a soul possessed.

With less than a month to bridge the gap, I faced a daunting task: to match the refined upbringing of those who had enjoyed elite private schooling—starting from my modest public education background.

Frankly, it was an impossible challenge, but impossibilities didn't matter when failure wasn't an option. I dedicated every moment of the winter break and more to this endeavor, supported by the specialists Shizuki had arranged for

me.

My days began with an early morning visit to the gym. Keeping an enviable figure was essential, and I followed my personal trainer's regimen religiously. Post workout, a quick shower and breakfast preceded a grueling schedule with my army of private tutors. Having worked at my part-time job for so long, I had fallen behind more than I realized. Nevertheless, as I didn't hate studying and had a solid foundation, I progressed at a steady pace.

Well, for the more core academic subjects anyway.

Liberal arts, humanities, and other topics were a struggle and a half. It seemed my understanding of the word "humanities" was very different from the way my zaibatsu-raised peers understood it.

Take for example, a simple discussion on current issues. In my mind, current issues referred more to like memorizing the names and dates of important accords, events, and their global impacts—a kind of superficial understanding to appear more worldly. But I was in for a rude awakening the moment the first question came from my tutor's mouth: *Please provide your opinion of the new technology developed by Sakurazaka Heavy Industries last month and a shortlist of industries you think it will affect.*

Like what?

First of all, what did Sakurazaka Heavy Industries even do? What even was this new technology? I couldn't even answer those questions let alone form an opinion on its impact on society at large. Artistic pursuits were a similar deal. My limited piano lessons from childhood did little to prepare me for the depth of knowledge expected in interpreting classical pieces and understanding the nuances of famous artworks. Surprisingly, however, the area that caught me most off-guard was manners and etiquette.

I might have been raised in a lowly home with modest parents, but I had server experience in a customer-facing role, so I had polite speech and mannerisms down pat, I had thought. Oh, how wrong I had been. The manners I learned in the House of Sakurazaka were so very different from the ones I learned in the House of Kaede.

"Lady Mio, your demeanor is unbecoming and unbecoming!" my tutor trilled.

“Sorry!” I stated a bit too loudly.

“It is good you have spirit, but even your most simple responses must mirror your status. Close those gaps between your fingers, and cease fidgeting!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My more subdued response seemed to have pleased her as she gave me a curt nod. “Good. Now, I trust you can demonstrate the proper etiquette?”

“Absolutely. I won’t disappoint you,” I replied earnestly.

“Truly? Is that so?” she hissed, her eyes narrowing on me in suspicion. I hastily gave another “I won’t” for good measure, but it only seemed to provoke her further as a sly, almost evil smile crept onto her lips. “Such confidence you have to assert so easily. But are you ready to face the consequences should you fail to live up to your words?”

“What?” I stammered, taken aback by her sudden change in attitude.

“Surely, a lady of the Sakurazakas wouldn’t make idle claims, would she?” She then cleared her throat, her voice reclaiming its former neutrality. “That is to say, Lady Mio, you wouldn’t engage in such disgraceful behavior now, would you?”

“I...” my voice trailed off, my eyes flitting about.

That unsettling smile fell off her face as fast as it had appeared. “Now, do you see how careless speech can lead to trouble? It’s commendable that you’re enthusiastic, but remember: your words now carry significant weight. Every statement you make will be scrutinized for any sign of weakness.”

“I...understand,” I acquiesced, feeling a mix of embarrassment and resolve.

My days continued along the same fashion. The world of the elite was daunting, yet it was a fear I had to embrace to succeed as the adversary. Each evening, after absorbing all I could from my tutors, I retreated to my room to consolidate my learnings amidst a sea of notes and textbooks.

One such night, engrossed in solving simultaneous equations, my phone interrupted the silence. Recognizing Shizuku’s call, I quickly put her on speaker.

“Hey, Mio, did I catch you at a bad time?” she began.

“No, not at all,” I contended while writing down the next line in my algebraic proof. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing fine. A lot better, actually.”

“Really? That’s good to hear.”

I hadn’t disclosed to Shizuku that I knew about her diagnosis. Revealing that would jeopardize the plan. If she discovered I was aware, she might suspect something amiss with her hospital transfer and refuse it, thinking I was meddling. By keeping silent, I maintained the illusion that I was oblivious, just as she had intended.

Shizuku’s voice, brimming with excitement, brought me back to the present. “Mio, you wouldn’t believe this place, they even do massages! The TV’s also huge, and the AC is on all the time. Honestly, it’s almost better than home,” she gushed.

It was good to hear the transfer didn’t stress her out. “That’s wonderful. I’m really glad.” My pen paused mid-air, a somber thought intruding. “Shizuku, I’m sorry I haven’t been able to visit.” The truth was, I hadn’t seen her since her transfer to the new hospital, excusing it by saying the distance made it impossible before work.

“It’s okay,” Shizuku’s voice reassured me. “This place is so nice; I hardly even miss you.”

“Shizuku...” I responded half-jokingly, recognizing her attempt to sound upbeat for my sake. I knew she felt lonely. With her time being limited, every moment was precious. Yet, here I was, unable to be by her side as much as before. But this sacrifice was necessary; I was doing all this for her. “I’ll visit soon, I promise,” I lied, hoping to offer her some comfort.

“Sure,” came her voice, quieter this time.

Pretending I didn’t hear the sadness in her tone, I wrapped up the call. “Okay, well, I should really go to sleep. Good night, Shizuku.” After that, I called my parents, let them know I was doing fine, and returned to my studies.

I continued working until exhaustion overtook me before collapsing into bed, only to rise the next day and repeat the grueling cycle.

TWO weeks later, on a day like any other, I felt a gentle nudge on my shoulder. “Lady Mio, please use your bed if you need to rest,” Shannon’s voice softly reprimanded.

Startled awake, I realized I had dozed off amidst my sprawled notes. Springing up, I checked the time and groaned. “Crap, thanks for waking me, Shannon.”

Because I’d drifted off to sleep, I lost valuable studying time. Eager to make up for it, I reached for my textbook, but Shannon, with a sigh, closed it. “Shannon?” I queried, puzzled.

“You’re clearly exhausted, milady. This isn’t efficient anymore,” she pointed out.

“But any study is better than none, right?” I argued. I was severely short on time. Any time I had needed to be devoted to studying. Surely, she understood that?

I flipped open my textbook again only to have her steal the whole thing away from me this time. “Lady Shizuki has requested your presence.”

“She’s back?”

“Back and in her room, expecting you.”

“Okay, tell her I’ll be there shortly.” Leaving that message with Shannon, I quickly freshened up. I hadn’t seen Shizuki since that very first day. After getting me settled, she apparently set off to overseas for some business. I anticipated she’d want a progress update, but I wasn’t sure what to report. My progress felt steady, yet agonizingly slow.

“No, stop doubting yourself,” I scolded myself. “You’ve made significant progress in these past two weeks. It’s time to show Shizuki that her faith in you wasn’t misplaced.”

I made my way to Shizuki’s room, steeling myself for the encounter. Pausing outside her door, I took a deep breath and knocked.

“Enter,” Shizuki’s voice called.

Stepping inside, I found her seated on the sofa. Drawing on my recent lessons,

I remained silent, adhering to the rule that the lower-ranked should not speak without being spoken to.

“Mio, how have you been?” she finally asked.

“Ms. Shizuki, I appreciate your asking. I have been doing quite well, thank you. May I hope the same for you?” I replied, careful to keep my tone respectful.

Here it comes, the moment of truth...!

“Three points,” she said flatly.

“Out of a hundred?” My voice withered. *That bad?* I bit down on my lip, trying to keep the frustration, dismay, and embarrassment from spilling out.

“Maintain your poise. I barely even pressured you,” Shizuki admonished.

Flustered, I apologized. When she said three points, I assumed I had already failed and the test was over. *Weren't you just taught to never let your guard down, even for a second? Stupid, me. Stupid!* I chided myself. “Please forgive my lapse,” I tried again. “Would you kindly tell me where I erred?”

“First of all, drop the formalities; we are siblings in our private space. Address me accordingly. Try again.”

“Understood, Lady Shizuki,” I replied.

Shizuki gave a slight frown. “Try ‘sister darling’, why don’t you?”

“I don’t think I’d be quite comfortable with that level of familiarity yet,” I professed.

She stared at me for a second. “All right, suit yourself.”

She didn’t look too pleased. Did she want me to act all chummy around her? No, probably not. “Chummy” and “Lady of the Sakurazaka Group” didn’t belong in the same sentence.

“Moving on. You were stiff, far too stiff,” she continued.

“I apologize— I mean, sorry.”

Shizuki nodded. “It’s good you’re adapting your speech, but that’s not my main concern. Remember how you interacted with customers? You were

eloquent and natural. What happened to that side of you?”

“Well, that was different; it was my job,” I explained.

“Then why not think of this as a job as well?”

Of course, that was it! I’d been so engrossed on changing myself that I forgot I could just don a mask like I had for a whole year dealing with customers; if I could just channel that same energy and pretend to be Nonoka’s opposition, then I had this in the bag! I visualized how Shizuki carried herself, blending it with my image of a villainess I’d cultivated through reading web novels and aha! It came to me.

With a flourish, I brushed a lock of hair from my shoulder with the back of my hand. “How do you do, Lady Shizuki? The past two weeks have treated you well, I hope?”

There was a brief pause. Then, Shizuki burst out laughing.

“Are you trying to upset me?” I asked peevishly.

Shizuki, still chuckling, apologized. “Sorry, it’s just that your transformation was so unexpected. It wasn’t funny, really. Actually, quite impressive”

“If you’re going to say it wasn’t funny, then at least wait until you’re done laughing,” I snapped. She was making fun of me, wasn’t she?

She regained her composure. “But I mean it. Still a tad stiff, but it’s a vast improvement. I had faith you wouldn’t let me down.” She motioned to the sofa across from her. “Please, sit.”

I settled onto the sofa, glancing at Shizuki who now wore a smile. “I’ve been briefed on your progress. Quite the challenge you’ve undertaken, isn’t it?”

I mumbled an apology.

“No need for apologies. I knew you were a work-in-progress when I chose you. What’s important is the effort you’re putting in. Your exhaustion is evident,” she observed, noting the dark circles under my eyes.

A lump formed in my throat. “But if I fail the entrance exam...” I petered. The thought was too heavy. I firmly believed that hard work would always be rewarded, yet I couldn’t shake the fear that it might not be enough. Regardless

of my personal growth, if it didn't lead to passing the exam, Shizuku's fate would remain unchanged.

The praise for my hard work felt hollow. Despite my efforts, passing the exam seemed a distant dream. Two weeks of pushing myself to the limit hadn't bridged the gap. Desperation crept in as I pondered alternative strategies, fearing I might let down Shizuki's trust and, worse, lose Shizuku's chance at a cure.

Lost in my despair, I clenched my eyes shut, only to feel a gentle touch on my cheek. Opening them, I saw Shizuki leaning over the table, one hand perched on it and the other resting on my cheek.

"Lady...Shizuki?" I hesitated, a mix of confusion and caution in my voice.

"I've tasked you with the impossible, and I'm sorry for that. No matter how hard you worked, two weeks is just not enough time," she admitted softly.

Confusion turned to disbelief, then anger. "I... What? Then why would you... Is this all a lie? A cruel game to see a girl's hope crushed? The villainess, the cure for Shizuku—is it all fake?!"

I recoiled, batting her hand away. Shizuki then leaned on her other hand, shaking her head as she sat back down. "Calm, Mio. The story of the villainess and the cure for your sister is real. I wanted to make a point, one that you need to understand," she expressed gently.

"A point I need to understand?" I resounded, still reeling.

"Yes. The missions I assigned you are based on a game, but you shouldn't mistake them for actual game objectives."

"Isn't that obvious?" I replied, somewhat defensively.

"Is it? Then why, all this time, have you been pursuing an unattainable goal without considering to change it?"

"Change the...goal?"

"Your deadline is the day of the entrance exam, and your objective is to be an insurmountable barrier to the heroine. *But how can she tell how insurmountable you are really?*"

“By...comparing our exam scores?” I ventured.

“Those scores are confidential. Somewhat. She could still find out your scores if she wanted to, so you should still aim to achieve the scores outlined, but what about everything else, the topics *not* covered by the exam?”

My eyes widened with realization, the gears in my mind turning. “Fitness... doesn’t matter until the start of the semester so I can put that off. Charisma and the like...I can hand-wave until I actually meet the heroine. And culture... No, I can’t ignore that—there’s the interview, after all.”

Shizuki’s next question caught me off guard. “Would prior knowledge of the interview questions help?”

I blinked in surprise. “Would it... What?”

Immediately, Shizuki took out her phone and made a call. “Hello? Hi, this is Shizuki—Shizuki Sakurazaka. May I speak with the director, please?”

“The director?” I blurted out, only to be met with Shizuki’s finger pressed to her lips, signaling silence. I listened as a voice on the other ended greeted Shizuki—rather obsequiously at that.

“Hello, Director,” Shizuki began smoothly. “I’m calling to discuss making a contribution to your secondary education program. Enrolling? Oh no, not for myself.”

At this point, I harbored a sinking feeling about where this was headed. Shizuki’s next words confirmed my apprehension. “It’s for my sister, actually. She dreams of attending your esteemed institution and aspires to excel there. Naturally, as her supportive sister, I intend to ensure she receives the finest education possible, hence my donation.” Shizuki’s voice then took on a wistful tone. “However, she’s somewhat anxious about the interview process, and... Oh, is that so? Certainly, if it wouldn’t be too inconvenient... Really? That would be tremendous. Thank you so much, Director.”

After ending the call, Shizuki turned to me with a triumphant smile. “The director will send us the interview questions.”

That was my breaking point. “H-How is that not cheating?”

Shizuki feigned surprise. "Cheating? My intention was merely a charitable donation."

"But we're receiving the interview questions in return..."

"Yes, but consider this: past interview questions are everywhere if you know where to look. It's not our fault if the questions we receive just happen to be the ones used this year."

"Yikes..." I couldn't help but whisper. The whole affair felt unsettling and left a sour taste in my mouth.

Noticing my discomfort, Shizuki offered, "You don't have to use the questions if it bothers you. It's your choice."

But could I really afford to cling to my principle when Shizuku's life hung in the balance? "No, I'd like to see the questions when you receive them, please," I found myself saying.

Shizuki raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in her tone. "Oh, but I thought you considered that cheating?"

"No, it's...not," I softly allowed after a pause. "Not when I don't have the luxury of choice. Not until I'm more capable."

I didn't want to rely on underhanded tactics, but this dilemma was solely a result of my own inability. If I rejected Shizuki's help here, it would jeopardize Shizuku's life just to placate my own ego.

Shizuki chuckled lightly. "It seems you've finally realized what's at stake."

My breath caught in my throat. All this time, I'd been telling myself just to push through, ignoring whether I could or could not. But that had just been an excuse, an empty recognition of the difficulties I faced without any genuine effort to address them. Shizuku's life was on the line, and failure wasn't an option. If any aspect of my mission hinted at impossibility, it was my duty to explore every avenue to overcome it. This was real life, not a game, where the boundaries were defined only by my own resourcefulness. That was the lesson Shizuki aimed to impart.

"Thank you. I think I'll do just fine now on the exam," I relayed with newfound

determination.

A sly smile slipped onto Shizuki's face. "I could get you a copy of the exam beforehand as well, you know?"

Is she testing me?

"That won't be necessary," I responded firmly after a moment's contemplation.

Her voice was light and teasing. "And here I was thinking you understood the severity of our challenge."

Now I knew she was testing me. "I've resolved to get my hands dirty—but only as a last resort. With my priorities realigned, I'm confident I can pass the exam on my own merits."

"Good," Shizuki expressed, her smile broadened in satisfaction. "Now, let's address your next task."

"Huh?" I let out in surprise.

"Forgotten already that Cousin Kyosuke spoke to my parents and that they're now eager to meet you? The date for that meeting has been set."

I hadn't forgotten. I'd even anticipated that this meeting would happen before the entrance exam—I just hadn't expected Shizuki to bring it up now, not after all that. This mission wouldn't be one I could wriggle my way out of. If Shizuki's parents branded me unworthy, that was it. Shizuku wouldn't be saved. The thought sent a wave of nervousness through me and my hands trembling slightly at the prospect.

"What if I fail to make a good impression?" I asked.

"Then I suppose that's that. You can't become the villainess."

I knew that already, yet I asked to confirm my suspicion about Shizuki's intentions. Why had she chosen this moment, after such an emotional rollercoaster, to introduce yet another challenge?

"Lady Shizuki," I declared, barely concealing my displeasure. "You enjoy this, don't you? Toying with me like this."

Her reply came with a sharp yet playful edge. “Have you forgotten who I am?”

“Right,” I exhaled, acknowledging her point. She was the original villainess, the standard I was striving to meet. These were not easy shoes to fill, but it was a task I had to undertake.

Grasping the hem of my skirt to still my trembling hands, I faced Shizuki, forcing a smile. “I’ll show your parents just what I’m capable of.”

TO prove my worthiness of the Sakurazaka name, I was set to attend a dinner at a Sakurazaka Group-run hotel, where I would meet my new parents for the first time.

I was in the middle of brushing up on proper etiquette and manners when I was suddenly accosted by Shannon and thrown unceremoniously into a car.

Smoothing out the wrinkles in the clothes I had no time to change into, I asked Shannon where she was taking me.

“The hair salon, then the beautician, followed by our in-house fashion outlet,” she conveyed without missing a beat.

“Right. Gotta look the part,” I muttered half-heartedly. No doubt the restaurant had a dress code—something even someone as unsophisticated as me understood. But then a practical concern struck me. “Wait, I can’t afford any of this.”

Shannon’s response was sharp. “I’ll forget you said that, Lady Mio *Sakurazaka*. This is as good a time as any to remind you that from now on, you’re not to worry about price tags. That’s not how a Sakurazaka behaves.”

“I... I’ll try...”

“And you’re not to stay up late any more until the date of your dinner.”

“Huh?! But I’m already short on time as is!” I protested.

“Yes, you are. Short on time to eliminate those dark circles around your eyes. If you’re aware of a better remedy than eight hours of sleep every night, then please, by all means.”

I conceded, albeit reluctantly.

Maybe I do know a better remedy, I sulked internally. *Maybe I'll just call in a makeup artist to cover them up. How about that?*

And so began my initiation into the world of glitz and glamour. I had always imagined my venture into fashion to be more lighthearted and enjoyable and not so fraught with dire consequences. But as it stood, I wasn't in a position to be choosy.

Perfecting table manners was another pressing task. Practice makes perfect, and that's precisely what I did at every meal. I drilled table etiquette until it became second nature, all while not neglecting my other studies.

With my days busier and my nights more restful than ever, three days zipped by, bringing me to the evening of the dinner. Seated in a chair, surrounded by a bevy of maids led by Shannon, I was asked about what kind of up-do I wanted for the occasion. My hair was washed and treated, my skin radiated a healthy glow, and my nails shimmered with polish. I was adorned in high-end clothes from head to toe.

Shannon's fashion acumen had transformed me into a vision of old money elegance: a vibrant green off-shoulder blouse suspended by glittering gold chains, paired with a rich red cashmere skirt over a garter belt holding up thigh-high stockings. I had surrendered all control of my attire to Shannon, yet she had managed to select an ensemble that was both sophisticated and true to my taste. The result left me speechless.

Completing the ensemble with a cashmere shawl draped over my shoulders and high boots laced up my legs, I stepped into the waiting limousine. Glancing down at my transformed self, I wondered if anyone would see through the facade—a common girl dressed in the trappings of the elite. Unless they were the real deal like Shizuki, it seemed unlikely.

But wait, if Shizuki could see through my facade, why shouldn't her parents too?

I shook off the thought; I couldn't afford any doubts now. As I reassured myself that Shizuki's parents would take a liking to me, we pulled up to the hotel. Stepping out into the crisp winter air, I looked up at the towering edifice.

It was the epitome of class and elegance, a glass tower not of ostentatious wealth but of refined, old-money sophistication. Inside, the son of the previous Sakurazaka head and his wife—in other words, my new parents—were waiting. Neither parent rested on the laurels of their family name. The father was the president of this very hotel, and the mother headed the Sakura-branded clothing line. They seemed larger than life. No wonder they haven't returned home the entire time I'd been there. Pushing those thoughts aside, I entered the hotel to be greeted instantly by balmy, warm, climate-controlled air. Throughout the five steps from the car to the hotel, the shawl had served its purpose and was checked in at reception. After handing Shannon the ticket, I confidently approached the bellman.

"Lady Mio, we've been expecting you," the bellman greeted me. "Please this way. Your parents await on the penthouse floor."

I stepped into a glass-encased elevator, seemingly summoned just for me. It whispered into motion, the gentle pressure of the floor against my soles and the receding view of the city below the only indications of our upward journey.

Ascending swiftly, one hundred plus meters disappeared below me in less than a minute. As it whispered again to a stop, I closed my eyes, pressed a hand against my chest and inhaled deeply. The doors slid open, I opened my eyes, and I stepped out with a semblance of grace.

Guided by the bellman, I reached a secluded VIP room. Arriving ten minutes early, I was surprised to find my new parents already waiting. Standing at the door, heart pounding, I listened as the bellman knocked and announced our presence.

A solemn yet youthful male voice permitted my entrance. "She may enter." The bellman crisply affirmed with a "Yes, sir," and then turned to me. "Your parents are ready for you," he said in a lower voice, offering a slight bow.

Ignoring the panic rising in my chest, I murmured a poised thank-you and forced a smile. *You are Mio Sakurazaka, the villainess*, I chanted to myself. Embracing my role, I steadied my nerves and opened the door.

My new parents didn't stand as they watched me enter. Approaching the table, I met their scrutinizing gazes and executed a well-practiced curtsy,

despite my tenseness. “Mother, Father, it is a privilege to make your acquaintance. My name is Mio, and I have been kindly taken in by Lady Shizuki’s generosity and your welcoming hearts. I eagerly anticipate the times we will share ahead.”

The words, refined and rehearsed with Shannon’s help, came out smoothly, almost without thought. My focus was on my movements: fingers pressed together, back straight, knees bent in a proper curtsy. I kept my new parents squarely in view, noting their extravagant yet tasteful appearance—just like Shizuki. They shared a quick glance and a nod before my father spoke. “Thirty points.”

I almost cried out in despair. I hadn’t even gotten to the hard part yet. Everything I’d done so far had been adhering to strict customs and rehearsed motions, and yet I’d already dropped the ball.

How...?

But I couldn’t let my mask drop like I had when their daughter scored me a tenth of what I’d just received. “I apologize for any shortcomings. My experience in these matters is still developing.” *I’m new, forgive me!* I tried to say in the most diplomatic way I knew how.

The father harrumphed. “Well, Shizuki certainly wasn’t lying.”

The mother nodded. “Quite so. She has indeed discovered a very intriguing young lady, hasn’t she?”

I sensed a shift in the room’s atmosphere, a slight easing of the tension. Their words seemed to carry a hint of approval.

Shizuki’s father’s expression transformed into a warm smile. “Forgive our intimidation. We merely wished to test your resolve a bit.”

Gesturing toward a chair, her mother added with an inviting tone, “You must have many questions. Please, have a seat.”

Though still on guard and internally hesitant, I masked my apprehension as I gracefully took the offered seat. *Please tell me I passed the first hurdle. We haven’t even started eating yet, and my mental fortitude is already dangerously low.* Shaking off these weak thoughts, I refocused, reminding myself of the

purpose behind my efforts.

Shinya Sakurazaka, the father, commanded attention. His hair was dark, as were his eyes, which might lead some to hastily judge his appearance as plain. Yet, there was an understated elegance about him, handsome features that defied simplicity. It was clear to see the source of Shizuki's striking features.

His counterpart, Miyuki Amelia Sakurazaka, was a blonde-haired blue-eyed beauty. To regard her as Shizuki's mother seemed almost a stretch; she looked like she wasn't a day over twenty-five, more like a benevolent, beautiful older sister than a mother.

These two individuals were the ones whose favor I needed to secure. Without them, Shizuku had no future. As I pondered my next move, Miyuki offered a warm smile. "Relax a little, won't you, dear? Let's not stand on ceremony tonight. This dinner is meant to be informal, so feel at ease."

I returned her smile, but internally I was screaming. There it was: that dreaded I-word: "informal." That term was an invitation to be open, to speak one's mind—but it was also a trap.

Consider a business setting, even if the function were to be declared "informal," would you ever see a superior casually serve drinks to their subordinates? Or the reverse, if the superior's cup remained unfilled by their subordinates, would it really bear no consequence? The answer, under the rigid Japanese social hierarchy, was a resounding no.

The true purpose of an "informal" gathering wasn't to abandon hierarchy, but to demonstrate that respect for superiors transcended formalities, that it was rooted in genuine admiration—or so Shannon had taught me.

Though I had never attended an adult social event, formal or otherwise, this logic certainly made sense. Respect borne out of obligation versus respect stemming from genuine regard—who wouldn't prefer the latter? Therefore, "informal" should never be taken at face value. But then, what was my best approach here? To continue showing respect, subtly adjusted for the context?

Caught in my contemplation, I must have paused too long, as Miyuki chuckled softly. "Such a storm of thoughts behind those eyes," she observed, her tone light and teasing.

“Indeed, she seems quite absorbed, doesn’t she?” Shinya added, observing me closely.

I had no idea what they were going on about. But as I remained silent, wrestling with my thoughts, Miyuki spoke again, her tone firmer. “Relax, dear.”

Something about the assertiveness in her tone compelled me to lower my guard. “Understood...” I replied, a hint of uncertainty in my voice.

Miyuki’s giggle was more pronounced this time. “Did you see that, darling? She’s quite perceptive of subtle cues.”

Shinya nodded, a glint of approval in his eye. “She’s inexperienced, yet not naive. Just as Shizuki described. Mio, we’ve seen enough. You pass.”

I could hardly believe my ears. “What?” I let out in disbelief.

“Good for you, Mio dear,” my new mother noted lovingly.

The remaining tension in the room seemed to dissipate. I almost collapsed onto the table from sheer relief but caught myself just in time—the test might be over, but the evening was just beginning.

Miyuki watched my restrained reaction and gave me an acknowledging nod. “Well done. Now, you truly pass.”

Wait. “Now, I truly pass?” Then what, had their first affirmation been a lie? Then was the second affirmation genuine or was this yet another test? In fact, how could I trust anything they say ever again?

Her elegant laugh filled the room as she signaled for the waiter. Soon after, our meal was served.

Was this just the beginning, I wondered, the first test leading into an examination of my table manners? As I sat, unnerved by my own anxiety, Shinya offered a reassuring comment. “Just do your best tonight, Mio. That’s all we expect.”

“I’m not quite sure I follow...” I voiced hesitantly.

He regarded me with understanding. “Mio. As our daughter, you’ll eventually need to master the intricacies befitting someone of our lineage. But not tonight. There is no need to rush.”

Miyuki chimed in. “Your grasp of etiquette still leaves much to be desired, but you should be proud of what you’ve achieved in three short weeks.”

Their gazes then shifted to their phones. In that moment, I realized something. They must have been reviewing the performance forecast Shizuki had prepared with the help of my tutors—a projection of my potential based on my current abilities and rate of improvement. Their approval of me today was rooted not in my present skills, but in my future potential.

“You saved me again, Shizuki,” I whispered to myself. Then, “Thank you,” I professed to my new parents, bowing my head respectfully.

And so began the most significant dinner of my life. It appeared the test was truly over. Any minor lapses in etiquette were met with understanding smiles, and the conversation flowed surprisingly well. They showed a keen interest in my previous life—the life of a commoner, as it were—and bombarded me with questions about my family. The discussion naturally shifted to my sister, in which they praised me for being so devoted to family.

“But imagine our shock when Shizuki approached us with the idea of adopting you,” Shinya revealed, his tone becoming more relaxed, possibly due to the wine. “We initially thought she was out of her mind. It was all so abrupt, you see.”

Feeling a bit awkward, I replied, “I’m sorry. I must’ve caused you both a lot of trouble.”

“Hm? Oh, no trouble at all. It was a surprise, but a welcome one to be sure. Especially now that we understand your qualities. Shizuki has always been indifferent toward her peers, so her request was particularly startling.”

Miyuki, gently touching her cheek in thought, echoed, “Indeed.”

Was it just me, or did it *almost* sound like they were more astonished by the fact that Shizuki made the proposal, rather than the proposal itself? That couldn’t be right, could it? There was no way that adopting a stranger’s child was just another Tuesday for them, right? Or was the gap between the modern aristocracy and the common folk just that large?

Shinya continued, “This might sound like a doting parent’s incessant rambling,

but Shizuki has always been precocious. She found little interest in children her age, claiming they were dull. Friendships were never something she actively sought out.”

Miyuki’s expression softened. “In truth, we were delighted when she brought you into our lives.”

It seemed that both of them harbored hope that Shizuki and I might become friends. A pang of regret struck me. I could never live up to that hope. I was merely a standin, someone to take the fall in Shizuki’s place. Someone like me could never become her friend—not when I knew what was to be my fate.

But, even so...

“I owe Lady Shizuki an unpayable debt. Whatever she asks of me, I will endeavor to meet. And, if I may speak candidly, it is my sincere hope that, in time, we might develop a genuine friendship,” I expressed earnestly.

Shinya responded with a touch of warmth, “That’s a commendable attitude.”

Miyuki, smiling tenderly, added, “Shizuki would be lucky to have you as a friend.” Both of them, touched by my words, dabbed at the corners of their eyes.

THE first encounter with my new parents concluded without incident. As we prepared to part, Shinya produced a small, rectangular card. “Mio, before I forget—here’s a credit card for your personal expenses. The limit is one million yen. Should you need to make any larger purchases, just drop me a line beforehand.”

I nearly choked on my own spit. A high school first year student with a monthly allowance of a million yen? And I only had to “drop him a line” for larger purchases? Meaning they’d be approved if I just asked? I cast a desperate glance at Miyuki for help, silently pleading for some sense of reason.

She seemed to understand my intent, and turned a scrutinizing eye on Shinya. “Darling, considering how diligently she works for her sister—and for our Shizuki—don’t you think one million might be a bit modest for such a conscientious soul?”

Shinya pondered for a moment. “Perhaps you’re right. Maybe two, or even three cards would suffice... Or, maybe a black card would be more appropriate.”

Nope, she didn’t understand me at all!

Hastily, I interjected, “Please, allow me to clarify. One card is already more than generous for my needs. Definitely not a black card. Aren’t those the ones without any spending limit?”

Miyuki chuckled. “Looks like there’s yet another area you need to brush up on, dear. Black cards do have limits, typically in the tens of millions. We wouldn’t dream of entrusting a middle schooler with a card that was truly limitless.”

Tens of millions is plenty limitless! I wanted to quip, but held my tongue. I was a Sakurazaka now. I needed to adjust my expectations. However, she was right that I had much to learn. I didn’t know black cards had credit limits. Though in the tens of millions, that limit was more of a technicality than anything.

“I cannot accept something I haven’t earned,” I appealed firmly. “But at the same time, I understand the importance of keeping up appearances. If it wouldn’t be too presumptuous of me, could I just have the one card for now?”

Miyuki took the card from Shinya and extended it toward me. “Of course. But do try to max it out every month now. I’ll be watching.”

I accepted the card reverently, handling it with both hands before placing it carefully in my purse. In that moment, I felt a subtle shift, a step closer to truly being a part of the Sakurazaka family.

HAVING gained the favor of my adoptive parents, my role as a true daughter of the family was cemented. But really, all that meant was that my actions carried much more weight than before. With this daunting responsibility at the forefront of my mind, I found myself more cautious than ever, constantly looking over my shoulder and second-guessing my every move. Roughly a month after I joined the Sakurazaka household, the day of the entrance exam arrived.

On the morning of the exam, I prepared diligently and made myself

presentable as I slipped into my old middle school uniform. Yet, as I studied my reflection, something seemed...off.

Was it because I haven't worn this uniform since before Christmas? I wasn't sure.

Shannon noticed my perplexed expression. "Is there something on your mind?"

"Nothing. Just, um, does this uniform look odd to you?" I asked.

Her response was thoughtful. "It appears fine. If you're feeling a sense of incongruity, perhaps it stems from the changes within yourself. Over this past month, not only has your appearance transformed, but so has your demeanor."

I tilted my head. "You think so?"

"More importantly, Lady Mio, it's time for you to adopt the appropriate mindset."

"Ah, right, right."

Closing my eyes, I chanted to myself, *You are a lady of the Sakurazaka family*. This mantra was my way of slipping into the role of the villainess—a persona I hadn't quite internalized yet, but as long as I could perform this quick mental switch, treat it like a job, then there wouldn't be a problem.

Opening my eyes, I swept a lock of hair off my shoulder with a newfound grace. "Now then. Onward—to the venue," I declared, my voice encompassed with an air of confidence and a touch of arrogance.

"Very well, milady," Shannon replied crisply.

We moved up to the front door, where Shizuki awaited us by the limousine. Her smile was knowing, almost mischievous. "Mio, you know what I'm about to say, don't you?"

Embracing my persona, I smiled back with equal slyness. "Certainly. I wouldn't dream of besmirching your good name."

"Very well," she said succinctly. "While I doubt you will fail the exam now, remember, to truly stand in the way of the heroine, you must do more than simply not fail."

I nodded. That was my main goal as the villainess—to become the best version of myself, to set a high standard for the female lead to chase after with all her might. “Fear not, dear sister. I will accomplish my goal—of that, I am certain.”

Shizuki’s eyes twinkled, then her expression blossomed into a full smile. “I have no doubt you’ll excel. Now go, Mio—prove that my confidence in you is not misplaced.”

“Of course I will.” Leaving her with the memory of a smile equally elegant, I stepped into the limousine.

The school I aimed to enter was a prestigious private secondary institution in Tokyo, attended by the country’s wealthiest. My mission within its storied halls was to make sure romance blossomed between the heroine and one of three potential love interests, whose names I truthfully hadn’t yet learned. Focusing on the exam had taken precedence; the intricacies of the game’s plot could wait.

Before long, the limousine pulled up to the exam hall. Inside, a cacophony of nervous chatter and speculations about the exam—about the strange young lady in their midst—reached my ears. I shut out the distractions and centered my mind on the task ahead. The proctor entered, giving a brief rundown before distributing the test booklets. As the exam commenced, I poured every lesson from my tutors into my answers, my pen moving steadily across the page.

THE morning portion of the exam concluded smoothly. After a quick self-assessment, I felt confident about passing with colors, if not flying ones. Now, a more daunting challenge loomed: killing an hour at lunch without attracting unwanted attention.

For some reason, I seemed to magnetize curious glances all morning. Honestly, mingling was the last thing I wanted. I’d devoted all my free time this past month cramming for the exam, leaving no time to brush up on my social skills. One brief conversation, and my uncultured, graceless self would come spilling out. During the morning’s brief breaks, burying my nose in notes with a do-not-approach aura worked. Employing that strategy for an entire lunch hour,

however? Highly unlikely.

Deciding to slip away before anyone could come talk to me, I scarfed down my lunch and retreated to the school courtyard. To my relief, it was empty.

“This is definitely not your average school, all right,” I mumbled, admiring my surroundings. This “courtyard” was more like a garden in disguise, a meticulous manicured masterpiece worthy of being a standalone tourist attraction.

As I wandered and took in the scenery, several female voices reached me. Instinctively, I straightened up and chanted my villainess mantra. Clearing another lock of stray hair from my shoulder, I poised myself for the random encounter, but it never came.

Well, if the situation isn't coming to me, I don't need to go looking for it, I told myself. I was about to spin around and leave when a rather disturbing remark caught my ear. “Don't have anything to say for yourself, commoner?”

Bullying? While an exam is ongoing? Who would be so crass? But then I remembered what Shannon had mentioned. The only prerequisites to enroll in this school was money and connections. This meant that the student body could roughly be split into three camps: industrious zaibatsu heirs who studied and applied themselves assiduously to be worthy of their last name, elitist zaibatsu heirs whose entire identity revolved around their lineage, and ordinary kids who earned their place through dedication and hard work. Anyone with half a brain could surmise that the elitist zaibatsu kids would develop a teensy bit of jealousy toward those “common” kids.

Was that what was happening here? A little bit of inter-class tension? My intuition told me yes. Curious, I peeked around the corner, and yep, there it was as clichéd as it could be—one girl cornered against a wall by two others.

I should leave this to a teacher, I decided. But as I turned to go, a branch cracked loudly underfoot.

“Who's there?!” one of the girls called out.

Great. *Well, what would a Sakurazaka do in this situation?* I asked myself. *Run with their tail tucked between their legs, or confront them boldly?* Desperate to prove myself worthy of my name, I made a decision I would later come to

regret.

“All this noise is giving me a headache. Just what is going on here?” Channeling my inner villainess, I stepped out into view, brushing a lock of hair from my shoulder. My other arm crossed over my stomach—the hand nervously gripping the fabric of my uniform. I was sure those two girls were just as scared as me, after all, they’d jumped earlier when they heard me, but as soon as they saw my public-school uniform, the fear slid off their faces. Both of them left the first girl to put the pressure on me.

“I don’t know you,” one sneered. “Playing hero, are you, rando?”

“Such impudence,” the other chimed in mockingly. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you to introduce yourself when addressing others?”

In the world of high finance, it was customary for those of lower status to remain silent unless spoken to. This rule protected those with power and influence from being swarmed by ambitious underlings keen on pushing their most recent gimmick. But in the end, this etiquette was just that, etiquette. It wasn’t always followed, and there were no real consequences for ignoring it.

That being said, these two girls had completely discarded any pretense of politeness with me. Tolerating this treatment would be tantamount to spitting all over the Sakurazaka name. But first, I had to gauge our respective statuses. Misjudging this could lead to another embarrassing moment like my mishap with Kyosuke.

“Oh, dear, where are my manners?” I feigned surprise. “Mio Sakurazaka, a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I apologize, but it appears I have been ill-informed. Would you two wonderful ladies be so kind as to enlighten me with your names?”

This greeting should work. Polite enough to keep me out of trouble on the off chance they were important people, yet subtly menacing in the case they weren’t. As if to say, *Please, tell me which family I shall have the pleasure of crushing today.*

Just as I expected, their faces paled at the mention of Sakurazaka. “A-A lady of the Sakurazaka family! We’re so sorry, we didn’t know,” they stammered, bowing rapidly in a flurry of apologies.

“All is forgiven,” I replied with feigned graciousness. “More importantly, I believe it’s almost time for the afternoon portion of the exam?”

“Q-Quite right! If you’ll excuse us, we forgot we had some last-minute studying to do!” they blurted out, hastily retreating.

There was still plenty of time until the scheduled start, but it seemed like they interpreted the subtext correctly, scattering like cockroaches under the light. Watching them flee, I finally allowed myself a moment of relief. Thank goodness for the sheer intimidation factor of the Sakurazaka name or else I didn’t know what I would’ve done. Things could have gotten messy if they were on higher or equal standing, which was an entirely reasonable fear.

The Sakurazaka zaibatsu was only the third most prestigious in the country. Moreover, my immediate family—Shizuki, my adoptive mother and father, and myself—were part of a branch family. The distinction of main family was reserved for the side of the family who succeeded the leadership from the previous family head. In this case, that was Shinya’s brother. Even before considering my adoptive status, there were plenty of kids who potentially outranked me. Not that all of them would be found in this particular exam venue, but enough to warrant real concern.

“Um, thank you for stepping in.” A quiet, meek voice brought me back to reality.

I’d nearly forgotten the bullied girl was still here. Turning to face her, I slipped back into my role. “And how may I help you?”

Hm?

Something about her seemed familiar—the shimmering black-green eyes, the chestnut hair framing her small, endearing face. She was undeniably cute, but where had I seen her before?

Then my eyes dropped to her uniform, and all was made clear.



“My name is Nonoka Hiragi.”

It's the freaking heroine!!!

Don't tell me I, the villainess, just extended a helping hand to the heroine?!

Okay, wait. Take a deep breath. You are the foe. Your job is to be a thorn in the heroine's side, nudging her toward the love interests. Of course, you two would know each other! No harm done in speeding up your introduction a little.

But you didn't just meet her; you helped her. Now she's going to feel indebted to you.

Crap.

“Um, thank you so much for your help,” Nonoka said timidly. “Those girls approached me, saying this place wasn't for ‘commoners.’ I feared I'd made a mistake coming here, but you've shown me that's not true! I'm really grateful...”

Her smile was absolutely radiant, quintessentially heroine-like. If I'd met her under normal circumstances, I'd have been charmed in a heartbeat. But I couldn't afford that. If I became friends with the protagonist, I would instantly fail to become the villainess. And if I failed to become the foil, I would fail to repay my debt owed to Shizuki, the game would reach its bad ending, and Japan would be plunged into the throes of economic crisis.

And if that happens, Shizuku will die.

I had no choice. I had to turn her against me.

Pompously holding my hands to my hips, I tilted my chin up and away. “Don't get it twisted, I didn't step in for *you*. I just can't stand it when unworthy students act like they belong.”

I peeked at her. *Get the message, girl, get the message! When I said “unworthy students,” I also meant you!*

A frown creased her face. She must have been feeling the pressure from the whirlwind of anxieties and uncertainties that must have plagued her since being adopted into this world of affluence. How did I know? Because I was experiencing the same tumultuous journey. Rejecting a soul so similar to my

own tore at me, but I had no other choice.

With a hardened resolve, I took another step closer. “And you—the most unworthy student of them all. Regardless of your background, your conduct is unbecoming. Call me old-fashioned, but I believe it’s only appropriate to tailor one’s behavior to the setting. You’ve failed, and that’s why they targeted you.”

She stood there, mouth agape, probably shocked by my harshness. Her expression, while endearing, was far from that of a lady of stature.

“That look on your face is exactly what I mean. Utterly baseborn,” I said.

The irony was bitter. I was no different from her, my poise nothing more than a veneer. Yet, here I was, tearing her down like I was that much better than her. The guilt was more than I could bear.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an exam to prepare for,” I declared curtly, turning on my heel to leave—more of an escape than a dignified exit. As I walked away, my facade was intact, but my heart a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. Could I really embrace this role of the villainess? This doubt weighed on me as I faced the afternoon’s challenges.

ASIDE from the hiccup at lunch, the latter portion of the exam also concluded without incident. Waiting for me by the front door when I returned home was Shizuki.

“Welcome back. How did it go?” she inquired, wasting no time on pleasantries.

“The exam itself went fine, I think,” I replied as nonchalantly as I could. *As for everything else...*

“Wonderful,” she remarked. “Hand over your question booklet for grading—you copied down your answers, didn’t you? We also have more to discuss concerning upcoming events, so come see me when you are available.”

I replied with a curt “Sure,” handed her my question booklet, and returned to my room. Letting out an exhausted exhale, I changed out of my school uniform and into the old money-chic outfit Shannon had selected. Or I suppose not chic,

because we were actually old money. The ensemble—a cardigan over an embroidered blouse with a high-waisted skirt over garter-belt stockings—was becoming familiar. Though similar to Shizuki’s style, it was likely subtly tailored to suit my own looks and personality.

After giving myself a final once-over in the mirror, I took a moment to savor a cup of tea Shannon had prepared before heading to Shizuki’s quarters. This time, she was in her study instead of her bedroom. There, amid the quiet grandeur of the room, she sat in an antique chair rapidly assessing my answers against her own conclusions.

“How are you going through them so quickly?” I asked in awe. Shizuki’s speed wasn’t just impressive; it seemed almost instinctual, as if she knew the answers by heart.

“Hm?” she remarked, not glancing up from her work. “Oh, well, this isn’t the first life I’ve lived, remember?”

She sounded a little somber as she said that, and I couldn’t help but wonder about her past life. Curious as I was, though, something told me this wasn’t a topic to broach so casually. In any case, being granted an opportunity to start anew is meaningless unless the individual in question put in work to make the most of it; I had no doubt Shizuki had worked tirelessly to get to where she was now.

She put down her pen and held up the sheets, glancing over them. “You did better than expected. A score worthy of the heroine’s foil, to be sure. It seems pressure brings out the best in you.”

“Really?” I replied, a little too eager. But I couldn’t help myself, her praise was heartening to hear. In the original game, simply hitting the stat requirements might have been enough to clear the mission, but not in real life. I could’ve been off for any reason the day of the exam, and the outcome would’ve ended up very different. Knowing I excelled under pressure was reassuring.

But this was no time for complacency. This had just been the prelude, my entry point. Now, the real challenge as the villainess awaited.

“Lady Shizuki, I’d like to get started studying the subjects I neglected right away,” I asserted with determination.

“That’s what I like to hear,” she responded. “Everything has already been prepared, so you can begin as soon as tonight. But before that, I’d like to brief you a little on the game’s plot and the first event you’ll be facing.”

“Please.” I pulled out my phone and opened the notes app. Shizuki, however, directed me to switch to the game app where she would send the details.

As I opened up the app and reviewed what was written there on the screen, Shizuki began to explain. “First, the game has one main love interest and two side ones. There is a slew of hidden routes as well, but we’ll set those aside for now as they are of no immediate relevance to us.”

On my phone screen, I viewed the profiles of the love interests. The main love interest was Ruki Yukishiro, followed by side love interests Kyosuke Sakurazaka and Riku Tsukinomiya. The zaibatsu hierarchy had the Yukishiro family in first, the Tsukinomiya family in second, and the Sakurazaka family in third. Three love interests, each from one of the “big three” Japanese zaibatsus. These were the key individuals in averting Japan’s economic crisis.

“Does it matter who’s route we choose or is the result all the same?” I asked.

“The successful completion of any route will avoid economic crisis, but for your sister’s sake, we will need to focus on Ruki’s route.”

I acknowledged her words as Ruki’s detailed profile appeared on my screen. He had a sickly younger sister whom he was rather devoted to. Unlocking his route hinged on befriending said sister during the school’s cultural festival.

“The cultural festival’s still some time away,” I pointed out.

“Indeed. Until then, he’s quite the aloof individual.”

“I see. So, we won’t be able to do anything until then.”

“Correct. Though, to reach Ruki’s good ending, all three love interests must be united to support the heroine. Thus, we cannot afford to ignore the other routes either.”

“That...does complicate things.”

It seemed this wasn’t one of those simple dating sims where you could mindlessly raise affection levels with the boy you wanted to date to reach the

happy ending. It was more like a collective effort to stand strong against the looming threat of economic collapse.

“When’s our first major event then?” I questioned.

“The entrance ceremony,” Shizuki replied. “Specifically, at the new student mixer. Sending you the details now.”

With a few quick taps, Shizuki sent more information to my phone. The mission title, “Dance with Riku Tsukinomiya at the New Student Mixer,” popped up. I expanded the details and read through. The mixer at Sosei Academy was a key event in the game where Riku reconnects with Nonoka and asks her to dance. My task was to insert myself into the situation and steal away Riku’s dance. In essence, meddle—as the villainess often does—and make a fool out of Nonoka.

Knowing that I’d have to deliberately hurt such a genuine soul, my heart twinged.

“Having second thoughts, Mio?” Shizuki queried.

“Not at all.” I clenched my fists tightly and nodded.

But no amount of justification could paint my task in a good light. What I had to do was despicable, plain and simple. Even with that recognition, however, I couldn’t back down. I had to cast off mercy, embrace the role of the villainess for Shizuku’s sake.

Reviewing the mission details again, a particular point caught my attention. “It says here they ‘reconnect,’” I read. “They met before?”

“Correct. The two first met during the entrance exam,” Shizuki explained. “He intervened when Nonoka faced harassment from two overbearing students. I didn’t mention it earlier to keep your focus on the exam.”

A jolt ran through me. “Y-You don’t say...”

From the description of the incident, it dawned on me that their first meeting should have been today. Should have, because I’d been there—and Riku had not.

I didn’t... I didn’t screw up the plot already, did I? Uh-oh, what do I do?

Don't you dare tell her, the devil on my shoulder whispered. If you tell her you derailed the storyline this early in the game, she'll can you on the spot and Shizuku will die.

Fair point.

But is that really the right thing to do? the obligatory angel asked. *Shizuki trusted you, that's why she chose you to be her standin. How can you betray that trust with an utter lie?*

Fairer point. Playing the villainess didn't entail forsaking my moral compass.

"The truth is," I began hesitantly. "I *may* have interfered with their meeting today."

I braced myself for Shizuki's reaction, expecting a harsh rebuke.

But to my utter surprise, she replied calmly, "Yes, I'm well aware."

"What?" My voice rose to a squeak.

"You stumbled upon the harassment scene; I know. Unfortunate, but you managed to just about salvage the situation." She flashed me a knowing smile. "I'm not sure I could have said the same had you kept the truth from me."

A shiver ran down my spine.

Shizuki had known. Not only had she known, but she tested me to see if I would confess. If I had chosen to sweep the matter under the rug, would she have thrown me out like yesterday's clutter?

Holy crap that was close.

"Don't make that face," Shizuki's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "I had full faith you'd come clean."

"But if I didn't?"

"But you did, didn't you?"

She wouldn't say. I needed no more proof to realize I'd stood at the edge of a dangerous precipice just now. *Better be careful*, I reminded myself. *You aren't just any villainess—you are Shizuki's villainess.*

Shizuki appeared completely uncaring of my internal turmoil. "Returning to

the topic at hand, your task now is to ensure Nonoka and Riku meet, on top of intervening at the mixer. Check your phone for all the details you'll need."

I glanced at my phone, where a script-like description detailed my next move: *In a crucial moment, as Riku is about to ask Nonoka to dance, the villainess interjects. With calculated intent, she utters, "Choose wisely, Riku, you know what's at stake. Whose hand do you think will benefit you most?" Her words strategically pressure Riku, compelling him to choose her as his dance partner over Nonoka. This manipulation ignites Riku's resentment against the elite and ultimately strengthens his bond with Nonoka, paving the way for their romance.*

"Any questions so far?" Shizuki asked as I finished reading.

"Yes. To what extent can I improvise as the villainess?" I began.

"Given that the plot has already diverged from the original, rigid adherence to the script isn't necessary. Focus on understanding the key elements of each event, ensuring that the heroine's connection with the love interests deepens."

I gave an acknowledgment and quickly noted her advice in my phone. Then, another question occurred to me. "What exactly does 'elite' refer to here? I thought Riku was also from a privileged background?"

"In this context, it refers to the students in the Corporate Legacy Program at Sosei Academy."

"Corporate Legacy Program?" I repeated, the words unfamiliar.

She tapped away at her phone again, and mine lit up with new information. The "NEW" tag appeared next to four new entries: "general student," "scholarship student," "Corporate Legacy student," and "Setsugekka." The first two were self-explanatory, but the last two caught my attention. According to the definitions, Corporate Legacy students were a select group at Sosei Academy who enjoyed extensive privileges on campus, including preferential access to school facilities.

The term Setsugekka was derived from the first Chinese characters that made up the names of the big three zaibatsus—"Setsu" for Yukishiro, "Getsu" for Tsukinomiya, and "Ka" for Sakurazaka—it was also a poetic expression that meant "Snow, Moon, and Flowers." In the context of Sosei Academy,

Setsugekka represented a more selective echelon of Corporate Legacy students who further excelled across specific metrics. These students received even greater privileges than their peers and had access to exclusive facilities on campus.

“Isn’t this rather problematic?” I asked.

“What is?” Shizuki hummed back.

“This.” I gestured emphatically at my phone. “This system. Isn’t this discrimination? It’s like the school is favoring students based on their social class.”

“It’s segmentation, not discrimination. Yes, Setsugekka and Corporate Legacy students receive preferential treatment, but their tuition is an order of magnitude higher, and that is no hyperbole. They quite literally pay for the privilege.”

She had a point. Just as a subscription service could segment their customer base by offering basic and premium subscriptions, I guess there was no rule saying a school couldn’t do the same. But even if it weren’t technically discrimination, it still felt wrong. “Still feels rather elitist if you ask me,” I grumbled.

“It is. And it’s a rather important plot point in the original game,” Shizuki elaborated.

That made sense. In that case, the harassment Nonoka received today was a manifestation of the game’s class conflicts. “Then does this theme underscore all the character dynamics in the game?”

“In a way, I suppose,” Shizuki replied thoughtfully. “Cousin Kyosuke leans neutral, while Riku Tsukinomiya advocates for equality. Ruki Yukishiro and I tend to have similar views on the matter. I’ll send you some more detailed background information; you can look through it when you have time.”

“Okay, sure. But I’m curious; which way do I lean?”

“Elitist to the very end. Which means, of course, we’ll be aiming to have you join Setsugekka.”

A more concerning proclamation hadn't been uttered more casually. "But isn't Setsugekka membership extremely exclusive?"

"Yes. The selection process begins as early as first semester. Heritage, academics, and conduct will all be considered, but the key is to gain the favor of the Board of Trustees."

"The Board decides on membership?"

"They are one factor, albeit a major one. When you have so many of the country's future financial leaders in one school, rarely is the matter so straightforward. For instance, there was a certain Board member who had issues with your adopted status, but I've already taken care of him. As long as you adeptly navigate your new school life, securing a place in Setsugekka shouldn't be a problem."

"Okay, thanks. Wait. 'Took care of him?' With what, cold hard cash?" I meant it as a joke. Partly, anyways. Because, you know, it sounded like a very Shizuki thing to do.

Her response was a stare that mixed surprise with mild offense. "Why, Mio, you should know me better by now."

Her indignation was reassuring in a way. I knew she would never stoop to a level as low as bribery.

"Who still uses legal tender for a monetary exchange in this day and age? I transferred funds to his offshore account, like any civilized person would. And besides, the sum was far too large to be carried off in a hand-to-hand deal."

"...Of course it was."

Should I be surprised at this point? Probably not. But so kicked off the start of my earnest preparation for my first significant mission. I continued my studies with my tutors, catching up on neglected areas.

Days later, I received word that I passed the exam. It should have been a moment of celebration, but my mind was preoccupied. There was little time to relish the success; I was barely making progress toward my ultimate goals—averting an economic crisis and saving my sister.

This was just the beginning of my journey.

THE entrance exam may have been behind me, but my hard work was far from over. I diligently worked on improving my weaker subjects while simultaneously taking dance lessons. Amidst all this, I made sure to keep in touch with my parents and Shizuku.

My parents definitely had their own share of worries, but hearing about my new allowance seemed to at least allay some of them—not before raising some very valid, new concerns, of course.

As for my sister, she never once mentioned my lack of visits again. She seemed to understand the distance being a factor, but I wanted to do something for her nonetheless. To make up for this new gap, I ordered us both shiny new laptops—with my shiny new credit card. When they arrived, I'd deliver it to her so we could video call.

Before I knew it, it was April and the day of the entrance ceremony. Besides the fancy new student mixer, the ceremony was a standard affair, except for the fact that it was Ruki Yukishiro up on the stage, giving his speech as our class representative. Allegedly. I was sat so far from the stage I couldn't make out his face. His presence at the podium confirmed his position as the top of our class, an achievement that was particularly noteworthy given that he had directly transferred from the academy's middle school and had bypassed the entrance exam. Working so hard when he didn't need to truly befits his status as the main love interest. I could only offer my thoughts and prayers to Nonoka. She had her work cut out for her, trying to match someone of his caliber.

And me, because that meant that I *also* had to match his caliber by proxy. *Where are the thoughts and prayers for me?*

The ceremony filled the morning, and as afternoon arrived, the focus shifted to preparing for the mixer. In a private room reserved for zaibatsu students, I slipped into a striking red dress with the back daringly open. I'd been told that this was the dress the villainess wore in the game—modified a little by Shizuki to fit me and my personality. Tonight, my mission was twofold: first, to orchestrate a meeting between Nonoka and Riku; and second, through a

flagrant misuse of power, to make Riku hate my guts, and by extension, the guts of the elite.

I stood at the entrance to the venue, ready to finally start earning my keep. “How do I look?” I asked Shannon.

“Like a villainess,” she answered smartly.

Shannon had slipped into an evening gown, just like me. Despite being a college graduate—from America no less—she’d been enrolled into Sosei Academy as Shizuki’s “personal help.”

How old is she again? Probably better I don’t ask.

Together, we made a striking pair as we entered the mixer. Passing through the front door, we were immediately greeted with the sight of Kyosuke, looking dapper in a white dress suit. Being a year my senior, he was presumably part of the welcoming committee.

Resigning myself to the prospect of more Kyosuke-encounters in the near future, I masked my apprehension with a bland smile, made eye contact, and bobbed a neat curtsy. “Cousin Kyosuke, it’s been some time.” Though still far from that coveted hundred out of hundred score, I could confidently say my mannerisms were a vast improvement compared to our first meeting.

Kyosuke’s response was tinged with a hint of approval. “Finally decided to stop being a complete eyesore, I see?”

“Of course, and I’m just getting started,” I replied smoothly. “I can hardly afford to make any more trouble for Lady Shizuki.”

“Is that so? Then it seems I can leave my reminder for the evening unvoiced.”

“Your reminder, Cousin?”

“To avoid making a scene tonight. For your benefit, as well as Shizuki’s.”

His eyes were locked onto mine, and I returned his gaze unflinchingly. While I wanted to assure him of my good behavior, the reality of my mission tonight cast a shadow of doubt over my ability to remain inconspicuous.

Kyosuke seemed to sense my hesitation, arching a brow. “Just remember: any harm to Shizuki’s reputation, and I’ll waste no time in getting rid of you.”

“Cousin Kyosuke,” I responded, carefully choosing my words. “I fully intend to align with my dear *sister’s* choices.” My reply, while seemingly in agreement, carried a different nuance. It was a subtle difference, but one I hoped he understood—or perhaps didn’t.

He paused, seemingly in contemplation, before unexpectedly extending his arm to me. I stared at it, confused. “Please, allow me to escort you the rest way of the way,” he offered.

No, every second with you is another minute added to my stomachache, so please let me be, is what I wanted to say. But for some reason, “It would be my honor,” was all that came out. Hooking my arm around his, we made our way to the grand hall.

As we proceeded through the glittering, chandelier-illuminated hall, a path seemed to magically appear in front of us. A parting in the crowd of students upon seeing Kyosuke and me—but undoubtedly more so Kyosuke—come through. This was the power of one of the most influential families in all of Japan, a power I would soon have to use for evil. My heart wrenched at the thought.

Yet, I couldn’t let my inner turmoil show. I was the villainess; it was only natural for people to defer to me. Adopting an air of entitlement, I followed Kyosuke, my chest puffed out in feigned confidence.

“Any specific plans for the evening?” Kyosuke inquired casually.

“Plans? Yes, I have plans,” I replied a bit too quickly. Revealing my actual mission was out of the question, but how could I convincingly divert his suspicion?

As I struggled for a plausible cover story, Kyosuke chuckled knowingly. “I gather Shizuki has set something up for you?”

I managed to mask my reaction with feigned ignorance. “Whatever do you mean?”

His smile widened slightly. “A bit of advice—your eyes give away more than you think.” With that, he smoothly released my arm and walked away, without even waiting for a reply.

Noticing which way I was looking? Creepy much?

But at the same time, I was grateful for his subtle hint about my telling habit. Composing myself, I scanned the hall filled with lively chatter and laughter. Just as there were daughters and sons of wealthy financiers exuding a splendor that eclipsed my own, there were also more humble, grounded students. These were undoubtedly the ones who had earned their place through hard work and dedication. It was among this latter group that I needed to look.

Where was she, my Cinderella? She, who had lost her parents in a tragic accident; she, who was brought up in the home of relatives; she, who was then found by her long-lost grandfather and transformed into the belle of the ball. Despite my searching, she remained elusive in the sea of faces.

Then, a gentle tug on my dress. “What is it, Shannon?” I asked.

“Five o’clock, by the tables,” she whispered.

Turning subtly in the indicated direction, I finally spotted her—my heroine. But something about her demeanor was unexpected.

“Lady Mio, she seems to be looking our way,” Shannon observed.

“Don’t be silly. Why would she be doing that?”

“Now it seems that she’s waving at us.”

“Must be a fly or something...”

Shannon’s ice-cold stare bore into my profile.

“I swear I turned her off from me...” I spoke under my breath.

“She’s coming this way—and seems utterly delighted to see you.”

Indeed, there she was, heading right for us with an inexplicable joy pouring off her in waves.

A wave of nausea hit me. Riku was supposed to be the one reconnecting with her, not *me*! Yet, as the plan veered off course already, I reminded myself to stay calm. Adhering strictly to the game’s storyline was ideal, but improvisation was still an option. *Understand the key elements of each event, ensure the female lead’s connection with the love interests deepens!*

The heroine has taken a liking to the villainess, and that was okay—for now. I just had to nudge events back on track as much as possible. Breaking away from Shannon, I stepped forward to greet Nonoka. “Ms. Hiragi, was it? When did we last... Ah, the exam.”

“Wow,” she breathed. “You remembered my name...”

“Certainly, I did.”

But maybe I shouldn't have! Now she's going to get the wrong idea! Whatever, what's done is done. Focus on the conversation ahead.

“I believe I made myself quite clear when we last spoke?”

“You did. But you said those things for my benefit, didn't you?”

So, she'd interpreted my harsh words as veiled encouragement, leading her to refine her manners and etiquette over the ensuing weeks. Heroine-levels of positive thinking.

But now that I observed her more closely, her mannerisms did look more refined than before. A lot more, actually. It seemed that perhaps the title of hardest-working girl of last month wasn't mine to claim.

“Don't think the meager time and effort you put in will truly impress anyone here,” I commented, hoping to shake her confidence a bit.

Her response, however, was filled with determination. “I wouldn't dream of it. That's why I'm going to work hard and follow your example!”

She was resilient, adaptable—and totally taken with me. But if this meant that she'd pursue me as part of her journey, then mission accomplished? *Maybe?*

With that out of the way, the next step was to facilitate her meeting with Riku and then outmaneuver her for the dance, thereby stoking Riku's flames of resentment toward the ruling class. At that moment, a boy approached. He had black hair that caught hints of green under the light. Shannon leaned in and whispered, “Riku Tsukinomiya, milady.”

It took a second for that to sink in. Despite having seen his pictures, I hadn't immediately recognized him—he looked much more...striking in person. Shaking off my admiration, I recalled his background: Riku Tsukinomiya was a

member of a branch family of the Tsukinomiya family, leaders of Japan's second largest zaibatsu, as well as heir apparent to the Group's prominent electronics division.

His appearance was unexpected—was it a push from the game's storyline, compelling him to be here, or something else? Regardless, this was my chance to realign the story. I readied myself for the task at hand, aiming to steer the evening back to its intended course.

As he drew closer, I recalled more of his bio. To the average person, Riku might have appeared as an affluent and privileged heir, but within his own social circle, he was at the bottom of the pecking order. Having witnessed firsthand the way his relatives abused their influence during his upbringing, he developed a strong disdain for the elite. This experience motivated his decision to attend Sosei Academy as a general student, seeking to distance himself from his zaibatsu roots. This placed him perfectly at odds with a character like mine. By flaunting my status in front of the heroine, I expected Riku to intercede, thus sparking their connection, the perfect way for me to align their paths.

Riku stopped right in front of us. "Evening, ladies. The name's Riku, Riku Tsukinomiya." His gaze then shifted to me. "*You*. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

What? A whimper threatened to escape me, but I held it back with all my might. *He wanted to meet me? Not Nonoka? Why?!*

Fighting to ignore the sinking feeling in my chest, I mustered a bland smile. "Have we met before?"

"Not properly," he replied, his gaze shifting between me and Nonoka. "However, your presence—and hers—was quite memorable at the entrance examination."

My breath caught in my throat. There could only have been one occasion he was talking about—the singular time Nonoka and I had crossed paths.

Riku continued, "Don't worry, I know you weren't with those other two that day. I only wanted to commend you for your actions. It's heartening to see someone stand so resolutely against the misconduct of the elite. I merely thought that perhaps we could get to know each other better?"

It would've been preferable if you had misunderstood! I screamed in my mind. Why couldn't he have just mistaken me for one of Nonoka's tormentors? That would have been easier to handle than this...nightmare!



Riku turned to Nonoka. “I apologize, I don’t mean to brush you aside. What may I call you?”

“I’m Nonoka Hiragi, pleased to meet you.”

“Enchanté, Ms. Nonoka. Riku Tsukinomiya, at your service. And as for you,” he continued, turning back to me, “might I have the honor of knowing your name as well?”

I hesitated before answering, an error on my part. In that moment of silence, the opportunity for me to act was snatched away. “This is the wonderful Ms. Mio Sakurazaka. She gave me some invaluable advice that day,” Nonoka offered instead.

Apparently now I was “the *wonderful* Ms. Mio Sakurazaka.” A premodifier I most certainly did not need! Also, I found myself being swiftly drawn into their circle thanks to Nonoka’s protagonist-levels of sociability!

But I could still turn the tables. We had only just met. I could easily betray Nonoka’s trust and disillusion Riku by invoking my family name and saying something blatantly elitist right now. “Yes, that’s right. I’m Mio, a *Sakurazaka* —”

“Ah, so you were a young lady of the Sakurazaka family,” a new voice interrupted me from behind.

Now, what is it?! I turned around, ready to give this newcomer a piece of my mind when suddenly stood before me was the young man from Plaza Sakurabana—the one who had whisked away his sister with such care on that fateful Christmas day.

As I stood there, mind struggling to process the situation, Shannon’s whisper broke through. “That is Ruki Yukishiro. You two are acquainted?” Her voice carried the slightest hint of disbelief.

My mind went blank. This was Ruki Yukishiro, the same guy who needed to end up with the heroine? The same fiercely overprotective older sibling who showed no interest in anyone unless they won the favor of his sickly younger sister?

If so, then... *Why was he here? Why was he interacting with me?*

“Surprised to see me?” Ruki asked smoothly. “Why, I distinctly remember saying I’d return the favor the next time I saw you. By the way, my sister sends her regards. She hasn’t stopped talking about the kind young lady who returned her scarf.”

A sound, somewhere between a gasp and a choke, betrayed my composure. The puzzle pieces began to align in a most astonishing picture. Main love interest Ruki Yukishiro was utterly devoted to his sickly younger sister—a sister that wouldn’t stop talking about the kind lady who returned her scarf?

Ruri? The sickly younger sister was Ruri?! You have got to be kidding me.

But Ruki, all he did was stick out a hand my way. “In light of our reunion, may I have the distinct honor of this dance?”

This was wrong. All wrong. In fact, that line, laden with an invitation to an intimate waltz, was supposed to be Riku’s line to Nonoka, so what was Ruki doing saying it to me?!

I squeaked again, now utterly petrified. To my further astonishment, Riku stepped in between me and Ruki. “I’m sorry, but is this really the time? We were in the middle of something.”

“That’s right. Ms. Sakurazaka is currently talking to us!” Nonoka chimed in so valiantly in my defense.

No! This was where Riku was supposed to stand out in front of Nonoka to protect her, not me! I was supposed to be the instigator, not the instiga-tee!

Ruki, however, retreated with a grace that was almost disarming. “Of course, my apologies for intruding. I simply wanted to convey my thanks. I do owe Ms. Mio a debt of gratitude, after all.”

“A debt of gratitude?” Riku’s voice sharpened with suspicion.

“Indeed,” Ruki affirmed. “Ms. Mio’s kindness shown to my sister and myself is not something I take lightly. I promised I’d return the favor the next time we met.”

The gazes of both Riku and Nonoka turned to me, as if seeking corroboration

of Ruki's story. I mean, nothing he said had been false, but I never thought we'd actually meet again. *Think, Mio, think. What should you answer here? How could you best get the story back on track?*

But in that moment of silent hesitation, the narrative slipped further from my grasp. This silence, this delay in responding, I would later come to recognize as my greatest regret.

Ruki stepped in to speak in my place. "As heir to the Yukishiro zaibatsu, I hold a profound sense of responsibility to honor my commitments. This principle, I am sure, is not lost on even the most junior members of the Tsukinomiya family?"

In other words, *I, the heir apparent of zaibatsu number one, wish to settle a debt, so who are you, insignificant lout of zaibatsu number two, to stop me?*

Instantly, Riku's eyes narrowed. "So, you use your position as a cudgel, compelling others to bend to your will? Is that how the Yukishiro heir does things?"

"You may interpret my actions however you see fit," Ruki shot back nonchalantly. "I only seek to reciprocate the kindness I have been shown."

Riku scoffed. "I thought you were better than that, but it seems I was mistaken."

There it was, the unveiling of Riku's disdain for the privileged class. *Mission accomplished? Maybe? Just kidding.* Shizuki would be seething if I considered this a success.

On a serious note, the scene before me was entirely messed up, scripts rewritten, roles interchanged. The situation looked grim—impossible even. A part of me wanted to give up, to abandon this convoluted game. Yet, resignation was not an option—not when Shizuku's future hung in the balance.

I had to embody the dignity of the Sakurazaka lineage; losing my poise now would be tantamount to disgrace. *Calm down, Mio, breathe and think. There must be a way to navigate this labyrinth—a path where I can be the daunting obstacle for the heroine; fan the flames of Riku's resentment; and strengthen the ties between Riku, Ruki, and Nonoka—all at the same time.*

There had to be a solution.

There just had to...!

Episode 3

THINGS couldn't have been worse for me, the villainess.

I had been invited to dance with the main love interest, the one who was supposed to remain aloof during the game's early stages.

I was under the protection of Nonoka and Riku, the very duo I was meant to confront.

And above all else, the very trio that was destined to unite against me, I was watching fracture before my eyes.

If I'd been your average reincarnated villainess, reborn in this body with my sole purpose being to evade doom, then maybe I would've happily accepted this twist of fate. We could have dismissed our predicament with laughter, shared kindness, forged friendships, and relished our high school days.

That would've been a fun way forward; unfortunately, it wasn't mine to walk. I wasn't some random girl who found themselves in the world of an otome game. I was someone who chose to become the villainess, someone who chose to meet my doom—*wanted* to meet my doom. Because without it, my sister's life hung in the balance.

I hoped for nothing more than for these three to unite, denounce me, use me as a stepping stone on the way to their own happily ever after, but at this current juncture, that hope was as good as an idle daydream. Currently, they were engaged in a quarrel that threatened to sever their relations for good—all because of me. The unfolding plotline couldn't have been more different from the original game; almost as if I was the heroine, and Ruki the villainess.

This was not good. It was not the path to saving my sister. I needed a miraculous turnaround, a way to reset the narrative—as if such a convenient solution existed in real life!

Aligning with Ruki would block off the Ruki route from the heroine. Joining forces with Riku and Nonoka, on the other hand, would make us allies, veering

us away from the intended confrontation. But of course, the most glaring issue with picking sides was that I was *picking sides*—between the three people that were supposed to stand united!

To be frank, I'd already lost. I lost the moment this predicament arose. Even still, surrender was not an option. As the villainess, I had to act—by any means necessary—to save Shizuku. Time was not a luxury I possessed, nor could I afford to be scrupulous about my methods.

Gradually, I found my calm. Although I couldn't leap across this vast chasm in a single bound, I could take small, deliberate steps to bridge it. Tackling everything at once was an impossible expectation; of course I'd felt overwhelmed. But then the question came: in which direction do I step first?

The worse outcome here would be for Riku and Nonoka to turn against Ruki. Even with heroine plot armor, I was sure Nonoka would struggle against the heir to Japan's mightiest conglomerate. My priority was to keep her aspirations intact, to prevent her dreams from being shattered at the outset.

With my goal set and my mind clear, I interrupted their intense standoff. I offered Riku and Nonoka a brief, icy smile, then swiftly turned away and extended my hand toward Ruki.

Catching my intention, he elegantly held mine in his. "Shall we dance, milady?" he asked, to which I responded affirmatively without any hint of doubt.

"Is that what you really want?" Riku's voice echoed from behind.

"Ms. Sakurazaka..." Nonoka added, her tone tinged with disbelief.

Clutching the fabric of my dress, I glanced over my shoulder with poise. "Why, naturally. Take the hand of the Yukishiro family's future head or throw my lot in with you two? The choice is obvious, isn't it?"

The choice really was so obvious.

If aligning with either side meant deviating from the intended story, then my only option was to choose neither. To become the antagonist of them all, embracing fully the role of the villainess that was mine.

This is the right choice, I reassured myself. So, smile villainess, smile!

Puffing out my chest with nothing but hot air, I crafted a graceful yet empty smile. “So please, would you two be so kind as to remove yourselves from my sight?”

All three of them reacted, a mix of shock and disbelief. I could hardly blame them. What I had just done was reprehensible in every sense of the word. Riku and Nonoka had courageously offered their support, ready to defy the powerful Yukishiro family for my sake, and how did I repay them? By spitting in the faces of their genuine kindness.

Let them see me as a monster. Because that was what I was.

“I only wanted to help you, Ms. Sakurazaka,” Riku said bleakly.

“And whatever made you think a Sakurazaka required *your* aid?” I retorted sharply. “The Tsukinomiya family dog thinking he could help me... How utterly silly.”

With these scornful words, I turned away from Riku and Nonoka definitively. Facing Ruki, I adopted a coquettish smile. His expression shifted to one of disdain.

Ah, so he was already repulsed by my arrogance, my unbearable demeanor? I hoped he would keep his contempt to himself for the time being. He had invited me to dance; I expected him to honor his commitment. “Now, where were we?” I purred, pulling him gently, coaxing him onto the ballroom floor.

RUKI remained silent as we approached the floor. Upon arrival, I abruptly withdrew my hand. “What’s the matter?” he inquired.

Having already alienated Riku and Nonoka, only Ruki remained. By refusing his invitation to dance, I hoped to reset the story to a neutral state.

“You’ve now seen me for who I am—a contemptible woman who revels in her superiority. While your dedication to honoring our dance is commendable, I must admit a dance rooted in obligation is hardly my cup of tea,” I declared.

Without warning, Ruki seized my arm, drawing me close into his embrace. His

arm found its way around my back as I reeled from the unexpected closeness. His grip shifted, his hand intertwining with mine, the other resting on my waist, initiating the dance.

“What do you think you’re doing? I clearly said we don’t need to dance!” I hissed under my breath.

“Easy tiger,” he murmured back. “People are watching. What do you think they’ll say when they see Ms. Sakurazaka, unable to waltz?”

“Why, you...” I barely had time for anger. Almost instinctively, I fell into step with him, aligning with the music’s rhythm, which he abruptly altered.

He began with a broad, natural spin turn, followed by a turning lock, then another, then a throwaway oversway. Just who did he think he was expecting a high school first-year to keep up with such advanced steps? If I hadn’t been trained by the best, I would’ve tripped about five times by now! *Unbelievable, this guy! He’s enjoying this. He’s enjoying making me sweat, isn’t he?!*

I wanted to yell at him from the top of my lungs, to express my displeasure, but I couldn’t—not when all eyes were on us. Yes, a dance between Yukishiro and Sakurazaka had attracted the attention of the entire hall. A misstep now would not only be a personal embarrassment but a stain on the Sakurazaka name.

There was so much more left for me to consider—pondering Ruki’s interpretation of my earlier actions, planning my next move, and navigating the new plotline. Yet I couldn’t dedicate mental bandwidth to any of them—not when my entire focus was being hijacked by the relentless challenge of this infernal waltz! Even through this maelstrom, I still managed to conjure a strained smile.

“Not bad. You handle yourself better than I thought,” Ruki remarked.

Yeah, because I’m trying my little heart out here! I screamed in the depths of my mind. I wanted nothing more than to let loose and scream every obscenity I was feeling that moment right to his face, but I kept it together, letting only my smile show. “Of course. Just what sort of clumsy, graceless footwork were you expecting?”

“The clumsy, graceless footwork of a former waitress—if my memory serves.”

Huh?

His words caught me off guard, and in that moment of my shock, my foot faltered, misplacing a step. Panic fluttered in my chest as I scrambled to regain the rhythm, but my movements were too hasty, my weight shifting too dramatically, and I lost my balance.

I felt myself teetering dangerously, my back arching toward the cold, hard floor—only to find the reassuring pressure of Ruki’s hand, pushing me back upright. Using his support, I quickly realigned myself, continuing the dance as if nothing had happened. A perfect recovery, yet a lingering question remained—why did he save me? Was his remark not a calculated move to throw me off balance and embarrass me in front of everyone?

“Sorry about that,” he muttered quietly.

“For what?” I countered skeptically.

“For putting you in that uncomfortable situation earlier.”

As he guided me through yet another fluid natural spin turn, my mind whirled with the implications of his words. Had his harshness for Riku been a ploy, thinking I was in distress?

Well, it was a plausible theory. Realizing my predicament, had Ruki extended the dance invitation as an escape from Riku and Nonoka, using his influential name when Riku resisted?

That...made much more sense than my initial interpretation. Ruki, after all, was the main love interest, a character meant for Nonoka, not someone to rashly play the villain. My gaze inadvertently softened, meeting his considerate eyes, causing an unanticipated flutter in my heart.

I almost thanked him, but halted. What was I doing feeling any kind of relief? I was the villainess; I wasn’t the one to bond with Ruki, it was supposed to be Riku and Nonoka. Seizing this newfound understanding, I masked my gratitude with defiance. “Do you really expect me to thank you and accept your favor just like that? Lest you forget, I am a Sakurazaka. I don’t need your ‘help.’ Status is my sole pursuit, nothing more.”

“Status. Because you aren’t a natural child of the family?” His smile carried a hint of cunning as he probed the truth of my upbringing.

No, it would be foolishly optimistic to say he merely “probed” it. If Shizuki could uncover my background in mere hours, it was highly likely Ruki, too, knew everything. It was a safe assumption that he might have even visited the café to inquire about me. However, I wasn’t going to make it easy for him to navigate my story.

“Just what could you be talking about, I wonder?” I retorted, feigning ignorance.

“Oh? Then tell me if this rings a bell—a hospitalized sister you so tirelessly worked to provide for.”

He even knew about Shizuku. In other words, about my true origin as a lowly Sato, and not an estranged Sakurazaka heiress. If he chose to reveal this here, in front of everyone, then that would be curtains for me. Yet I found myself utterly calm; something told me he wouldn’t.

He didn’t find out about my origin just now. He must have unearthed it long ago and kept it under wraps. But why? If not to publicly denounce me, then to threaten me?

“What do you want?” I whispered fiercely.

“What do I want? Goodness, do I really come off as that opportunistic? As I said, I’m here to settle a debt. With influential eyes upon us, rumors of your adoptive status are rife. But being seen with me, that should quell the whispers.”

I blinked in surprise, then raised an eyebrow. “You invited me to dance to give me legitimacy?”

“It’s Setsugekka you’re after, isn’t it?”

“Of course, you’d know that as well.”

His depth of knowledge was more extensive than I had anticipated, yet it seemed he wasn’t intent on using it against me.

At least, for now.

There was no denying it, Ruki's endorsement could indeed significantly bolster my bid for Setsugekka membership. His unexpected invitation to dance, initially puzzling, I now recognized as his attempt to give me something of actual value in return for my assistance to him and his sister.

It was just too bad his efforts were wasted on the villainess.

"I appreciate your offer, but it's unnecessary," I declared firmly.

Riku and Nonoka were the ones in need of his favor, not I. Rejecting his aid might bruise his ego, but that was precisely my intention. I held my head high, silently daring him to challenge me.

"I know," he countered disarmingly. "Consider it a backup plan, should your own efforts not suffice."

He knows? He was aware that I didn't need his help? But how? *I* didn't even know that. I'd said that just as a false show of power, a bluff to get him off my back.

What had he misinterpreted? Or worse, what did he know that I didn't?

"And to what are you referring, exactly?" I inquired, masking my surprise.

"No need to play dumb with me," he replied with ease. "It would take quite the fool to underestimate the Yukishiro family's information network. Which you, prized daughter of the Sakurazaka family, are decidedly not. You and I both know this is a trap."

"Why, to receive such high praise from a member of the Yukishiro family..." I crooned back with a sly smile, concealing my growing confusion.

Trap? What trap? I had no clue what he was talking about. But I couldn't let even a whisper of my ignorance show. I never thought the day would come where I would be ensnared in such a convoluted accusation...

AFTER my dance with Ruki, I chose to make an early exit. My first real event—it hardly ended without incident, but at least it ended. Arriving home, I was too drained to even change out of my clothes before diving onto my bed headfirst.

"I'm exhausted," I mumbled into the sheets.

I had braced myself for the demanding role of stepping into Shizuki's shoes as the adversary, but the intensity of the first day had surpassed all my expectations.

Please, please, please, no further commitments for the day, I pleaded silently, only to be promptly interrupted by the harbinger of further commitments: Shannon.

"Lady Shizuki requests your presence in her room, milady."

"Yep," I mumbled back in resigned acceptance.

My first day had been an utter fiasco. I didn't know how to face Shizuki, but I couldn't ignore her summons either. Gathering my composure, I made my way to her room. Upon entering, I found her elegantly reclined on her sofa, casually perusing documents she held in one hand. Even in her loungewear, she was the portrait of elegance, looking more put together than any outfit I'd previously owned.

"So, what happened out there tonight, Mio?"

"I am deeply sorry, Lady Shizuki," I began, offering no excuses, only a head bowed low in contrition.

"Lift your head. What happened was far from ideal, but it's in the past. I'm not looking to place blame; I just want your perspective on the events. Shannon's report can only convey so much."

I murmured an acknowledgment and settled down across from her, straightening up and smoothing my skirt as Shannon floated around, setting down tea and snacks. "Where would you have me start?" I asked.

"Let's start from the beginning. Why did Nonoka approach you at the party?"

I quickly recounted the incident with Nonoka during the entrance exam, where my harsh words, meant as a deterrent, ironically drew her closer to me instead.

"Not at all out of character for the heroine," Shizuki commented, implying Nonoka's tenacity was a trait she carried over from the game. Next, I delved into the reason behind Riku's approach.

“Of course. The moment that egalitarian birdbrain saw you defend Nonoka from those bullies, your fate was sealed. Everything you’ve said so far aligns with expectations, but what confounds me is...”

“How Ruki and I were acquainted?”

“Yes, enlighten me.”

I detailed the encounter when I returned Ruki’s sister’s scarf during my last day as a server, including the incident of her fever and his gratitude upon being informed.

Shizuki’s head lolled back, her gaze drifting to the ceiling in utter exasperation. “That pretty much mirrors the event triggering the Ruki route in the game exactly. No wonder he took an interest in you.”

I reflexively stood up, bowed deeply, and apologized once more. My lack of foresight had made a mess out of Shizuki’s master plan. Ignorance was no excuse. I’d proactively asked Shizuki for one last day on my job. It was my direct interference that led to this current mess.

“Enough with the bowing, sit down,” Shizuki commanded, and I obeyed. “I agreed to let you work one last day. The fault is as much mine as it is yours. An apology is unnecessary, however...” Her eyes narrowed.

“Neither you nor I can afford to call it quits, not even after what’s happened,” I finished for her. Assigning blame was futile. The stakes were too high. Whether it resulted from a mistake on my part, a force of nature, or any other reason, our failure would spell disaster. We needed to persevere, regardless of the obstacles.

Shizuki nodded in agreement. “Precisely. Now, explain your decision to dance with Ruki.”

“I engaged in the dance with Ruki to shift all animosity onto myself,” I explained. “Presenting myself as the antagonist, I aimed to redirect Riku and Nonoka’s focus on me rather than Ruki.”

“I question how much of that is entirely accurate. Shannon mentioned you seemed to thoroughly enjoy dancing with him. Are you sure your decision wasn’t influenced by personal feelings?”

I slammed my hands down on the table between us. “Absolutely not!”

“And yet, such a strong reaction suggests I might be touching upon a hidden truth.”

“No,” I reiterated, regaining my composure. “While I acknowledge Ruki’s remarkable charm as the main love interest, I would never jeopardize my sister’s life for something so frivolous as a high school crush!”

In assuming the role of the villainess, I had forsaken my birth name and left my family behind, all for Shizuku’s sake. Shizuku’s intense gaze met mine, but I held her stare firmly. I needed her to know that I did not become the villainess to go cavorting around with the son of a billionaire.

SHIZUKI was the first to flinch in our staring match. “Very well. I’ll believe you’re being honest. Ruki tends to have a certain effect on people, so I had to confirm I couldn’t count you among the list of casualties. I apologize for questioning your resolve.”

I snapped back to my senses. “N-No, it’s understandable. My actions could easily be misconstrued. Sorry.” My head drooped, weighed down by shame. What was I doing biting the hand that feeds? I should’ve been glad Shizuki didn’t dismiss me on the spot for my incompetence, and here I was mouthing off like I had any leverage.

“Let’s chalk that tense moment up to both of us losing our heads in the spur of the moment and move on,” Shizuki suggested gracefully. “I am curious, though. Why *did* you look so delighted dancing with him? What exactly did you two talk about?”

I recounted to Shizuki how Ruki had discovered my true identity as a Sato and shared my feeling that he harbored no malice toward me, even appearing to assist me by legitimizing my presence through the dance.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “He’s aware you’re not one of us?”

“Yes. He also said something about not underestimating the Yukishiro’s information network, and that he and I both know this is a trap. Do you have any idea what he’s referring to?”

“Yes, I do,” Shizuki hummed knowingly. “I should’ve known better than to underestimate him.”

Her response was just as cryptic as Ruki’s, leaving me feeling increasingly isolated in my ignorance. “Could you possibly elaborate?” I asked politely.

She seemed on the verge of explaining herself, but then abruptly held back. “Not yet. I can’t afford to introduce any more variables into the equation at this moment.”

“I see...” I uttered dejectedly. Not that I was happy with her decision, but I couldn’t question it. After all, she was effectively my boss. “Then would you at least offer me some guidance on my next move? Should I start focusing on getting Ruki and Nonoka closer?”

“Not yet,” she said again. “Nonoka hasn’t encountered Ruri—and besides, her stats are yet insufficient to contend with such a challenge.”

“Her stats?” I echoed.

The Ruri part I could understand, but the concept of applying stats to real-life romantic endeavors seemed...strange. Despite all the work I’d been doing raising my own “stats,” hearing it used in this context was still jarring.

“Not just anyone can become the wife of the head of a major conglomerate,” Shizuki explained.

“Ah, that...that makes sense.” Marrying into the Yukishiro Group no doubt entailed significant responsibilities and social demands, a daunting prospect for someone like Nonoka in her current state.

“Which means we will be sitting back and observing how things play out for a while,” Shizuki continued.

“And after a while?” I asked for even a glimmer of additional clarity, but Shizuki’s reluctance was palpable.

She exhaled deeply. “Mio, I don’t think you’re ready to hear that yet.”

“Please don’t patronize me,” I expressed forcefully but respectfully.

“All right,” she conceded. “Your next event will take place on a field trip after midterms. There, you’ll need to bully Nonoka.”

Bully Nonoka. Just repeating the words mentally sent a sharp pang through my chest. The idea of being so mean to someone so kind gnawed at me, yet I steeled myself. “Understood,” I said quietly.

“Mio...” she began softly.

“I’m fine. I was the one who made you tell me,” I said with a strained firmness, trying to cloak my vulnerability in a veil of resolve.

But she saw right through it, her words slicing through the defenses I had erected. “Mio, listen to me. This isn’t about doubting your dedication or me patronizing you.”

“I know, it’s whatever. So can we please just—”

“If you know, then will you *please* stop trying to pretend like everything is all right?” Her voice lost its cool edge. “If you think I haven’t noticed how hard you’re trying to seem like none of this bothers you, then you really must think me a fool.”

“Lady...Shizuki...?” Words failed me. I had been so consumed with projecting strength that Shizuki’s unexpected recognition of the pain I’d buried left me utterly disarmed and vulnerable.

“Mio,” she emitted softly, each word wrapped in compassion. “I chose you not because I thought you as a soulless automaton, devoid of remorse, nor because I saw you as a fragile spirit, too brittle for the harshness of reality. I chose you for your true strength—the kind that bears the weight of consequences and yet finds the courage to continue.”

“I... Is it really okay for me to feel this guilt?” I asked, my voice quivering with the fragility of newfound understanding.

“Of course it is, darling.” Her smile radiated a warmth that thawed my frozen heart, brimming with understanding and compassion.

The moment her words sank in, the facade I clung to crumbled. Tears, long held back, surged forth, carving wet trails down my cheeks. My hands moved in a futile effort to stem the flow.

“That bad, huh?” I heard her whisper.

“C-Can you believe what I said to her?” I struggled to speak through my tears. “She was nothing but kind, looking up to me, and I...I just...”

Nonoka was innocent. She had been the victim, and I the aggressor. No rationale could erase the fact that, in her eyes, I had become the embodiment of cruelty. Yet, that realization paled in comparison to a more harrowing truth.

“Mio, you don’t have to go through with this. We can stop everything right here.”

“No... No! We are not stopping!”

The most agonizing part lay in my inaction, my conscious choice not to intervene, even as I was acutely aware of the immorality of my actions. Guilt gnawed at me, yet I remained steadfast in my course.

With tears still streaming down my face, I fixed my gaze steadily on Shizuki. “I am the villainess. I won’t flee from the role I’ve embraced, nor the consequences that follow.”

She regarded me for a moment. “Very well. If that is your choice, then stand by it until the very end.” Her gaze softened. “You’re not in the wrong here, Mio. Though you may be the one facing doom, it’s me who will be going to hell,” she said, a self-deprecating smile floating onto her lips.

As I dabbed futilely at my tears, Shizuki extended a handkerchief. “We have some time before the off-campus event. For now, let’s focus on other priorities.”

Taking the handkerchief, I gently blotted my tears. Shizuki tapped away at her phone and soon mine buzzed with a new notification. I opened the app to find four new missions added to my log:

1. Raise your stats to the updated targets.
2. Realign the story.
3. Join Setsugekka.
4. Become a fashion model.

“Quite a few new additions,” I remarked, my tears finally subsiding.

“We’re now past the prologue. The real game begins now. That being said, missions three and four shouldn’t exactly come as a surprise to you.”

“And mission one is just an update to an ongoing task.”

The updated stat targets, though higher, were far more achievable than the original ones. Last time, my struggle had been due to my inadequacy in all areas, but now, having laid the groundwork, I foresaw a smoother path forward. For my first midterms, I just had to rank in the top twentieth percentile, meaning top fifty or higher.

Everything made sense so far, but that all changed when I tapped on the second mission. “Keep an eye on the villainess’s hangers-on?”

“Remember those two you rebuffed the day of the entrance exam? They were supposed to become your underlings.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. Not because I thought the trope was unreasonable in a story like this one, but because Shizuki had omitted this detail previously. I’d assumed it wasn’t relevant due to her silence.

“I feel like you’re withholding more information than you’re sharing...” I grumbled.

“Not withholding, no,” she corrected in a sly tone. “Just timing my reveals judiciously.”

“Right...”

If Shizuki believed this was the best strategy, then I wouldn’t argue, but *would* express my displeasure. Noticing my slight pout, Shizuki offered a knowing smile. “If you’re so eager to be informed, you might want to learn the art of appearing less knowledgeable than you actually are.”

“I don’t need to *appear* less informed,” I retorted dryly. “Not like *I* have any way of studying the original game’s plotline.”

“Then perhaps you should consider giving up?” she challenged playfully, then returned to the matter at hand. “Regarding those girls you rebuked, they technically hail from zaibatsu families, but only just managed to weasel their

way into the Corporate Legacy Program. That's why they attached themselves to the villainess—because they sought her prestige. Well, why they attached themselves to her *originally*, that is"

"And because of the way I handled them, I've altered the storyline once again? What should I do about that?"

That being said, I barely did anything to them, only criticized them for bullying Nonoka. With a little diplomacy and effort, I was sure I could get them on my side again.

"Strictly speaking, they're not essential to the plot," Shizuki noted. "And what worries me is that they aren't the most...predictable lot. Their class, or lack thereof, may lead to unforeseen complications should we associate with them."

"So, I should steer clear of them?"

"For the time being, yes."

I understood: observe them from afar, ensuring they don't instigate any surprises. Then, Shizuki mentioned an adjustment that had to be made given the day's events.

"An adjustment?" I asked.

"Yes, an adjustment. While the present situation is far from ideal, we've only switched tracks in the story, so to speak, and not derailed it completely. In no small part due to your quick thinking. But this means that even I can't predict what comes next. Report anything that seems significant."

"Understood," I acknowledged. Basically, I had a lot of waiting-and-seeing to look forward to.

Shizuki tapped away at her phone, and mine buzzed again. The mission to join Setsugekka updated, revealing that both the student council election and the Setsugekka membership panel were scheduled post-midterms.

"Setsugekka isn't part of the student council?" I asked.

"Think of Setsugekka as high school high society. The majority of Sosei's students attend under the regular program. What would they think, being governed by a clique perceived as superior?"

“Hm. I hadn’t realized the school valued its general admission student body so highly,” I commented, somewhat to myself. Shizuki’s laughter broke the seriousness of our conversation. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Think about it. If Setsugekka represented the interests of the entire student body, what do you think would happen if there was a proposal to democratize the exclusive facilities on campus? Remember what I said earlier: general admission makes up the vast majority of student voices.”

“Democracy triumphs and equality is achieved?” I ventured.

“Yes, but at what cost? Chip away at the privileges of the Corporate Legacy Program, and you chip away at its prestige—its value. And should that group of high-paying students dwindle, Sosei Academy would find itself in quite the operational pinch.”

“So, that’s the rationale for the division,” I realized aloud. Setsugekka represented the Corporate Legacy students’ voice, while the student council spoke for the rest. This division of power ensured the elite’s influence remained unchallenged by the unwashed masses.

“There you have it,” Shizuki concluded. “In one corner of the ring, the student council; in the other, Setsugekka. As you aim to rise within Setsugekka, Riku is setting his sights on the student council. That’s how our story is supposed to unfold.”

“Does anything major happen between us there?”

“There’s an event where Nonoka helps out Riku, but nothing that concerns you. Your induction into Setsugekka is straightforward—or at least, *was* straightforward in the game.”

“I suppose we’ll find out soon enough,” I joked wryly. It seemed increasingly prudent to abandon our reliance on the game’s storyline, given the deviations we’d already encountered.

Resigning myself to potential future complications, I reviewed my phone again. “And the fashion modeling task?”

“That’s the event that precipitates Nonoka’s interest in fashion.”

“An interest in fashion. That’s useful given the broad freedom of expression allowed us in our school attire...”

“I understand you made a joke, but I shall explain anyway. This is an elite private school. Beyond the occasional white tie function, students have opportunities to dress freely for certain extracurricular activities. Currently, Nonoka’s fashion choices are...rather pedestrian.”

“I see.” Basically, any prospective partner for the Yukishiro family had to exemplify sophistication, including in their wardrobe.

“At any rate, it is your appearance in a fashion magazine that will inspire Nonoka to explore the world of fashion. To that end, you will be participating in a photoshoot in one month.”

“Huh? In one month?”

“That’s right. One month, or four weeks, if you prefer.”

My eyes drifted nervously. If I took her words at face value and just expected to show up at a photoshoot in four weeks and strike a few poses and that’s it, then I’d learned nothing. “And what will I be doing in the four weeks leading up to the photoshoot?”

“Oh, a little bit of this, a little bit of that,” she responded breezily.

“A little bit of this, a little bit of that...”

Yeah, I can already tell I’m going to be going through it.

Seemingly delighted at my befuddlement, Shizuki continued. “Initially, the Sakurazaka Group’s fashion division requested me as the model. But with some persuasion and a tiny bit of applied pressure, I arranged for you to take my place. Beware, though, the photographer is quite particular. He’s extremely talented, to be sure, but only works with models he personally approves of. So, it’ll be up to you to win him over.”

Is it just me or have I already been handed an impossible task?

My lessons and tutoring had instilled a modest confidence in my manners and poise, but modeling for a professional photographer was an entirely different realm, one my training hadn’t touched. I was a rank amateur. How could I hope

to capture the attention of an industry giant, and such a finicky-sounding one at that? Against an opponent so nitpicky, Shizuki's money-wiring-no-jutsu might not even work.

"How can I possibly manage that?" was all I could ask.

"Through preparation. You'll have access to the best tutors and stylists money can buy," Shizuki reassured me.

"That's it? Is that not standard for any professional model?" A crash course in modeling might impress an amateur, but a seasoned photographer? In fact, wouldn't they even think lesser of me for thinking I could pull the wool over their eyes?

"Again, you'll have access to the *best* tutors and stylists," Shizuki reiterated.

Her response left little room for argument. Basically, she planned to compensate for all that I lacked with dough, along with the implication that I had better apply myself and put that money to good use. *I know I said I'd do anything to save my sister's life, but this...*

In that moment, a flicker of doubt shone in my eyes, which Shizuki caught immediately. "Mio. Are you the villainess or not?"

"I am, but that's *exactly* why we should consider other, more feasible methods to achieve our goal, isn't it?"

Her eyes flickered. Then she chuckled elegantly. "Yes, thinking outside the box, just like I told you—but not this time, I'm afraid. Too many future events are dependent on this affair for us to bypass it."

My response came out as a weak, resigned "yes."

It seemed I had no alternative but to commit fully and strive to make this endeavor a success.

MY intensive journey into photo modeling began the very next day. At the same time, I faced the pressing need to excel academically, with midterms already looming and my grades needing significant improvement.

In essence, my days were a whirlwind of modeling lessons, studying, and

striving for adequate sleep, interspersed with visits to the aesthetician whenever a spare moment arose. This relentless routine continued until the first school day of the semester. Dressed sharply in Sosei Academy's uniform, I joined Shannon in the limousine and we embarked for school.

"If someone had told me a few months ago that this would be my life, I would've laughed them out of the room," I muttered as I stared blankly out the limousine window, watching the scenery whip by.

"And yet you seem to have adapted remarkably well," Shannon commented.

A wry smile crossed my lips. "I sure hope so. Remind me just how much money has been spent on me again?"

Even just in the past few days, the combined costs of my tutors and aesthetic treatments must have added up to a truly astronomical figure. I felt uncomfortable—guilty, even—that such vast resources were being spent on me.

Shannon, however, offered a different perspective. "Consider it an indicator of the importance of your role, milady."

"I understand that..."

"The fate of countless lives—the Sakurazaka Group itself—rests on your shoulders. In that context, what is an extra hundred thousand or million yen if it enhances your chances of success, even slightly?"

My words caught in my throat, the enormity of our undertaking suddenly hitting home.

Shannon quickly apologized. "I didn't mean to add to your burden. Lady Shizuki even cautioned me against saying things that might increase your pressure."

I shook my head. "No, it's all right. Thank you, actually, for reminding me of what's at stake. I won't dwell on the costs anymore." I mentally reframed it: these were essential investments, and my task was to convert them into tangible results. With this mindset, the anxiety began to recede.

We arrived at the Academy shortly. The limousine pulled up to the student

drop-off area and we alighted. I took a few steps toward the school building but paused, compelled by a burning question. “Why are you here again, Shannon? As a student, I mean?”

“Sosei doesn’t permit personal attendants on the premises.”

“So, you enrolled as a student instead? But aren’t you a college graduate? From America?”

“You needn’t worry about that, milady. I completed my degree early so our age gap isn’t as vast as it seems.”

Twenty-four versus fifteen is plenty far apart in age if you asked me, but I kept that thought to myself. Truthfully, I didn’t even know why I was worrying. Shannon, with her flawless complexion, could be mistaken for a younger student, but most importantly...

“Why am I even bringing this up? This is what Shizuki wanted.”

Shrugging off my doubts, we continued our way up to the main entrance. There, I checked my class assignment and sure enough, I found myself in the same class as Ruki and Nonoka, exactly as the game dictated.

“Coincidences really do just happen sometimes, don’t they?” I remarked.

“Yes, I’m sure with enough resources, you could make all sorts of coincidences happen,” Shannon quipped.

“I know, I was kidding.”

My adopted older sister sure was something else. When it came to solving all her problems with money, anyway.

“More importantly, Lady Mio, your speech?”

“Right, it’s showtime,” I affirmed, mentally shifting into villainess-mode.

With a poised stride, I made my way to the classroom. At school, Shannon and I would pretend to be strangers; things were simpler that way.

Upon entering the classroom, I had barely settled into my assigned seat when homeroom commenced. Predictably, we began with roll call and introductions. Corporate Legacy students made up about a third of the class, the majority

being regular students, interspersed with a few scholarship students.

Key characters in this class included myself, Ruki Yukishiro, Nonoka Hiragi, and the two girls who were my alleged underlings. Notably, Nonoka was enrolled as a regular student, consistent with her portrayal in the original game, despite her recent affiliation with the Nagura Group.

Among the unfamiliar names, one particular student piqued my interest: Rikka Yukishiro. Her surname suggested a connection to Ruki, possibly a cousin. Shizuki hadn't mentioned her, which made me wonder about her relevance to the plot.

Our homeroom teacher then clarified a unique custom at Sosei Academy: due to the prevalence of shared family names among students—being from the same few influential families and all—we were encouraged to address each other by first names.

When it came time for me to introduce myself, I stood up, gave as inconspicuous a self-introduction as I could, and promptly sat back down. While I might have been the villainess in the game and to its characters, I most decidedly did not need to attract undue attention among all the other nameless faces.

Soon, homeroom came to an end and classes began. Aiming to rank high in our first midterms, I devoted my full attention to each lesson, absorbing the material with earnest dedication. When break time rolled around, though, I found myself in a dilemma. Ideally, I would have seized these moments for additional study, but in the presence of Nonoka and Ruki, such an effort seemed incongruent with my persona. What would they think, seeing the villainess try so hard? Reluctantly, I opted for some light reading to subtly enhance my sophistication, keeping in character.

Engrossed in my book, I suddenly sensed an intense gaze fixed on me. Turning swiftly, I caught Nonoka hastily averting her eyes. *Was she staring at me? Or glaring at me, rather?* Well, I shouldn't be surprised if she hated me after what I'd said the other day. I inwardly shrugged off the potential animosity and returned to my reading.

Not long after, another gaze unsettled me. This time, turning in the opposite

direction, I spotted Rikka quickly looking away. Now, this was curious. To my knowledge, we'd never interacted directly, so what was with the attention?

To my knowledge, I wryly reminded myself. Could there have been an unnoticed encounter similar to the one with Ruki?

No, no, no, definitely not. I'd used up a life of bad luck after the whole Ruki incident. If the same thing happened again, I had a thing or two to say to Lady Luck's manager. For now, focusing on my studies was paramount. I would address any complexities with Rikka if and when they arose. Resolutely, I refocused on my book, immersing myself in the text once more.

THE routine of school, home study, and modeling lessons continued, and a month swiftly elapsed. It was the day of the photoshoot. Wrapped in Shannon's latest creation, I stepped into the limousine with her, setting off a little earlier than necessary. We had planned a detour to visit Shizuku, whom I hadn't seen in months.

Arriving at the hospital, I had Shannon wait for me in the lobby while I took the elevator to Shizuku's room. Knocking before entering, I found Shizuku reclined in her bed, looking comfortably cute in pajamas while perusing a fashion magazine.

"Shizuku, did you miss me?" I greeted her with a big smile.

"Not as much as you missed—" she looked up from her magazine with wide eyes, "—me?"

"Why was that a question?" I playfully retorted.

"Well, no, it's just that you..." she trailed off, eyeing me up and down.

She was obviously thrown off by my new look—I'd never worn anything like this around her before. But, of course, I anticipated this and had the perfect excuse ready. "Oh, this old thing?" I casually remarked. "Just something I picked up with my part-time job money."

This was a little allusion to the Sakurazaka Group's financial support for her treatment, implying that my server job funds were now available for personal

use. It was a little lie, blended with a larger truth, which hopefully made it convincing. It was also my way of showing that I was no longer burdened by work for her sake and instead embraced a more carefree teenage life. Surely, she would be relieved by that, I thought.

“It’s legal, right?” she shot back, not missing a beat. “Your part-time job?”

“Y-You’re funny.” My voice began with a waver, but I tightened it up right away, returning her suspicious gaze with a firm one. If there was one thing I learned these past months, it was how to play the part convincingly, so I employed that here. I pressed her for what she meant by that, but she didn’t answer, only returning to her magazine.

“Shizuku?” I prodded again gently.

She briefly met my gaze, murmured “It’s nothing,” and looked away. Unsure of her sudden reticence, I decided not to push further. Instead, I changed tactics.

“Oh, I also brought you some cake today,” I declared, revealing the treat prepared by Shannon.

“Cake!” Her demeanor instantly brightened.

Worked like a charm. I unpacked the cake and prepared tea, arranging everything on the side table.



Our meeting, the first in several months, was filled with much to catch up on. She shared a lot about her experiences at the new hospital, and it all seemed to be generally positive. She seemed healthier and more stable than before; a change evident in her noticeably brighter demeanor. Throughout our conversation, I couldn't help but silently acknowledge my gratitude for Shizuki for making this possible. Despite the underlying complexities of my current life, this reunion was a genuinely joyful moment.

After a while, I glanced at the clock and realized it was time to leave. "I should really get going," I remarked, getting up, "Wouldn't want to be late for work now."

She narrowed her eyes again. "You really aren't involved in anything shady, are you?"

"Again, no," I earnestly assured her. "I'll call you tonight, okay?"

With that, I left Shizuku once more. I went back the way I came, picked up Shannon, and once again we set off in the limousine. Our destination this time: a photo studio.

One smooth ride later, we stood before the studio. Shannon and I entered, announced ourselves at the reception, and were ushered down a corridor. Abruptly, a cacophony of heated voices spilled out from a green room door held ajar ahead.

"So, let me get this straight: I'm expected to collaborate with this...*amateur*? A girl who's basically here because of who she knows, not what she knows?" came a rather high-pitched, agitated voice.

"Sir, if I may—this situation, it's really beyond our control. The orders, they come from way above..." another voice tried to mediate, respectful yet firm.

I immediately recognized the first voice as the distinctively androgynous and flamboyant timbre of Yuya Takanashi, the renowned photographer I was scheduled to meet. A youthful prodigy in his early thirties, Yuya had taken the fashion industry by storm with his exceptional talent. The other voice, likely a staff member, struggled to placate the notoriously volatile artist.

"Ultimate nepotism, that's what this is!" Yuya exclaimed, his tone oscillating

between indignation and disbelief. “You drag me all the way here for this? Do you have any idea who I am, what I represent?”

Yikes, talk about unprofessional.

But despite his tantrum, I couldn’t help but empathize. A luminary in his field, reduced to such a mundane assignment—I’d have lost my cool too.

Still, I couldn’t let him intimidate me. *I am the villainess*, I told myself, switching modes. Crossing one hand elegantly across my stomach, I tapped on the doorframe of the open door.

I paused, ensuring I had Yuya’s full attention before speaking. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“Says sorry but does it anyway—oh, the audacity,” Yuya snapped back. “And who might you be, darling? Where did you spring from?”

“Mio Sakurazaka—the girl who’s here because of who she knows and not what she knows.”

His eyes narrowed, assessing me with newfound interest. “Ah, so you’re the one...” he said, circling me like a hawk that had just found the source of his irritation. For a good ten seconds, he scrutinized me from head to toe. “You’ve got quite the mask on, don’t you? This isn’t the real you.”

His directness didn’t catch me off guard; Shizuki had briefed me on how perceptive he could be. However, we had an answer prepared. “I’m working. This is how I am at work.”

He let out a skeptical huff. “Well, well, well, someone likes to think of themselves as a method actor. Hate to break it to you, but it’s not exactly dazzling me.”

“I admit to still honing my craft. Which is why...” I snapped my fingers. At my cue, Shannon stepped forward, handing Yuya a letter. It was written by Shizuki and to be given to him should the situation necessitate it.

“A letter? Now who would do such a... Oh, well if it isn’t from my darling Shizuki,” he said, a hint of amusement in his voice as he began to read.

Shizuki hadn’t clued me in on the fact that she and Yuya were acquainted. In

fact, she hadn't even told me about the contents of the letter.

As I stood there, steeped in uncertainty, Yuya abruptly tore the letter to shreds. "You. Out," he commanded, pointing not at me, but at the earlier staff member.

"But, sir..." The poor guy looked on the verge of tears being left out in the dark. His eyes flickered anxiously between me and Yuya.

With a dramatic sigh and a hand to his forehead, Yuya exclaimed, "You want her to model, correct? Then scram!"

The staff member, perhaps sensing that things were moving in the right direction, wordlessly rushed out of the room. Yuya didn't even give him a second glance as he spun on his heel and sauntered toward a table, sitting down with an exaggerated plop. "Chop chop, we don't have all day. In you come, and close the door, would you?"

We complied and Shannon shut the door behind us. My mind buzzed with questions. Why had Yuya destroyed the letter? Was he angry, or was it something else because right now he looked almost...calm.

"Okay, missy, let's cut to the chase," Yuya declared abruptly.

"Th-The chase?" I stuttered, my act starting to slip. "You mean, you know that I'm the villainess?"

"The villainess?" He looked genuinely puzzled for a moment.

"Oh, well, I mean..."

"Oh, is that part of your little acting spiel?" he interrupted. "Whatever, I don't care about that. You do you, darling. I'm talking about you getting adopted for your sister's sake."

"Wha—?!" I gasped, unable to mask my shock. My adoption was public knowledge, but the reason behind it, my sister Shizuku's existence, was a closely guarded secret, so just what was going on here?

What have you done, Shizuki?

"Hey, hey, ease up," Yuya reassured, his voice unexpectedly soft but still tinged with his usual flair. "Believe it or not, these lips can keep a secret. Your

big mystery is safe with me. But, you know, I'm wondering..."

I struggled to maintain my composure, forcing my voice to match the villainess persona. "Wondering about?"

Yuya's reply was laid-back, almost teasing in contrast to my effort. "After all that you've done for your sis—do you ever feel, I don't know, a bit of resentment?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, girl, you heard me—do you ever resent her, feel like she's a burden?"

"Absolutely not. Never, not even for a second."

"Not even a smidge, after all you've given up?"

His persistence was as baffling as it was irritating. Sure, I'd sacrificed a lot, but I never saw Shizuku as a burden. She was my own sister for crying out loud. "What I've done is nothing. If it's for her, I'd face my doom with open arms. I'd renounce my family name, my connection to her, if it meant saving her life!"

My fist was clenched, a symbol of my resolve, when suddenly a shutter clicked—Yuya held aloft a camera.

"When did you...?" I stammered, taken aback. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Quiet," he ordered, eyes flitting down to his camera's viewfinder. "Not too shabby. That's quite the expression. Lucky for you, it fits today's shoot to a T. Or maybe, just maybe, that's not luck at all?"

"Excuse me?" I shot back, still trying to process it all.

"What are you waiting for? Why aren't you changed already? Time's a-wasting!"

I took that to mean he'd accepted me as his model for the day. Was this his plan all along? That whole charade—was it necessary? Though, deep down, I suspected it was. Still, the abrupt change of heart baffled me. How had one letter swayed him so?

I would find out later from Shizuki that the magazine's theme for the issue

was “Fashionably hard at work for your special someone.” Talk about a perfect theme for me.

Once I was in wardrobe, the photoshoot really took off.

“Come on, show me some of that grit, that fire you had earlier,” Yuya directed from behind his camera.

“Fire? What fire?” I had no clue what my expression had been.

“Goodness gracious, girl, how are you going to defend your sister with that blank stare? There—that’s the fire! Now, pivot that way. Picture this—your sister’s in trouble, crying out for you!”

“My sister?”

“She’s right there, in dire need, yelling out your name! Are you going to rush to her side, or just stand there? Perfect! That’s the drama I’m looking for!”

The photoshoot whirled on in this manner, a blur of commands and poses, before soon, it was over.

“**MIO**, my goodness, what a stellar performance today. You, my dear, are one interesting character,” Yuya beamed, wrapping up the day’s work. “Let’s do this dance again sometime.”

“Of course,” I tossed back, oozing confidence. “It’s not every day I meet someone capable of capturing me at my best.”

He let out a playful cackle. “A feisty one, aren’t you? But I suppose that too is an act. Listen, honey, it’s the real, unscripted you that truly captivates. You should let her out more often. Though, I understand you may have your reasons.”

“I do,” I replied, my voice taking on a more serious tone. “So, I would really appreciate your—”

“Say no more, darling, your secret’s safe with me. And before I forget... Here’s my business card. If you ever get that itch to dazzle my lens again, just give me a holler.”

I gratefully accepted Yuya's card and handed him the one Shannon had prepared. Behind me, I could sense the awe-stricken whispers of the staff, clearly impressed by the personal acknowledgment from the great Master Yuya Takanashi. Only later did I come to realize the full significance of Yuya's gesture; he was selective about even remembering his models' names, let alone giving out his card to them. At the moment, I hadn't grasped its full importance, merely relieved to have made a good impression during the shoot.

Shannon and I made our way out of the studio and down a hallway when we stumbled upon a familiar face.

"Oh, what a pleasant surprise," came the voice of Rikka Yukishiro.

"Ms. Rikka, a pleasure as always," I responded with a measured grace.

"And you, Ms. Mio," Rikka replied, her voice tinged with a formal cadence. "I do believe this is the first time we've spoken like this, is it not?"

A chill ran down my spine. Not from Rikka; she was the epitome of politeness, her smile genuine and her words full of grace. My eyes drifted to the entourage behind her, recognizing two familiar faces within the crowd: Sayaka Saionji and Asuka Azumaji. The pair who'd involved themselves with Nonoka that day now stood flanking Rikka, positioned like guards in her royal court.

Was this meeting between villainess and her hangers-on scripted or mere coincidence? The thought that it might be scripted unsettled me, as I had no idea this was going to happen.

Preferring to keep my distance until I could decipher why these three were moving together, I chose my words carefully. "Well, I must say this has been quite the enlightening exchange, but I must excuse myself. Ciao for now."

As I edged past Rikka, careful to maintain a nonchalant pace, she suddenly spoke, freezing me in my tracks. "Wait."

I felt my face twitch. Masking my irritation with a polite smile, I turned back. "Yes? Is there something you needed?"

"What exactly is your relationship with Ruki?"

The question, abruptly posed by the main love interest's relative—a character

notably absent from the original game—caught me off guard. The fact that she was flanked by the former cronies of the villainess only added to the surprise.

Unsure of her motives, I offered a deliberately vague response. “Our relationship? I suppose that of a name to a face, a classmate just like any other?”

I hadn’t spoken a word to Ruki or Nonoka since the semester started, to say nothing of Riku, who was in another class. Rikka, a fellow classmate, would surely understand the innocent nature of my statement. As for Sayaka and Asuka on the other hand...

“Don’t lie! If that were the case, then why would Mr. Ruki choose to dance with you?” Sayaka trilled.

Asuka chimed in, her tone accusatory, “Indeed! And don’t think we haven’t heard—the whispers that the Sakurazaka family didn’t have a ‘Mio’ until recently. An adoption, perhaps? How presumptuous of you to think you could be worthy of standing beside Mr. Ruki.”

The duo, once the villainess’s allies in belittling the heroine, now seemed to use Rikka’s presence as a shield to direct their venom at me...

Not sure what I expected, them being the villainess’s attack dogs and all. Yet, their newfound loyalty to Rikka raised questions. Had Rikka somehow assumed the role of the new antagonist?

“Girls, that’s quite enough. Ms. Sayaka, baseless accusations are unseemly. And Ms. Asuka, we do not judge others by the circumstances of their birth,” Rikka rebuked them harshly, torpedoing my villainess replacement theory.

“We apologize, Lady Rikka,” Sayaka responded, contrite.

“Our deepest regrets,” Asuka echoed, bowing deeply.

Their expressions of regret were notably more focused on Rikka than on me. It was obvious they found it difficult to abase themselves in my presence, an observation Rikka seemed to make too. “Girls?” she prompted with a knowing tone.

But I couldn’t just sit back and let this scene play out. “Ms. Rikka, you were

asking about my relationship with Mr. Ruki?" I acted swiftly to preempt their forced apologies. Forcing Sayaka and Asuka to apologize to me, against their will, would only be a hollow victory. Such coerced remorse could breed further resentment, undermining my position even more.

Rikka seemed to catch my drift, exhaling sharply before nodding. "Indeed, I did ask about your relationship with Ruki."

"May I inquire why you're interested?" I asked calmly.

"As Ruki's cousin and a future leader within the Yukishiro group of companies, I find it's only natural for me to be curious."

By identifying herself as Ruki's cousin, Rikka subtly insinuated her right as a family member to be informed about the people in her cousin's life. Though, the exact nature of her concern, romantic or otherwise, remained unclear at present. Her mention of her impending role in the business world, however, suggested she might suspect me of attempting to position myself as a prospective partner of the heir of the Group, and she needed to determine if I was worthy.

"Ms. Rikka, I fear you may be mistaken," I began cautiously. "Ruki's interaction with me was merely a gesture of gratitude for a situation involving his sister."

"His sister? Do you mean Ruri?" she followed up.

Why don't you ask him yourself, I almost said, but instead chose a more prudent approach to avoid creating future pitfalls. "As Ms. Asuka so aptly pointed out, I am adopted. Mr. Ruki only danced with me as a favor, a way to grant me legitimacy in the eyes of the student body."

"Then Ruki does indeed hold you in a special regard."

How?! I wanted to retort but bit my tongue.

None of them knew this, of course, but I was the villainess. It was my inevitable fate to fall in futile love with the love interests, lose to the heroine, and face my ultimate destruction. Averting any misunderstandings about Ruki's attitude toward me was crucial, as who knew what even a slight misinterpretation could entail.

"I wouldn't read too much into it," I maintained, masking my concern with a forced smile.

"For now, perhaps," Rikka mused, "But who knows what the future will hold?"

I do. I know what the future will hold, and it certainly doesn't involve Ruki falling in love with me! I absolutely did not say out loud. The conversation was veering dangerously off course. I had to steer it away, and quickly.

But in which direction? The most expedient way to lay the topic to rest was to declare a lack of romantic interest in Ruki, but that wouldn't work. I couldn't contradict my requirement as the villainess to harbor unrequited feelings for him. But to make things even more complicated, I couldn't risk eliciting sympathy or assistance in my pursuit. I had to love alone and unreciprocated.

Then, my only viable strategy was to subtly deter Rikka from endorsing my affections for Ruki, without explicitly negating them. "Speak plainly, won't you?" I retorted with a hint of defiance. "Are you suggesting that my adoption makes me unworthy of Ruki and to leave him alone, much like your companions believe?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't dream of implying one's birth or upbringing reflects their worth at all. My sole concern is whether you and Ruki are a suitable match as individuals. Surely, I don't overstep in this regard?"

My attempt at intimidation utterly failed. In fact, was it just me, or was Rikka actually just a genuinely kind soul?

"And, I hope I'm not speaking out of turn here, Ms. Mio," she continued, "but might it be possible that your adoption is a source of insecurity for you?"

"Not at all. I have little cause to be insecure when true Sakurazaka blood runs in my veins," I replied, my tone firm. Casting a deliberate glance at Sayaka and Asuka, I added with a sly smile, "And should anyone suggest otherwise, it would merely be their own insecurities reflecting back."

Acknowledge the existence of detractors, but also make a point of conveying my utter indifference toward them. The two stooges started to react, but Rikka stuck out an arm, silencing them. She pondered briefly, then clasped her hands

in a gesture of resolution. “Then how about this? I promise to be a guarantor of your character. Should you succeed in joining Setsugekka, I’ll acknowledge our friendship and support your endeavors with Ruki on one occasion.”

“Excuse me?” I blurted, taken aback.

“Oh, and fret not. If you don’t make it into Setsugekka, I’ll remain neutral regarding you and Ruki. You simply won’t have my endorsement,” she clarified.

That wasn’t what I was fretting about at all! Rikka, astute as she was, surely realized I was on the fast track to Setsugekka membership. Barring the school burning down or me not showing up for midterms, I was a shoo-in for sure. She definitely misinterpreted my aloofness toward critics as disapproval. Her “offer” was clearly a facade, a subtle move to back me up and quiet the naysayers.

In other words, the girl was an absolute saint who extended a helping hand—one I neither desired nor required right now. The villainess had a crush on Ruki, yes, but no one was supposed to root for her. Accepting Rikka’s help would veer us off the original storyline, but how could I tactfully decline without contradicting my character?

I glanced desperately at Shannon for guidance; she merely shook her head, offering no solution. In a silent, frantic plea, I sought any rescue. I made a prayer for someone—anyone—to come to my aid, and miraculously, it manifested in a most peculiar form.

“Lady Rikka, I would beg you to reconsider,” Asuka interjected.

Yes, there she is, the villainess’s underling, coming in to save the day! Though it didn’t sit right with me that I was now the target of her meddling instead of the heroine, I’d give her a pass if she could get me out of this bind!

Almost as if hearing my silent encouragement, Asuka continued, growing bolder. “Her admission to Setsugekka is a foregone conclusion. This agreement seems solely advantageous to her!”

“Yes, exactly!” Sayaka affirmed. “A tougher criterion is needed if friendship with you is the reward.”

I picked up the thread, hoping to up the ante even more. “For once I concur. My pending Setsugekka membership hardly reflects on my character, given its

inevitability.” I smiled haughtily, like a villainess, hoping Rikka would see my flawed nature and rescind her offer.

But Rikka, after a moment’s contemplation, faced Sayaka and Asuka. “All right. Then what do you propose as a fair condition?”

Sayaka seemed on the verge of speaking, but instead turned to Asuka; they began a hushed, fervent discussion.

Though my hope that Rikka would entirely retract her proposal faded, I could still count on the whims of these two. If they would just suggest something utterly unattainable, I could reject the whole proposition based on its impracticality.

Come on, girls, you got this! I silently cheered, eager for an impossible challenge.

Before long, Asuka broke away from their secret conversation. “Here’s our proposal,” she declared. “Lady Rikka, you wish to verify Ms. Mio’s suitability for a position of influence, right? Then let academics be the judge. Her grades, as it were.”

Rikka looked unconvinced. “Is Setsugekka membership not already indicative of academic prowess?”

“Partially,” Asuka replied. “But for her to call herself your friend, top fifty in the next midterms seems a fairer benchmark.” Her grin spoke of victory.

“An interesting point of view,” Rikka conceded, much to Asuka and Sayaka’s delight.

Considering the stakes at play—marrying into the family of Japan’s most powerful conglomerate—the condition was not at all unreasonable. Yet it was still a direct challenge to me. They assumed that I, like other Corporate Legacy students, wasn’t as academically driven as the regular students, making a top fifty ranking seem like an uphill battle. What they didn’t realize was that I was already aiming for the eightieth percentile. With around 250 students in our grade, this goal unexpectedly aligned with their expectations.

Then, Rikka seemed on the verge of speaking again. “In that case, Ms. Asuka and Ms. Sayaka, I expect the same commitment from both of you.”

They exchanged puzzled glances. In that moment, Rikka's gaze hardened, its icy intensity chilling me to the core. "Since, as you claim, it's a fair standard for those aspiring to be my friends."

"Yes, but—" Asuka faltered, beginning to stammer.

"Hm? Are we endorsing double standards here? Surely, we wouldn't discriminate against Ms. Mio for being adopted, would we?"

Stunned into silence, they struggled to respond. Agreeing with Rikka implied condoning discrimination against me due to my background, yet disagreeing meant they had to meet the lofty standard they had set for me.

Rikka's words were measured, each one deliberate. "I will hold you to your words. Ms. Sayaka, Ms. Asuka, either secure a top fifty ranking in the next midterms, exhibit a deed or gesture of similar or higher merit, or I will cease to consider you my friends."

Their complexions drained of color. The challenge was daunting, considering their current academic standings. Unyielding, Rikka pressed on. "Is my point clear?"

"Crystal, Lady Rikka," Sayaka managed to say.

"We'll do our utmost..." Asuka murmured, her voice quavering.

"Very well," Rikka responded. "You may leave now. Your presence is no longer required."

With that dismissal, the two hastily cast a final spiteful glance my way before retreating, as if defeated.

Watching them vanish from sight, Rikka lowered her head toward me. "Ms. Mio, please accept my apologies for that scene."

"Not at all," I replied firmly. In the world of high finance, it was a widely accepted observance that those with enough influence to command a following must also bear responsibility for their actions. In this context, she had indeed wronged me, but the fact that those two were supposed to be *my* followers stirred a hint of sympathy in me, enough to dissuade me from pursuing blame.

A question lingered in my mind. "Did you truly mean what you said?" I

inquired, looking directly at Rikka. “They don’t stand a chance of meeting that goal, do they?”

“Every word,” she replied without missing a beat. “In fact, I didn’t say anything. This mess is entirely one of their own making.”

The rest of her group nodded solemnly, implying that this wasn’t the first time Sayaka and Asuka had caused trouble.

“Are they not your friends?” I probed further.

“Friends? Would you consider people who latch onto you solely for the status of your family name as friends?”

“So, you intended to distance yourself from them from the beginning?”

“Not exactly. If they own up to their words, either by achieving their self-imposed goal or by understanding that my true desire was for them to apologize to you, I will gladly welcome them back.”

So that’s what she meant by “a deed or gesture of similar or higher merit.” She hadn’t discarded them without offering a chance to improve themselves. Did all kids who grew up in zaibatsus know how to work people like this?

And right. Almost forgot she’s in the middle of working me as well. “What about me? Would you impose the same condition on me?” Here, I allowed a touch of disapproval to color my voice. After all, she had used me as a pawn to reprimand her subordinates, and my indignation could serve as leverage.

“What did you have in mind, Ms. Mio?” Rikka’s swift grasp of my intention was impressive. She might even give Shizuki a run for her money in terms of strategic acumen.

“I suggest an alteration to our agreement,” I stated. “If I join Setsugekka and secure a top fifty position in our class, I would ask that you grant me one unconditional favor.”

“As long as you understand I can only grant what is within my personal capacity to fulfill,” she cautioned.

“Of course. I won’t request anything that necessitates involving your family’s corporation.”

My request for an unconditional favor might have seemed akin to her initial offer to support my endeavors with Ruki, but the nuance made all the difference. Did she perceive this subtlety?

Sure enough, she nodded. "Very well. If you meet those criteria, I'll happily acknowledge you as a friend and pledge one unconditional, personal favor."

Perfect. With this, I should be back on track to accomplish Shizuki's mission. In one move, I now held Rikka's favor and obtained an ace up my sleeve to facilitate Nonoka and Ruki's encounter.

"I'll be holding you to your word." I flashed a calculating smile, casually flicking another strand of hair from my shoulder.

***WITH** this, I should be back on track to accomplish Shizuki's mission. In one move, I now held Rikka's favor and obtained an ace up my sleeve to facilitate Nonoka and Ruki's encounter.*

Remember when I said that? Utterly hare-brained, empty confidence. The fact of the matter was that, academically, I still had a long way to go.

At home, I studied. At school, I hung on to every word my teachers said while pretending like I didn't care. During breaks, my only respite was reading to seem more cultured.

This repetitive cycle consumed me. As a result, after almost two months at my new school, I hadn't made a single friend. Seriously. Who'd ever heard of a loner villainess? *The Villainess Has No Friends*. Sounded like a bad light novel title.

My attempts to escape my daily monotony through bad jokes aside, I really did apply myself fully in my studies. On one such night, after finishing up with my tutors, I was returning to my room when I was accosted by Shizuki. She seemed utterly deflated, a stark contrast to her usual self, appearing just like any other normal, lost girl.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"The story just won't stay the same," she replied sullenly.

“No problem. Just tell me what I need to do. I’ll fix it.” I tried to project a little confidence, cheer her up a bit, but it didn’t help. Her face dropped even further.

With her gaze downcast, she said, “Nonoka has no friends.”

My eyes fluttered in surprise. Nonoka was the protagonist of an otome game. Bubbly, sunny, a golden retriever in human form—how could someone like her end up friendless?

“Could you elaborate?” I prodded.

“You know that she chose to attend Sosei as a regular student and even kept her old last name?”

Of course I knew that. That was why she’d earned the ire of the villainess’s underlings that day of the entrance exam. But in the original storyline of the game, she was meant to be popular among regular students.

“The Corporate students, as expected, look down on her. But now, in this version of events, the regular students are also keeping their distance. They see her as connected to the elite,” Shizuki explained.

“Connected to the elite?” I racked my brain, trying to figure out what Shizuki could possibly be talking about, but nothing. “But how?”

“You, Mio. It’s because of *you*.”

“Me?”

“Your friendly little chat with Nonoka at the new student mixer was witnessed by a large portion of the hall. As a result, they perceive her as being associated with you.”

“Wait, what? But I rejected her outright!” With the words I chose, there was no way anybody listening could’ve mistaken that for anything but pure disdain, so how did we...

Wait, anybody *listening*?

“Yes, your rejection was clear, but it was also unexpectedly abrupt,” Shizuki pointed out. “To an onlooker, the rapid shift from what seemed like a friendly chat to outright hostility was too jarring to comprehend as a simple dismissal.”

“So, it’s my fault...” I was forced to admit that I did push her away rather abruptly. The stress of those contemptuous stares on me as I bashed Nonoka had been more than I could bear. In my eagerness to avoid the consequences of being the villainess, my strategy had backfired spectacularly. “I can’t seem to do anything right...” I lamented.

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one at fault. I tunnel visioned too heavily on the game’s original plot and failed to consider how the narrative would change outside of it.” Shizuki clenched her fists, her gaze meeting mine with renewed resolve. “I also tried to exert some control over the flow of information to change the public consensus on Nonoka, but that ploy failed as well. So now, it’s all in your hands. We need to show everyone that you have no plans to play nice with Nonoka.”

“...Right.”

“I’m truly sorry, Mio. I know I promised you wouldn’t have to engage in such actions for a while, but I’m left with no other choice.”

“It’s fine. I know.”

But something didn’t make sense to me. By adhering to the original plot of the otome game, we aimed to avert an economic catastrophe and find a cure for my sister. Additionally, it was crucial for the Sakurazaka family to emerge unharmed to expedite her treatment. This heavy reliance on the game’s storyline had been our steadfast approach, but now, I questioned its singular focus.

“Lady Shizuki. Why are you so intent on following the game’s script?”

“Why? I believe I already explained that to you.”

“You did, but I don’t accept it.”

The plan, as it stood, required the heroine to unite the three most influential corporate families in Japan in order to weather the economic storm. It made sense, but was it really the only way?

“You know the future, Lady Shizuki. Are you telling me that with all that knowledge, this was the best strategy you could come up with? Leave everything in the hands of an amateur while you sit here, appearing so...

helpless.”

I owed her everything for showing me a glimpse of Shizuku’s future. I was grateful beyond words that she had chosen me and given me this chance—but I still couldn’t help thinking she was stupid for pinning the future of the country and her family on a random stranger like me.

After a moment of silence, Shizuki conceded, “You’re right. If my sole objective was to prevent the economic crisis and save the Sakurazaka Group, I had other, simpler options. But I’m...no longer doing this just for myself.”

If not for herself, then who? She didn’t elaborate, leaving me to speculate whether her motivations involved the heroine, the love interests, or perhaps everyone connected to the game. But what I did understand was that despite the struggle and guilt she carried, Shizuki was steadfast, moving forward for someone else’s sake—and that was enough for me.

Shizuki and I were kindred spirits, driven by purpose. There was no need for her to stress over the decisions she was forced to make. “I am also committed to protect what is precious to me,” I announced with renewed confidence.

“Shizuku?” she asked.

“Yes. She’s my sister. Well, perhaps no longer legally, but she’ll always be to me. That’s exactly why I’ve got to save her, no matter what it takes.” *To that end, I’ll do whatever it takes, face any challenge head-on.* “I jumped onto this burning ship willingly, so no part of you needs to feel guilty for the tasks you set before me. Just guide me, and I will act without question.”

“Even now, you still put others before yourself...”

“I do with you—because you are my sister now too, Shizuki.”

A flicker of sadness passed through her eyes, quickly hidden as she nodded in agreement. “In that case, your next move is in three days, during gym class. It involves a dance lesson. Nonoka should have no partner to dance with. Or perhaps I should say that she won’t, because I will make sure of it. Pair with her, then openly reject her, making your disdain for her known.”

“Understood. Leave Ms. Hiragi’s social situation to me. I’ll improve it or die trying.”

“Thank you. But you will not physically injure her, nor inflict irreparable emotional harm.”

I agreed, though the notion provided little comfort. The plan was not to hurt Nonoka, but merely to stage an act that would dispel any misconceptions of friendship between us. This was slightly easier to accept, albeit only just. It was a lesser evil compared to a strategy aimed at causing her direct harm.

“You have my absolute trust, Mio,” Shizuki said. “And always bear in mind, you are and will remain Shizuku’s sister, no matter what anyone says. It’s truly admirable and heartfelt, the lengths you’re going for her. Keep your chin up.”

“Thank you!” I replied with an enthusiasm that nearly bordered on shouting.

Bullying is a crime.

My actions were morally questionable. Nonetheless, I had no regrets. For when the time came for me to face judgment, I would meet the consequences with dignity and grace.

“Oh, and by the by, the theme for the dance lesson is hip-hop. You might want to start brushing up on that.”

“Wait, *what?!?*” There was absolutely no way I just heard what I thought I’d heard. “Hip-hop, not waltzing?!”

Shizuki explained, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, “Why would they teach waltzing in school? The Corporate students already know it, and the regular students would prefer something more contemporary, like hip-hop.”

“H-Hold on just a second. You’re not telling me to master hip-hop dancing in just three days, are you?”

“Oh, you’ll be fine. You’ll have the best instructors at your disposal as usual.”

“Three days. *Three days.*”

“Just think about your sister. You’d do it for her, won’t you?”

My throat rumbled in irritation. “Fine. *Fine!* I just have to do it, don’t I? Then I’ll freaking do it! For Shizuku, I’ll take on hip-hop like it’s nothing!”

And so began my journey into the world of hip-hop dancing. However, as I

delved into the basics, a thought nagged at me—did a villainess *really* need to master such a skill, or could I just scrape by with a basic understanding? Was it truly in character, or was something else going on here?

Reflecting on this, it dawned on me that perhaps Shizuki was keeping me occupied with this task to prevent me from overthinking. Truly, figuring out the essence of her generosity was often the hardest task of all.

THREE days later, I found myself trudging through school classes and reading during breaks, as was my usual routine. On a whim, I stole a glance at Nonoka. There she was, solitary, a sight that struck me as poignantly unusual, especially given her otome game heroine personality. If I were just a normal student, I would have certainly liked to befriend her. The mere thought of the fun we could have together brought a smile to my face, but I quickly suppressed it. After all, I was cast as the villainess. My role was to bully and harass her today. But not now. I refocused on my book, only to sense someone's presence before me.

"You always seem to be reading, Ms. Mio. Do you enjoy it?" It was Rikka.

"Yes, indeed, I rather find reading offers boundless knowledge and perspectives, wouldn't you agree?" Not a lie, but not the full story either. Truthfully, I enjoyed reading, but my current selections weren't exactly my preference. My tastes leaned to more casual reads, particularly light novels targeting a broader audience. Though, I'd probably stay away from the villainess stories for now...

"I'm sorry, but did you need something?" I asked, turning my attention back to Rikka.

"No, I was just noting that you seem rather unburdened," she replied.

"If it's our arrangement you're concerned about, rest assured, I intend to fulfill it," I imparted confidently.

Shizuki had given me permission to interact with Rikka. As she wasn't a character from the game, our interactions didn't have clear right or wrong outcomes. Nevertheless, I proceeded with caution, aiming to avoid making

waves.

Speaking of making waves, I spied my two alleged underlings staring daggers at me from a distance. *If they have the time to glare, surely, they have the time to study?* I kept that thought to myself, not wanting to instigate further trouble today.

“If they have time to glare at you, shouldn’t they be studying instead?” Rikka said.

Surprised, I blinked and then let out a burst of refined laughter. “That’s amusing. I was thinking exactly the same thing.”

“Well, as they say, great minds think alike.”

“Why, you flatter me.”

Despite everything, Rikka was undeniably kind-hearted. She had the courage to call balls and strikes, yet her sincerity and loyalty were unwavering. I knew someone like her would never approve of me bullying Nonoka. It saddened me to think that her perception of me would soon be tarnished, but I hoped she would simply attribute it to a misjudgment and move on.

For the remainder of the break, our conversation remained pleasantly mundane. After several more classes and breaks, it was time for gym class. Sosei Academy had separate changing rooms for boys, girls, and Corporate Legacy students. In this secluded space, I changed into an athletic shirt and safety shorts, over which I donned the school’s tracksuit. Designed with the assistance of a renowned fashion designer and emblazoned with the school’s emblem, the tracksuit was elegant in its simplicity, not to mention extraordinarily comfortable.

Once dressed, I made my way to the gymnasium. Typically, gym classes were two or more classes combined and segregated by gender, but today was an exception. The expansive room was bustling with students. As I, a Corporate Legacy student, stepped into the room, the atmosphere seemed to notably shift. Ignoring the gazes directed at me, I noticed Riku conversing with a classmate. He briefly glanced at me, then smoothly resumed his conversation. Clearly, my previous actions had alienated him. That was good. Then he wouldn’t object to being further distanced from me today.

Muttering a silent apology to those I inevitably had to harm, I was caught off guard when I suddenly bumped into Ruki. “Mr. Ruki. How can I assist you?”

“Mio. Why do you...” he began.

“Why do I what?” I prompted.

He shook his head, seemingly searching for the right words, his gaze drifting aimlessly before finally focusing on me. “Mio. Why, is there any outfit that doesn’t suit you?”

I nearly choked on my own surprise. Steadying myself, I reminded myself that his comment was likely just a diversion, a stray thought blurted out to mask his real intentions. He didn’t truly mean it. And after all, as the designated villainess, I was accustomed to such flattery.

“Well, this tracksuit is a creation of a renowned young fashion designer who has even been featured in Tokyo Girls Collection. It would be rather surprising if it didn’t look good on me, don’t you think?” I attempted to sweep a lock of hair off my shoulder, forgetting for a moment that I had tied it up for gym class. Quickly adapting, I smoothly transitioned to holding my ponytail, bringing it over my shoulder to rest in front of my chest. Wrapping my other arm in front of my waist, I shifted my weight and smiled provocatively.

He chuckled. “You know, I never considered that pompous attitude alluring until I heard it from you. You really shouldn’t play such games when you can actually pull it off. Tell me, you weren’t like this in middle school, were you? Is this your idea of reinventing yourself for high school?”

I almost choked on my own spit. A high school fresh start? Was that how he saw my transformation. But then again, he’d done his research, just like Shizuki. Sure, I’d changed my personality a whole lot, but to have that interpreted as trying to reinvent myself...

Well, it didn’t matter how he interpreted it, as long as he recognized the current me as the villainess. Probably.

“Mr. Ruki,” I said with a feigned, flirtatious surprise, “to have delved so deeply into my past... Do I truly hold such a special place in your heart?” This line, perfectly in sync with the role of a flirtatious villainess, was bound to repel him.

Any moment now, Ruki would break out into a look of disgust and leave.

“And what if I said you did?”

He whaaaaaat?!

Why isn't this working?! Ruki may have taken a liking to me because I looked out for his sister, but surely, by now, my repeated questionable actions should have disillusioned him completely.

“Mio,” he purred softly, reaching out to casually brush a stray lock of hair from my cheek with his thumb. If it'd been the beach at sunset, this would've made for a scene from a movie, but this was the gym in broad daylight. And I was supposed to be the villainess, destined to have my one-sided affections for Ruki rebuffed and face my downfall. My role was to flirt, not to be flirted with.

Suddenly, the bell rang. “Saved by the bell,” Ruki murmured, stepping back. “Well, no matter, you'll find out the answer to that question soon enough.”

As he walked away to rejoin the boys, I headed to the girls' area with heavy steps as my mind still reeled from the interaction.

This was not good. I completely lost my cool. I needed to hurry up and shake it off. I'd completely lost my composure and needed to regain it swiftly. Closing my eyes, I focused, tuning into the surrounding chatter. Conversations about so-and-so's cute among the boys; conversations about so-and-so's tone among the girls—and then a conversation about Nonoka and why she was standing all alone. “You best stay away from her,” one girl advised. “She's connected to the Corporate students.”

It seemed poor Nonoka really was ostracized. Knowing this, my hesitation vanished.

It was time to get to work.

MS. Chiaki, the girl's gym teacher, motioned for all the girls to group up. “Girls, gather 'round and pair up! We'll be learning the basics of hip-hop dancing today.”

The girls moved quickly, friends and acquaintances naturally gravitating to

each other first. I cast a covert glance at Nonoka and as expected, she stood isolated, without a partner in sight.

Next, the remaining students started to pair up. I made eye contact with Shannon; she nodded, and immediately, several girls nearby began to make their move—these were the students paid off by Shizuki. They would pair off with stragglers and ensure Nonoka was left alone—Shizuki’s method of ensuring Nonoka had no choice but to pair with me.

I snuck another glance at Nonoka, but this time, our eyes met. She quickly averted her gaze, clearly not wanting to partner with me; understandable. I’d originally planned to make my move when everyone else had paired off, but this was as good a time as any. I took a single step forward, when a familiar voice halted me. “Ms. Mio. Would you honor me by being my partner?”

It was Rikka. We’d anticipated she might approach me, and a plan was in place for Shannon to intervene, but where was she? I looked at her; she only looked back apologetically; Rikka had given her the slip. This wasn’t ideal, but not at all plan-ending. “Ms. Rikka, I would be delighted, but I am already committed to another,” I responded diplomatically.

“Oh, is that so?” Rikka seemed surprised, but not disheartened. “Then perhaps next time.” With grace, she withdrew and approached another girl, who eagerly accepted, visibly moved by the gesture.

With that out of the way, I moved to where Nonoka stood. By this point, most girls had already paired off, and she was looking increasingly uneasy. When she noticed me approaching, she reacted visibly. I made sure to keep my gaze fixed her so that she couldn’t run. Considering Nonoka was always very polite and respectful, sometimes even unduly so, I figured I could use that to my advantage. “Nonoka,” I said, adopting an overtly friendly tone. “It is with great pleasure that I offer you the illustrious chance to dance with me.”

“R-Really, Ms. Mio? You’d partner with me?”

Um, why does she look so happy? She hasn’t forgotten that I debased her on the basis of her birth not along ago, has she?

Perhaps I underestimated her protagonist-levels of positivity. But as long as I could show a definitive act of intimidation or bullying toward her in front of

everyone, I could still achieve my original objective. I had to admit, however, Nonoka looking happy to see me was definitely a wrench in the works.

Whatever, stick to the plan. The lesson began with Nonoka and me as partners. We started with basic steps, before moving in to pair work, then splitting up to learn a quick solo choreography before finishing back up in pairs.

The basic steps were easy for me, given my recent practice. Nonoka, however, struggled. Each time she made a mistake, I made sure to reprimand her—and I made sure to let everyone know.

“No, no, no, didn’t I just tell you not to do that?” I exclaimed in feigned exasperation. “It’s supposed to go like this... Then this! You want to start—pause—then as you lower your right foot, simultaneously slide your left foot backward!”

“S-Sorry!” Nonoka stammered in response.

“Apologize less, perform better. Look, you’re off-beat again. Now what are you doing?! Your right hand is all wrong! How is it that you’re a whole beat ahead of the music?!”

My critique was far from constructive. It was harsh. Destructive. It pained me to be so cruel, both emotionally and physically from the strain of yelling, but I needed to make sure everyone around us heard.

Ms. Chiaki, having observed our interaction for some time, finally stepped in. “M-Ms. Sakurazaka, that is quite enough!” she said with as much firmness as she could muster.

“Oh, Ms. Chiaki, how can I help you?” I replied, feigning innocence.

“By toning down your attitude a notch!” she said. “You may have talent, Ms. Sakurazaka, but that is no reason to talk to your partner like that!”

I looked down; her hands were shaking subtly as they gripped the hems of her tracksuit—a natural response, perhaps. The corridors of the Academy were rife with rumors of the Sakurazaka family’s lavish endowments. A mere phone call from my end held the potential to derail her career. As specious as these rumors were, however, they were not entirely birthed from thin air. Certainly, the majority of parents from Corporate Legacy backgrounds were sensible

enough not to abuse their clout to settle childish squabbles, but that didn't mean they couldn't.

Not to mention that I was ostensibly the archetypical spoiled, bratty villainous—she who trampled over everything and everyone in the pursuit of her happiness. Confronting me despite knowing the risks spoke volumes about her character, suggesting that it wasn't smart to confront her directly. But perhaps her presence presented a unique pathway for me to reach my goal.

"Is that so? Then I am truly sorry," I said.

Ms. Chiaki looked relieved. "R-Really? Good. Then, if you understand—"

"Truly sorry for believing one of low birth could do better. I was a fool to trust in my better instincts."

"Ms. Sakurazaka!" Ms. Chiaki's voice, sharp and clear, cut through the noise of the gymnasium, drawing the attention of everyone present. The once noisy room fell into a tense silence.

I waited for this moment to speak. "Nonoka. Now why don't you be a good little general student and play with the other good general boys and girls?"

My blatant display of classism resonated through the gym, causing an immediate stir. Concerned voices surrounded Nonoka, while looks of disapproval were directed at me, painting me as the heartless tyrant.

"M-Ms. Sakurazaka, apologize right now!" Ms. Chiaki's voice rose above the commotion.

"Oh, but I have apologized," I retorted, feigning nonchalance. "For misplacing my trust. Now, I must excuse myself; my feet are quite sore."

She struggled to hold back her anger. "S-See me after class, young lady!"

Instead of a curtsy, I brought my right hand to my chest and extended my left hand out behind me, performing a sarcastic bow and scrape. Then, I pivoted sharply on my heels to leave. Shannon started to follow, but a look from me told her to stay put. I made my way out of the gym, down the corridor, and into the courtyard, where I collapsed onto a bench. The pain was almost unbearable as I removed my athletic shoes, revealing socks soaked with blood. My blisters,

aggravated by the dance, had burst.

“If only I had trained more, this wouldn’t have happened,” I muttered, reflecting on the painful blisters and calluses that were the result of my intense training over the past few days.

They hurt. They hurt like hell. But the pain in my feet was nothing compared to the agony I felt in my chest. It felt like utter betrayal. Nonoka had looked up to me, poured her soul into fitting in, and I’d just spat in her face, repaid her efforts with cold dismissal. In that moment, the mask was about the fall, the heat welling up, manifesting as tears, when the sound of footsteps approached. Frantically, I wiped away the nascent tears, the brief window into my soul swiftly closing as I donned my usual facade once more.

“There you are, Ms. Sakurazaka!”

It was a female voice. Painting indifference over my face once more, I raised my head to see the gym teacher who had just reprimanded me.

Her name was Chiaki Urabe. Twenty-four years old, single, young, and thus a bit of a loose cannon, as Shizuki’s app had indicated. Her pursuit of me was likely a display of this impulsive trait.

“Ms. Chiaki. Don’t you have a class to teach?” I inquired aloofly.

“They’re practicing independently, and the boys’ teacher is overseeing them. But you don’t need to know about that. I’m here because we need to talk about your behavior,” she began, but her attention was abruptly drawn to my feet. I attempted to hurriedly put my shoes on, but it was too late.

“Your feet, show me them now!” she commanded, squatting down for a closer look.

“Asking to see a young maiden’s foot—are you trying to lose your job?” I shot back, trying to deflect.

“That won’t work. Just take off your shoes,” she insisted. Without waiting for my response, she took my shoes off. Her expression turned grim as she saw my feet. “My God, there’s so much blood... What happened?”

“My blisters burst. Now are you quite done making mountains out of

molehills?”

“Blisters wouldn’t even form, let alone burst, from just a single day of dancing, which means you...” She paused, lifting her eyes to meet mine, her suspicion apparent. She lacked certainty or any proof to speak of, but she didn’t need any—her empathy didn’t hinge on it. This realization sparked a thought: could I leverage her sympathy, possibly win her over to my side?

Maybe not, but I tread down that path regardless. “It is as you suspect,” I said, slipping into a faint smile.

“So, you picked up the steps so fast just now because...”

“That was not my first day in their company.”

“R-Really? But then why were you...” her voice trailed off, but the question was obvious: *Why were you so harsh on Nonoka?*

“How is Nonoka now?” I deflected.

“Nonoka?” she echoed, slightly taken aback. “She’s, um, I think she’s joined another pair. There were quite a few girls asking her to join them.”

“Really? That’s good to hear.”

“Is it?” Her head tilted in confusion.

“Ms. Chiaki, tell me. Are you aware that there is a divide between the Corporate Legacy students and the rest of the student body?”

“Huh? Um, yes, of course I am.”

“Then you are also aware that Nonoka was being shunned because of her perceived association with me?”

“No, I wasn’t aware of that, but... Wait, really?! Then just now, you did all that to...” Her face was a portrait of shock and confusion. I said nothing, only offering her a disarming smile, and slowly, the shock slid off her face. “But why do something like *that*...?” she said, her voice quieter now. “Surely, you had other options?”

“I did not.”

“Why not?” she pressed. “If it’s not something you can say, then I can talk to

Ms. Hiragi for you—”

I stopped her there. With that same, disarming smile pressed to my lips, I narrowed my eyes slightly as I placed a hand on her shoulder. “Ms. Chiaki, I like you, so I’m going to offer you a piece of advice.”

“A-Advice?” she stammered, a hint of apprehension in her voice.

“Yes. You have my utmost respect for standing up for Nonoka, especially against someone like me. Your compassion and courage are commendable, and you are indeed a wonderful educator. For that, I assure you, you won’t lose your job. However, if you try to delve deeper into my actions or discuss this incident with others, you know the consequences.”

Ms. Chiaki visibly tensed under my touch. “Y-You make it sound quite serious. But what exactly will happen?” Though she tried to maintain a brave front, her voice betrayed her fear.

“If you’re truly eager to find out, then I welcome you to test the waters,” I warned, tightening my smile.

She shook her head quickly, understanding the unspoken threat that hung in the air. I could tell she would no longer speak to Nonoka about this matter.

As the conversation seemed to conclude, I went to put my shoes back on, but Ms. Chiaki reached out to stop me. “What is it now?” I asked.

“Ms. Sakurazaka,” she began earnestly, “as an educator, it’s my duty to nurture and protect my students.”

“Yes, and?”

“If it turns out you really are bullying Ms. Hiragi, I *will* act.”

“In other words, you have no intention of staying silent?”

Problematic if true. But Ms. Chiaki shook her head again. “Bullying is a complex matter. Sometimes, a person might not mean to bully, but if the other person feels hurt or picked on, the impact is all the same.”

“Yes,” I replied, somewhat uncertain of her direction. “It’s a story as old as time.”

Sometimes, a boy might act in ways that upset a girl because he likes her. But if his actions hurt her, regardless of his intentions, it was still bullying. Thus, was Ms. Chiaki implying that my behavior was bullying, intentional or not?

“But after listening to you, and reflecting on what just happened, I started thinking—maybe the opposite can also be true. Sometimes, the intent to bully is there, but what if the person on the receiving end doesn’t actually feel victimized?”

“What are you...” I was at a loss for words.

“That’s why I’m going to let the matter slide. At least, for now.”

How did she even arrive at that conclusion...? There was no question in my mind that Nonoka perceived my actions as bullying. I’d witnessed her heart break with my very eyes. Was Ms. Chiaki truly convinced by her own reasoning, or was this her way of yielding to me with dignity? I needed to safeguard myself against her potential change of heart, but for the moment, I chose to trust her promise of silence.

“I’ll keep your words in mind,” I conveyed, standing up.

“What about your feet?” she asked.

“I’ll have my servants tend to them. Please do not ask me to go to the nurse’s office.”

“I... All right... Take care now....”

Shrugging off her concern with a dismissive smile, I turned and left her behind.

TO make a long story short, the operation was a success. Nonoka’s social isolation had been effectively dismantled. Following the day’s incident, two rumors started to swirl among the students: first, that Nonoka had a falling out with her wealthy benefactor—myself; and second, that we had never been friends from the start.

The latter rumor was preferable—a clean break, as it were, with no notions of her supposed connection to me lingering around, affecting her or those around

her. To ensure this narrative prevailed, Shizuki directed her pawns to amplify this version. Contradicting one rumor with another was challenging, but signal-boosting an existing one proved surprisingly straightforward.

Two weeks later, Nonoka had fully integrated with her classmates, solving not all of our problems, but our most immediate one. During this period, I only occasionally monitored her social progress, as my focus was dominated by the upcoming midterms. Spanning five days, with liberal arts included on the final day, these exams demanded comprehensive preparation. The targeted study approach I used for entrance exams wasn't going to cut it this time—I needed to excel in every subject.

The first exam morning, I sat in my seat, doing my best to review the materials for the day's exams—in my head, that was. Outwardly, I propped up an irrelevant trivia book, pretending to be unbothered.

Perhaps, too unbothered.

"Ms. Mio, cool, calm, and collected as always," Rikka remarked, approaching me. This was our first interaction since the gymnasium incident two weeks ago. Her approach was unexpected, especially since I had assumed she would never speak to me again.

"Ms. Rikka. I didn't think you'd come knocking," I commented, maintaining an air of indifference.

"Truth be told, I'm surprised myself," she admitted. "I'd resolved to keep my distance until after the exam results were out, but I couldn't help noticing you seemed rather tense for someone engaged in a leisurely read."

Tense? Was I really appearing tense? I'd focused on appearing tranquil, absorbed in my book as though without a care in the world, so how did she...?

But wait, she planned to keep her distance until after the exam results were announced? In other words, she still intended to speak with me?

"I thought our little agreement was null and void after what happened recently?" I ventured.

"The gymnasium episode?" she replied with an air of nonchalance. "Well, yes, frankly, I found your actions there quite repugnant."

Her straightforward condemnation caught me off guard, prompting only a wry smile from me. I couldn't dispute her view. In her position, I would have felt similarly repelled, though I questioned whether I'd have the boldness to express it as she did. Once again, the strength of character of young Ms. Yukishiro impressed me.

"Then why bother initiating this conversation with little old repugnant me?" I retorted, lacing my tone with a hint of sarcasm. "Especially since, after that incident, you could easily renege on your promise and no one would bat an eye."

I wanted Rikka to understand my perspective but simultaneously hoped she wouldn't get further involved. Caught between these conflicting desires, I aimed for detachment.

But Rikka was persistent. "I'll admit I considered it. Yet in the end, I couldn't dismiss one, nagging question: why did a kind and compassionate someone who helped a stranger one moment turn to attack the next, especially over something as crude as the basis of their birth?"

"A stranger?" I asked, seeking clarification.

"I'm referring to Ruri, of course."

Ruri, of course. For a moment, I thought she meant Nonoka, but it was beyond unlikely that Sayaka and Asuka would willingly tell Rikka about their involvement in bullying Nonoka.

In that case, my defense was straightforward. True, I didn't know Ruri at the time, but no one else could confirm that. "Strangers, yes, but I helped her because her demeanor suggested she was influential. I assist where I see potential benefits. I'm calculating like that."

"Calculating," Rikka echoed, a trace of humor in her tone, "yet you reject my invitation to be your partner in class, then commit such a boorish act in front of everyone. Utterly contradictory, don't you think? Unless—there was an ulterior motive."

Her insight caught me off guard. Again, it seemed I underestimated her. Seeing that I wasn't going to respond, Rikka continued her explanation. "So, I

took a step back, looked at the larger picture, and there, what I saw, was most surprising: I saw the actions of someone who recognized Ms. Hiragi's social plight and took decisive steps to address it."

She saw through everything. But I would never admit that for as long as I lived. Deny, deny, deny. As long as I clung to my story, the truth would remain like a mist, never condensing into solid reality. "That rather sounds like a theory in search of proof," I countered dismissively.

"Indeed. And so, I have come searching for that proof. Do you disapprove?"

I didn't answer. I *couldn't* answer.

I had wronged Nonoka, a fact witnessed by many. They'd all formed their opinions on the matter and yet, here was Rikka, telling me she was on my side, that she believed in my better nature. I could never rebuff someone who saw so much good in me even if I wanted to.

Unfortunately, however, it seemed my silence spoke volumes. "Best of luck in your exams, Ms. Sakurazaka," Rikka said with a parting smile before returning to her seat.



Left alone, I refocused on my book, my fingers idly resting on the same page they'd been stuck on all morning while my mind incessantly combed through exam materials.

UNLIKE the intense pressure I experienced during the entrance exams, I felt considerably more relaxed this time around. Having improved in most subjects, my focus was primarily on the few I had previously neglected. The first two days of exams went by smoothly until an interesting event happened on the third.

I calmly filled in the final answers on the last exam of the day. Once our papers were collected, I glanced over at Nonoka. She seemed exhausted, meticulously organizing her question booklet and textbooks, when suddenly, my view was blocked by a barrier of students—girls who had grown fond of Nonoka—forming between us. Their hands clutched at their skirts, betraying a nervousness, yet they stood firm, shielding her from me.

Well, it seemed Nonoka was getting along just fine without me. Maintaining an air of indifference, I turned away and started to pack my things. Soon, I overheard some classmates inviting Nonoka to the library for a study session after school. As she left the classroom with her new friends, she cast a brief, indirect look in my direction. After watching them depart, I too gathered my belongings and left the classroom.

The remaining two exam days also ended without incident. As the final test papers were collected and I saw the teacher exit from the corner of my eye, I took the opportunity for a brief stretch. That was when Ruki suddenly appeared in my line of sight, causing me to almost choke in surprise. His gaze was fixed on me, prompting me to abruptly cease stretching and act nonchalant, though I was already caught off guard.

“You ever think about becoming a less difficult person?” he asked abruptly, approaching me.

“What, is that supposed be an insult?” I shot back. My words were sharp, but inside, my mind raced at the uncertainty of his meaning. Was he referring to the gymnasium incident? Kind of a late intervention, considering Ruki's personality. But if not that, then had Rikka said something to him?

I braced myself for more, eager for any hint that might confirm my suspicions, but Ruki simply shrugged and walked away, leaving me in confusion. *Huh?* Did he not have something to say to me? I fought the urge to call after him, demanding an explanation, but restrained myself, letting him walk away in silence.

Talk about frustrating. Part of me wanted to chase after him and demand clarification. Unless that was his intention? Whatever. I had more important things to do today than worry about him. Midterms were over, which meant it was time to go see Shizuku! Clinging to this uplifting thought, I hastily packed my pencil case and made a beeline out of the classroom.

“SHIZUKU, I’m here~!” I called out in a sing-song voice, swinging open the door to her hospital room.

“You’re early today,” Shizuku observed with a hint of surprise. “Was it Foundation Day at school or something?”

“Nope, just the last day of midterms,” I replied cheerfully.

“Midterms?” She gave me a curious look, eyeing my attire. I had donned one of the outfits from the magazine photoshoot, a chic summer ensemble featuring a breezy cardigan and blouse paired with a high-waisted skirt and thigh-highs, straight from the summer catalogue. Since Shizuku still thought I attended the local public school, I had made a quick stop at home to change before visiting her. Actually, I had brought the clothes with me and changed right here in the hospital.

“You changed before coming?” she asked, a little incredulous.

“Yes, I did. And for a good reason,” I said, presenting the cardboard box I carried. “This is for you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Which is?”

“*Your* new laptop. A present from yours truly. I got two, actually—one for you and one for me.”

“You bought me a *laptop*? And— Woah. Isn’t this the high-end model that

was released last winter? How much did you pay for this?”

“Not that much. Here’s the receipt if you don’t believe me.”

I knew nothing about computers, so I sought advice from the geniuses at the Sakurabana Plaza electronics department. I gave them a budget and explained my purpose—a video call setup for Shizuku—and they suggested a model that was surprisingly affordable, well within what a high schooler could afford.

Shizuku examined the receipt with a raised eyebrow. “Is this really all you paid?”

“Yes? What am I, faking receipts now? But aren’t you excited? Now we can have video calls!”

“Of course, I am, but...”

She didn’t look convinced about the price, but I didn’t know what to do—I wasn’t lying about the price. “You know how to set it up, right?”

“I think I can manage. What about you?”

“I’m all set. A friend already helped with mine.”

That friend was Shannon, a detail I omitted for obvious reasons. As Shizuku started fiddling with her new laptop, I took out the apples I had brought and headed to the room’s kitchen.

You heard that right. Shizuku’s hospital room had a kitchen, and a living room at that. Peeling apples and cooking weren’t skills taught in my “villainess training,” but rather ones Mio Sato had learned over time. Lately, though, I hadn’t had many opportunities to practice. Picking up a small knife, I began peeling the apple, skillfully rotating it in my hands.

I was humming a cheerful tune, buoyed by a good mood, when Shizuku called out to me. “What’s up?” I responded.

“What have you been up to these days?” she inquired.

“Just the usual stuff, I guess? Like school? And my job.”

“Your job at Kaede’s café?”

“No, actually... I started a new job when high school began.”

Shizuku lapsed into silence. “A *regular* job, right?”

Her question made me tense up. Taking a deep breath, I forced a relaxed smile. “What other kind of job would there be?” I quipped lightly. Glancing at her, I noticed she was engrossed in a magazine; the cover was flipped over, hiding it from me “Whatcha looking at there?” I asked curiously.

“Nothing,” she replied curtly.

“Nothing?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

Strange. But if she wanted to drop the subject, then all the better for me. Finished with the apple, I placed it on her bedside table.

A few days after my visit, the day to announce exam results arrived. The names of the top fifty students in the grade were displayed in the hallway—I quickly stepped out of the classroom to take a look. In the top ten, I noticed Ruki and Riku. After a series of unfamiliar names, Rikka appeared at twenty-seventh. Then, farther down the list, Mio Sakurazaka at forty-four.

I had narrowly made it, fulfilling both Shizuki and Rikka’s expectations. A sigh of relief escaped me. To complete the picture, my gaze drifted to the bottom of the list. There, the name “Hiragi, Nonoka” caught my attention.

Huh?

I looked again. Indeed, Hiragi, Nonoka was at fiftieth place. While Nonoka’s potential was unquestionable, her journey was meant to begin modestly. According to my memory, her first appearance in the top fifty was supposed to be in the second semester. Seeing her name now, even at the last rank, was unexpected.

Absorbing this surprise, Rikka’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “Congratulations on your achievement,” she expressed, her smile warm.

“Thanks, though it seems a bit ironic coming from rank twenty-seven,” I replied.

“I appreciate it, but what you’ve accomplished is more commendable.”

For a moment, I wondered if she was being sarcastic, but that wasn't Rikka's style. My puzzled expression must have been obvious, prompting Rikka to laugh and explain, "Considering your showing at the entrance exam."

Ah, that made more sense.

But hold on a second—weren't those results supposed to be confidential?

Yeah, right. Shizuki had already managed to access my exam results once. This shouldn't have been surprising. But then something else caught my attention. "Ms. Sayaka and Ms. Asuka aren't with you?"

"They are not," Rikka responded, her tone neutral. "I neither caught wind of an apology, nor saw their names on that board."

Rikka was a woman of integrity, it seemed. Sayaka and Asuka had failed to align themselves with the villainess and now, it seemed, lost Rikka's friendship as well. Their future was uncertain at this point, but it was likely still better than if they had sided with the villainess.

"Though I must admit, I do feel a smug sense of satisfaction, knowing my suspicions were correct," Rikka continued, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I looked at her, not understanding. "Suspicious?"

"That you, Ms. Mio, are more than meets the eye. For someone who seems so absorbed in casual reading, your results speak for themselves. You've clearly worked hard behind the scenes, haven't you?"

I couldn't say anything in response. Rikka only smiled at the dumbstruck me before she declared, "I eagerly anticipate your induction into Setsugekka," and walked away.

I wholeheartedly welcomed this moment of respite, having just triumphed over numerous challenges. Of course, I still had the field trip waiting in the wings, but at least my induction into Setsugekka started to seem more and more like a mere formality—as long as I controlled my shows of power.

Thus, after the exams, my entire focus shifted to the upcoming field trip. Within days, however, whispers circulated that I had changed my surname and falsified my background, that I wasn't a true Sakurazaka. The timing of these

rumors seemed too deliberate.

And unmistakably malicious.

Episode 4

THE day I discovered the unsettling rumors about my identity, I hastily summoned Shannon as soon as I arrived home, not even bothering to change out of my school uniform. She arrived quickly, already in her maid attire.

“Lady Mio, did you need me?” Shannon asked, her tone calm and composed.

“You and I both know why I called you here,” I said curtly, my patience thinning. “You’re aware of the rumors, aren’t you?”

“Yes, quite aware. What would you like me to do?”

“Contact Lady Shizuki. Tell her I need to speak with her as soon as possible.”

“Lady Shizuki is currently out for observation. I can arrange for a meeting as soon as she returns.”

“Never mind. I’ll send her a message then.” Pulling out my phone, I swiftly composed an email to Shizuki, summarizing the situation and seeking her counsel. “Okay, well, I’m going to go shower. Hopefully, she’ll respond quickly,” I told Shannon, turning away.

“I’ll have your clothes ready.”

Without giving much attention to the flurry of activity among the maids triggered by my command, I headed decisively to the bathroom. Shedding my uniform and undergarments, I stepped into the spacious bathroom and directly under the shower. As the warm water enveloped me, my thoughts drifted through the events that had unfolded so far.

Identity fraud was no minor offense. And while a powerful zaibatsu might have had options to keep such scandals under wraps (i.e. the “it’s not a crime unless you get caught” approach), on the off chance that the truth did leak, even their influence would likely be powerless against the repercussions. The irony was, the scandal’s flames would likely burn even brighter because it was linked to such a powerful entity.

As I lathered shampoo into my hair, my mind raced to piece it all together. Ruki knew my secret but had kept quiet. The fact that we had already brushed shoulders with this danger and yet Shizuki hadn't prepared any countermeasures indicated her confidence in handling the situation, perhaps even anticipating it, but *why* was she so confident? What was her angle? Did she plan to quash the rumor at its source by pressuring the originator's family? But that would be counterproductive, akin to shouting, "the rumors are true!" Besides, if the rumor-starter had concrete proof of my false identity, such a tactic could backfire spectacularly.

I felt trapped in a maze of uncertainty, the way forward obscured. My only hope was that Shizuki had a plan. I continued to shower, almost trying to wash away the anxiety and confusion clouding my thoughts.

AFTER my shower, I eagerly checked my phone for a reply from Shizuki. Balancing the phone in one hand and a bath towel in the other, I opened her message.

"Thank goodness," I muttered in relief.

"No need to worry, just sit tight and wait for my word." Her words were precisely what I needed to hear, and a wave of calm washed over me. I was about to place my phone beside my clothes when it buzzed again. This time, it was a message from Shizuku, asking for a video call. Quickly drying my hair and changing, I hurried back to my room to set up my new laptop.

After sending a quick response to Shizuku indicating I was ready, her call soon appeared. I answered, and there she was, my dear baby sister displayed in crisp detail on my laptop's screen.

"Ah, I can see you!" I chimed eagerly. "Hello, Shizuku. Can you see me okay?"

"I can see you," she replied, then paused. "Where...the heck are you?"

"My room. I moved a few things around so maybe you don't recognize it." I had already prepared an excuse. My current room was easily several times larger than my old one, so of course I had carefully positioned the laptop to conceal most of the room.

Shizuku's expression flickered with doubt, but she eventually nodded, seemingly accepting my explanation.

"So anyways, you had something you wanted to discuss?" I prompted, trying to steer the conversation.

"Yeah," she began, a dry edge creeping into her voice. "There's something I couldn't say in person, but I thought maybe through this call..."

"Oh. What is it?" I tried to sound as unconcerned as possible even as my heart began to race with apprehension.

Shizuku's eyes darted around her room, a visible struggle playing out on her face as she mustered the courage to look directly at me. "Mio. You've done so much for me—more than anyone should. Please, you don't have to keep forcing yourself."

"F-Force myself? Are you kidding, Shizuku? I'm not forcing myself to help you."

"This is you, isn't it?" Suddenly, a magazine covered the camera. It was the fashion magazine she always read. This month's edition—with me on the cover.

"That was just an opportunity from Lady— I mean, Shizuki. I always wanted to try something like this."

"Liar. You never liked the spotlight."

"Maybe not in the past, but people change, Shizuku."

It was true. In middle school, I used to shy away from attention, but that had changed since working at Kaede's café. Shizuku, however, looked like she was on the verge of tears. "I see. So even at Kaede's, you were already forcing yourself."

"No, I wasn't!"

"Mio, you're kind, too kind. I love that about you. But you've heard, haven't you? That I only have three years left to live."

"Shizuku, please—"

"So that's it. Enough is enough, Mio. You don't have to pretend for me

anymore.”

“Shizuku...”

In that moment, I realized my folly. I’d been an idiot, a full-blown idiot for not having shared the truth with Shizuku. Why hadn’t I told her that there was a potential cure on the horizon? Was it because I’d been scared of disappointing her, that I wasn’t confident in my ability to bring the plan to fruition? My silence, borne from fear and uncertainty, had only extended her suffering, reinforcing her belief that her life was a dwindling clock, a burden to those she loved.

I had let her down. And for what? To protect myself? To placate my own ego? No longer. That changed now. She deserved to know there was light at the end of this tunnel.

“Listen, Shizuku. There is hope for you,” I revealed, my voice steady but filled with earnestness.

“Hope?” She almost laughed. “What hope, Mio?”

“I can’t share all the details right now, but there are trials happening right now, overseas, for a cure to your condition. It’s expected to be approved in three years.”

She smiled bleakly. “Yeah, I heard. But it won’t reach Japan in time for...”

“I know, but listen,” I urged, desperate to get her to understand. “I made a deal with Shizuki. If I hold up my end of the bargain, she’ll ensure you get the treatment as soon as it’s available, even here in Japan.”

Her eyes, briefly alight with a flicker of hope, dimmed again. “You’re lying...”

“I’m not lying, Shizuku.”

In her eyes, I saw the turmoil—the desperate wish to believe against the fear of being let down once more. Her gaze flitted around, struggling with the magnitude of what I’d said. Then, as the reality of my words began to sink in, tears broke free, cascading down her cheeks.

“Sh-Shizuku?” I prodded gently.

“Is that why you’ve been acting so...strange? Is it all...because of me?” she

managed to voice between sobs.

That right there—her utter selflessness in that moment—was precisely why I was so determined to help her. She'd been shown the first glimmer of real hope she had in years, yet her first thoughts went to me. Her rare kind of kindness and empathy was what the world desperately needed most.

"Mostly right, but let me correct you on one detail," I replied, my voice firm yet gentle. "It's not because of you, Shizuku—it's *thanks* to you. You've given me a purpose. I want to help you because I love you, so very much."

Though Shizuku and I were no longer related by law, she would forever remain my sister in my heart. Nothing could change that, or my love for her. "I help you because I choose to," I continued, trying to convey my sincerity. "I'm not forcing myself. Everything I do, I do it because I'm driven by my dream to see you healthy and happy."

"But... But..." her voice was a whisper, drowned in tears.

Through the screen, I saw Shizuku overwhelmed by her emotions, rending my heart. Sobs and sniffles mingled as she rubbed away at her eyes, trying in vain to stem the flow. I ached to reach through the screen, to offer a comforting embrace, but was restrained by the digital barrier. So, I gripped my laptop, my physical connection to her, as tightly as I dared.

"Shizuku, as soon as that treatment's ready, you're first in line. I promise. So just hang in there, okay? Three more years. That's all we need."

"Is it really okay? For me...to keep living? To be a burden to you, to Mom, to Dad?"

"Don't you dare think that, Shizuku, not even for a second. Besides, I need you to get better. Because when you do, you owe me. Big time."

"Yeah... Yeah...! I will... I'll make it up to you, I promise."

She wiped her face hastily with the back of her hand, a muffled sob the last thing I heard before her mic went silent. Her hand reached out to the camera, blacking out the screen.

"It's okay, Shizuku, I'm here with you," I whispered, reaching out to caress the

now dark laptop screen, wishing I could wipe her tears away. Soon enough, the screen lit up again, revealing Shizuku's red, swollen eyes, her embarrassed yet relieved smile peeking through.

"Mio. Am I really, *really*, not a burden?" She sounded more secure, yet vulnerable still. "I don't want to give up. I want to live, so badly. But is that *okay*?"

I smiled, trying to pour every ounce of my love and encouragement into the gesture. "Of course, it's okay. And I'll be by your side every step of the way, making sure you reach that happy ending. You and me, together."

Her laugh, to finally hear it, was the sweetest melody. "Thank you, Mio. Having a sister like you...it's more than I could ever ask for. I promise, I'll keep fighting. Just a little longer."

"You and me both. Here's to both of our happy endings."

"Yeah. You and me both." A comfortable silence fell. "Okay, well, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Yeah, talk to you tomorrow."

Our smiles lingered as we ended the call. I exhaled deeply, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door. Granting permission, I watched Shizuki stride in. She must have been waiting for me to finish.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said as we settled across from each other on my lounge set.

"Not at all. Keeping your sister's spirits up is a part of the job as well."

"You overheard?"

"Bits and pieces. But that's not what I'm here for. Let's discuss the rumors going around the Academy."

"Right. Well, someone clearly has it out for me."

That was all I could confirm now. Not whether there was any solid evidence behind the rumors, nor anything else. The rumors being deliberate suggested that someone with a grudge against either me or the Sakurazaka family was responsible. And while the family had no shortage of enemies, my own

adversaries could be counted on one hand.

“As for potential suspects, I can only think of Rikka, the two toadies, Riku, or Ruki,” I noted.

“It’s interesting you consider Rikka a suspect.”

“Yes. At least, I can’t rule her out completely.”

Rikka, I thought to be a person of integrity. Ruki, a considerate soul, through and through. Even Riku, I found to be driven by a strong moral compass, committed to challenging those who misused power and status. But, like all offspring of zaibatsu families, there was no telling what lurked behind those smiles, much as Shizuki’s and mine were shaped by our secret ambitions.

“Though it must be said the only suspects with an overt motive against me are the two toadies,” I added.

“Yes, and I can confirm them to be behind the rumors.”

She confirmed the source, just like that. This meant we could erase Ruki and Riku from the evidence board. “With those two as the main culprits, that leaves Rikka potentially at the helm, though I’m reluctant to believe she’s involved.”

“Taken a liking to her, have you?”

“She’s shown faith in me.”

Despite witnessing firsthand the way I treated Nonoka, Rikka still chose to believe in my better nature. Our bond wasn’t built on anything as solid as friendship, yet I couldn’t help but hope she wasn’t part of this.

“Then you’ll be relieved to hear that I share in your assessment,” Shizuki stated. “Ruki would likely have dissuaded his cousin from instigating anything.”

“Because he sees through your trap?” I looked at her.

She returned my gaze, then with a small sigh, she continued, “I suppose I shouldn’t keep the truth from you any longer.” She fanned out a few documents on the coffee table between us. Family registers—mine and my family’s. “You once said, Mio, that Shizuku remains your sister, whether you two are related by law or not.”

“I did, but...”

I scanned the documents, and my breath caught sharply. It was as if Shizuki waited until that moment to speak, her clear, resonant voice shaking me to my very core: “Well, Mio, legally, you’ve never ceased being her sister.”

The documents laid it bare. My identity as a Sato was intact. I was, and always had been, Shizuku’s sister. As this truth dawned on me, a lone tear traced its path down my cheek. “You had this planned from the very start?”

She smiled knowingly “I have laid a trap, Mio. And in it, I’ve ensnared the naive. Now, it is up to you to use their folly to proclaim your truth—that you are a true Sakurazaka. That you are a true villainess.”

All along, Shizuki had been the puppeteer, masterminding each step. Realizing her craftiness sent an icy shudder through me, but this sensation swiftly gave way to a comforting warmth, as I recognized the fortune of having her as an ally rather than a foe. As the understanding of my next move dawned on me, my villainess side effortlessly took charge. Sweeping a lock of hair from my shoulder, I declared, “I understand completely, my dear sister.”

“Then go forth, Mio. Teach those playground bullies the meaning of true villainy.”

AT school the next day, I felt a barrage of stares from all sides. Some of the bolder students even spoke about me loud enough for me to overhear. The chatter was particularly pronounced among the Corporate Legacy students—maybe gossiping was part of their makeup, or they saw Sakurazaka’s misfortune as a chance to gain something for themselves. The two toadies had probably targeted these students first in spreading their rumors. But even amidst the undercurrent of gossip, I was surprised to find a non-negligible faction of individuals who rose above and chose not to engage in such pettiness.

“Shannon. Compile a report on the various reactions and send it to Lady Shizuki. She may find the information useful,” I instructed while walking.

She muttered an acknowledgement and began tapping away at her phone.

What is she doing? Probably not noting down every reaction individually. Then

what? Delegating the task to fellow Sakurazaka plants or using hidden cameras to record the situation?

“I’m doing both, milady.”

“Please don’t read my mind like that.”

“I did nothing of the sort. It’s your expression that gives you away. You would have recognized the same had you seen the look on your face.”

I didn’t think so, but decided to let the matter drop. Shannon was Shizuki’s right-hand woman, a walking reminder of the caliber of person Shizuki surrounded herself with. Another reminder of the expectations I now had to live up to as her younger sister.

Such were the thoughts on my mind as we reached the classroom. As I crossed the threshold, all eyes turned toward me. I wasn’t sure what I expected, but the feeling wasn’t at all more hostile than usual. Perhaps I thought the general students would find me even less palatable after the rumors, but I felt none of that.

As I scanned the room, my gaze met Nonoka’s; she looked concerned, to my surprise. Or perhaps it shouldn’t surprise me, because she was the heroine of an otome game—she who showed empathy to even her enemies. Still, I was the villainess, and such sentimentality wasn’t afforded me. I averted my gaze with a deliberate, scornful swiftness, as if to say, “Save your sympathy,” and settled into my seat. I pulled out a book, as was routine, but Rikka approached before I could settle into it.

“Ms. Rikka,” I greeted, a veneer of politeness in my tone, “I trust the day finds you well?”

“Hello, Ms. Mio. Yes, it does, thankfully. And yourself? May I hope the same for you?” Her greeting carried the slightest hint of sympathy, eliciting a sardonic chuckle from me.

“Yes, well, I could certainly be faring better, but I won’t complain.”

“Could be faring better...” she barely mumbled. Then, her expression fell all at once. “I must assure you: I played no part in these rumors.”

“You believe me so readily?” There was genuine relief in my words, and it seemed to take Rikka aback. “In all honesty, Ms. Rikka, you were under my suspicion. But if you must know, I felt this level of work beneath you. I couldn’t envision you leaving a trail back to yourself, or stooping to use intermediaries when you could claim the victory openly.”

Most villainesses, as far as the trope went, often delegated their dirty work to their underlings. Yet such methods were inherently flawed, often traceable back to them, with predictable repercussions. Shizuki, on the other hand, was hardly “most villainesses.” She didn’t rely on her personal entourage for her schemes; she maneuvered unseen players, ensuring she remained untainted by any fallout. And on the contrary, if she *wanted* her handiwork to be known, she would have boldly declared her role instead of cowering behind Sayaka and Asuka. Rikka and Shizuki were cut from the same cloth, which made me believe the absence of such a declaration affirmed her innocence.

“I am already aware of the real perpetrator,” I revealed. “However, I am curious, Ms. Rikka, about your stance on the situation.” My words were loaded, the real question—*Will you publicly express your disapproval?*—hanging unsaid.

“As a Yukishiro, my official position is to observe,” she responded, a mask of neutrality.

“So, you won’t intervene?”

“While the method was undeniably crude, I cannot condemn the actions outright. As, in a way, I instigated it. Of course, their method deviates from my intention, but my hands are tied.”

Ah, the “deed or gesture of similar or higher merit.” I’d almost forgotten about that. So, this was Sayaka and Asuka’s motivation. Clearly, the hurdle of ranking in the top fifty had been too high and they’d opted to undermine me instead as a way of fulfilling Rikka’s proposition.

Rikka then offered me a smile. “Personally, however, you have my full support.”

“Thank you, Ms. Rikka. That means more than you might realize.”

“Curious. I assumed this would’ve been the perfect segue for you to seek my

assistance.”

“Oh? And you would offer it, just like that?”

“Should the agreement we come to prove mutually advantageous,” she replied, a light giggle escaping her.

I couldn’t help but smile either. So much for being neutral, Rikka. “Thank you, but your promise of support is help enough.”

“Is that so? Then, I shall eagerly watch how you navigate this predicament and reclaim your standing.”

“Then I’m afraid I may disappoint already, for I don’t think I ever said I was in a predicament? In fact, I’m rather grateful to them.”

Rikka’s expression faltered into confusion. “But... What?”

“You’ll see soon enough.” Right on cue, the student guidance counselor entered. “Perhaps sooner than you expect.

I looked in Asuka’s direction, catching her smirk as she mistook the counselor’s arrival as *my* downfall. Little did she know...

“Azumaji, Saionji. See me in the student guidance office, immediately.”

Sayaka and Asuka blinked in surprise. A wave of whispers surged through the classroom, a collective murmur of disbelief: “Not Mio?”

Sayaka shook herself free from her stupor first. “Wh-Why us?”

Asuka followed suit. “Exactly! What grounds do you have to call upon us?”

The counselor responded with icy detachment, “Does inappropriate behavior—maligning a fellow student with baseless claims, ring a bell?”

A fresh ripple of murmurs washed over the class. Embedded within these whispers was a prevailing theory—a conjecture that I, somehow, manipulated the school’s authority to quash the rumors. Sayaka was quick to protest.

“Baseless? I’ve spoken nothing but the truth!”

“Exactly!” followed Asuka. “We verified everything about Mio’s background!”

In their loud, unequivocal outbursts, Sayaka and Asuka unwittingly confessed

to their deeds—exactly as Shizuki had predicted. It was almost eery how the situation played out exactly as she'd described, to the letter. Now, if the script continued to hold true, it was my time to act.

With a flamboyant sweep of my hand through my hair, I let out a measured chuckle.

Sayaka bristled immediately. “Wh-What’s so amusing?”

Feigning an air of aristocratic nonchalance, I replied, “Oh, my apologies. It’s just that your attempts to unearth dirt on me were so crudely executed, I couldn’t help but find humor in it.”

“Excuse me?!” Asuka squeaked in indignation. She and Sayaka glared at me as if trying to pierce my soul with their stares.

Shrugging them off, I turned to the counselor. “Would it be too much to ask to explain their misdeeds to them, right here, right now?”

“I don’t mind if you don’t, revealing your family’s secrets,” he responded.

“Not at all. I’ve sought and received permission beforehand.”

“Then by all means.”

I thanked the counselor, bobbed a curtsy, and turned back to face Sayaka and Asuka. “Let’s clarify the matter from its conclusion. My mother is the daughter of a disowned Sakurazaka male. In other words, true Sakurazaka blood runs in my veins.”

“She’s lying!” Sayaka’s screech pierced the air, her predictability like music to my ears. “You falsified your identity! Your last name is Sato, we made sure to find out!”

“Ms. Sayaka,” I replied with feigned indignation, “you misunderstand. I have never once fabricated my identity.”

“Then what about the name Sato?!”

“Simply the surname I bore prior to my adoption.”

“There! She admits it! Sakurazaka isn’t even her true last name!”

I shook my head theatrically, as if to say, *just what does this girl think she’s*

saying? Seeing this, the counselor interjected. “Saionji. Her mother married a Sato. She’s a Sakurazaka by birth.”

Sayaka’s jaw hinged open. “What?”

Seeing her confusion, I realized she needed the answer spelled out for her. “My mother married a commoner and took his name to avoid any potential complications. What, I ask, is so implausible about that?”

“What? No! That can’t be true!” Sayaka’s denial was feeble, betraying her dawning realization of her error.

“The facts stand as Sakurazaka has stated,” the counselor added, lending his authority to my claim. “The school can attest it obliged to a request to maintain privacy regarding her family situation.”

With the counselor’s support, public opinion visibly shifted in my favor. Seizing the moment, I continued—it was time to put Sayaka and Asuka out of their misery. “Indeed. While *my* records had never been tampered with, my grandfather’s had. But that is the sort of minor detail that gets overlooked in hasty investigations, isn’t it?”

I drove my closing statement home with another dramatic sweep of my hair. A portion of the class—they who recognized this as the inevitable fate of all those who dared challenge a Sakurazaka—looked on in blank horror. Approaching Sayaka and Asuka, now mute and visibly defeated, I leaned in close. “Don’t look so downtrodden,” I whispered, my voice a venomous hiss. “Admirable effort on your part, truly. Pity, though, that you tangled with a girl just a tad more devious than yourselves.”

They crumbled under the weight of my smile, a practiced blend of triumph and disdain.

NOTHING more was said as Sayaka and Asuka were solemnly led away to the student guidance office. Later, standing before the bulletin board outside the staff room, I caught sight of a notice declaring their sentence: three days of community service for inappropriate behavior. A light punishment in writing, but the true consequences—their ignominious defeat against a Sakurazaka—

resounded far louder through the school's corridors. The whispers about my lineage gradually evaporated, not because the truth had been settled either way, but because the corporate students shuddered at the thought of sharing Sayaka and Asuka's fate.

All that to say: Every piece had fallen precisely into place, orchestrated by Shizuki's ingenious plan. It was honestly quite clever. Had the truth of my lineage been disclosed from the outset, it would have served as fertile ground for contempt over my "commoner" origins. However, by weaving a more tantalizing scandal—the alleged falsification of my identity—the focus was masterfully shifted, drawing eyes away from my humble beginnings to the sensational prospect of me being an imposter among the Sakurazakas.

Now, with this incident, the reality of my common upbringing was exposed, yet I was confident it would no longer serve as ammunition against me. My biggest and most apparent vulnerability had been a cleverly laid trap, and with the fresh memory of Sayaka and Asuka's downfall, none would dare test if this was another, not when nobody knew what lay swirling under the surface.

Then, almost anticlimactically, I became a member of Setsugekka. With this induction, my character as the villainess was fully realized, the Academy now set as the grand stage for a performance steeped in malevolence. Yet, amidst all this, one nagging thought lingered: just how much of a coincidence had it been *really* that'd led Shizuki to select me as her proxy?

What was the probability that I, the girl who had once saved her bag from a would-be pickpocket, just happened to have been the progeny of a disowned member of the Sakurazaka family? In this world, where someone like Nonoka can find themselves as the heroine from an otome game, stranger things have certainly happened. With everything Shizuki had hidden from me, who was to say there wasn't more? Like, a lot more?

But regardless of what she concealed, Shizuki was someone who'd shown genuine concern for my well-being. We'd shared trials and tribulations. My pain had been her pain, and because of that, she'd earned my unwavering trust. I harbored no doubt in my mind that she would honor her vow to save Shizuku when the time came.

And so, my saga was just beginning. My aim remained unaltered: to reach that bittersweet denouement, the final scene where the villainess, in an act of self-sacrifice, ensures the joy and salvation of all—the happy ending scripted in the original otome game, a path I was now set to tread.

Epilogue

A week had passed since the last commotion, heralding the day of the much-anticipated field trip. Today was the day that I, the villainess, was to confront Nonoka about her fashion sense, igniting a transformative spark in her.

The event in-game went a little something like this: Nonoka would show up to the field trip in the same outfit I'd modeled on the cover of that fashion magazine. I would mock her for merely imitating a look instead of owning or transforming it, which would then ignite her passion for fashion.

On such trips, students of Sosei Academy weren't in uniform. The apparent rationale was to avoid drawing attention to the offspring of influential families to reduce the risk of kidnapping, for that was how synonymous the Sosei brand was with the rich and powerful. Quite a unique problem, if you asked me, but it was hardly my place to question school policy.

For this occasion, I, too, donned the magazine cover outfit, albeit with a few choice additions and alterations—the same breezy summer cardigan, but with a gold-thread-embroidered blouse, a steel blue high-waisted long skirt, and tall, lace-up boots. The theme for the shoot: “fashionably hard at work for your special someone” was a fairly vague statement open to interpretation, but it basically meant the kind of clothes you wore to impress someone you looked up to. My expression on the cover—a profile shot of me as I thought about Shizuku—was pensive and romantic, almost like that of a young girl in love. Honestly, it was the kind of expression that suited the heroine better than the villainess.

But Nonoka couldn't be that heroine without her own sense of agency and desire. She required a subtle push, a gentle prod toward realizing that she shouldn't be content merely replicating the latest look she saw in whatever magazine she found that day. To that end, the destination for the day's trip was, rather fortuitously, a fashion show. It was divided into two portions. The first segment was dedicated to haute couture, spotlighting avant-garde, less

practical fashion styles to spark creative inspiration, while the other centered on prêt-à-porter fashion, centering on improving designs already prevalent in the market. Yes, it was a rather high-brow kind of field trip, but considering the Sosei Academy motto—Forging New Standards, Shaping a Refined World—it seemed perfectly in line.

Gratuitous reflections on the school motto, however, should've been the last thing on my mind as I made my way to the meet-up location. Stepping into the posh lobby, I recalled Shizuki's briefing, which mentioned that there was only a fifty-fifty chance Nonoka would actually be wearing the outfit for the magazine. This was real life, after all, and not a video game. Somewhere, a butterfly flaps its wing, Nonoka's mood changes, and she would end up in a different outfit for the day. Yet amidst the capricious chaos of the universe, the game's narrative seemed to act somewhat like a restoring force, influencing the course of events. It wasn't overtly powerful, unable to enforce drastic changes, however it did seem to consistently nudge events along to a familiar path if left undisturbed. You might think this an outlandish theory, but alas, there was Nonoka, standing in the exact same outfit she was supposed to be standing in. With that out of the way, it was time to carry out Shizuki's mission.

"Hello, Nonoka," I announced, approaching her.

"Ms. Sakurazaka...?" she gasped in surprise.

In the middle of this lobby buzzing with students donning a variety of styles, Nonoka and I faced each other, clad in nearly identical outfits. To an uninformed onlooker, we might have seemed like coordinated friends, but Sosei Academy students knew better. You had the rich girl and her usual punching bag, now dressed oddly alike. Observers aware of the impending confrontation watched in tense silence.

As I prepared to confront her, a classmate rallied to her side, but no friend of hers would deter me this time. "Nonoka. That's the same outfit from my shoot. What are you trying to say, that your...distinct stature and demeanor can even come close to—"

But before I could finish my sentence with a derisive "replicating my greatness?", Nonoka interrupted me, her eyes shining. "I know! Seeing you on

that cover was such a shock!” She even leaned toward me, her enthusiasm unmistakable.

This wasn’t part of the plan! I thought, blinking in surprise. In the original game, she had been unaware of the original model of the outfit, or else she would’ve never worn anything that reminded her of her tormentor. “You...You knew who the model was and still chose to wear this outfit?” I inquired.

“Yes!” she beamed.

“...Why?”

My villainess mask fell, and I spoke with my usual tone. Fortunately, Nonoka didn’t say anything about that—but instead said something far, *far* more problematic:

“Because...Ms. Sakurazaka— I...I admire you!”

She was so adorable the way she said that, slightly embarrassed, that I couldn’t help but— No! What was I doing gushing about the heroine! I’d said some totally mean things to her, hadn’t I? Like unequivocally, awful things, hadn’t I? So why was this girl still here telling me she admired me?! My mind whirled like a certain spinning wheel of death as I tried to process this perplexing turn of events.

Even her friend, who had stepped in to protect her, was upset with her, saying, “Nonoka, how can you admire someone who’s been so cruel to you?” And honestly, yeah, good looking out, Nonoka’s friend. I would’ve liked my own friend who would stand up for me in front of a Sakurazaka, but that was the kind of escapism I absolutely needed to *not* indulge in at this moment.

“I told you, it’s not like that!” Nonoka said to her friend. “Ms. Sakurazaka has been there for me. She came to my rescue at the entrance exam, put on a mean face to cover for me at the new student mixer, and her actions in the gym were meant to help me make friends, like you!”

Internally, I screamed in frustration. Yes, it was true! Everything she said was technically true and I had to give props to Nonoka for seeing through my intentions but why, Nonoka, why did you, of all people, have to see through my intentions?! She was almost like a video game protagonist the way she was able

to take all that abuse on the chin and still come out swinging!

Oh wait, she is.

Crap. Now what do I do? Nonoka's friend looked on the verge of believing her. Affirming Nonoka's claims was out of the question, but if I denied them, would anyone even believe me at this point?

No, it didn't matter. I *had* to make them believe me. In a new voice, I said, "Nonoka, whoever you admire or don't is none of my business. But frankly, I find your blatant imitation of me rather embarrassing, so perhaps you could, you know, not?"

I expected my words to sting, even for someone as resilient as Nonoka, to say nothing of her friend who was now glaring daggers at me, saying, "That's going too far!" I wasn't sure if she was brave or just ignorant standing up to me like that, but then I noticed her hands, quivering slightly. Her protectiveness over Nonoka was touching, yet it was Nonoka herself who suddenly brightened with realization, striking her hands together.

"I see! So I shouldn't be simply imitating, but building upon the look with my own tastes and preferences. Ms. Sakurazaka, you're ever so helpful!"

Not false.

Not false, but why did she have to look so happy about it?! Yes, I'd intended to hide a nugget of advice amidst my harsh words, but she'd grasped it so fast, it made me look like a total tsundere! At this point, I was just a "it's not like I said that for your sake!" from never ever beating the allegations again!

That's it. I quit.

Not from my job, but it was time to make a tactical retreat from the situation. "Suit yourself. Now if you'll excuse me."

"Whaaat?" Nonoka looked slightly disheartened. "We aren't watching the fashion show together?"

God, it was so cute the way she slightly sulked as she said that, but Nonoka was growing a bit too chummy. I needed to set boundaries before things got out of hand. "This has gone far enough." I stuck a finger to the tip of her nose.

“What makes you think I’m here to indulge your whims? And your friend—is she always that reckless, confronting a Corporate Legacy student so boldly? Instead of wagging your tail at me, perhaps you should be thanking her for her courage.”

Nonoka’s friend looked surprised. Hopefully my words reassured her slightly—it hurt to see her so terrified, standing up to me. With that, I turned sharply and exited with poise, leaving the scene behind.

PUTTING a bit of distance between myself and Nonoka, I plopped myself down on a lobby bench. Just as I sighed, lamenting the utter positive mental attitude of this girl, I noticed a shadow creep over me.

“Why the long face, Little Miss Tsundere?”

Startled, I looked up, and was promptly startled again to find Ruki standing over me. But I quickly composed myself and fell back into my role. “Mr. Ruki, while I appreciate your attempt at humor, I assure you, I am anything but a tsundere.”

Ruki’s expression shifted, like he’d heard something interesting. “You didn’t know we all knew?”

“Don’t tell me you honestly buy into the drivel that spews out of that girl’s mouth?”

“Drivel? Not at all. I believe her, not because I take her word for it, but because I trust my own judgment. I’d known it ever since you covered for her at the mixer.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken.”

Just like the time with Rikka, this was a game of he-said, she-said. Ruki had no proof, just his intuition, like I had mine. Deny, deny, deny, and all would be fine—or so I had thought.

Ruki snorted. “That act of yours might fool someone who didn’t see your expression that night.”

“My expression?”

I had no idea what he was talking about, and this imbalance of information unsettled me.

“So, you really had no idea...” he mused aloud, then smiled. “That night, when you stepped in as the antagonist to spare me from a confrontation with Riku and Nonoka, you gave quite the performance with your words, but your face—you looked so guilty you might as well have burst into tears right then and there.”

“Nonsense!”

“Nonsense? Or simply the truth? Why else do you think Riku and I have buried the hatchet? It’s the same reason Nonoka believes in you. I’m afraid only a fool could have looked at your expression that night and failed to grasp your true intentions.”

Words failed to describe the storm of emotions I was feeling in that moment. I’d been nothing but hostile to everyone, but both Nonoka and now Ruki had seen through to my real intentions. I was surrounded by such insightful, wonderful people, and it was impossible not to feel a glimmer of happiness at being so deeply understood. In a different world, under different circumstances, I might have even fallen for Ruki. But in this narrative, I was the villainess. My path was predestined to culminate in a dramatic confrontation with Ruki and the others in three years. My demise was necessary, a key to saving Shizuku and a trigger to propel the game to its good ending. They could trust me now, but they couldn’t trust me forever. And the more they believed in me now, the more devastating the eventual betrayal would have to be. Just thinking about it caused a deep ache in my chest.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed. It was a notification from Shizuki’s app—an update with a new mission for the villainess. No doubt Shannon had been watching me, perhaps sending me a subtle reminder of my duty. I appreciated it, but it wasn’t necessary. I knew better than anyone what was truly at stake. This thorny path I walked was one of my own choosing.

Standing up from the bench, I straightened myself, but even then, I had to look up slightly to meet Ruki’s eyes. “Why don’t you just say what you’re thinking? You believe I’m playing the part of a villain, don’t you?”

“I do. I just can’t fathom why,” he replied.

“Oh, but you won’t need to fathom it. Just when the time comes, Mr. Ruki, do what’s necessary. I hope you won’t disappoint me.”

I left him with these words, turning away. Whether he completely understood my charade was irrelevant. The crucial point was his actions at the decisive moment. He needed to pursue his own happy ending, even if it meant leaving me to my downfall. My only wish was for him to fulfill his role, that he could set his emotions aside to deliver the justice I deserved.

As I walked away, I allowed my hair to flow dramatically behind me, slipping seamlessly back into the villainess persona that had become my second skin.

“Now then, let’s get to villainessin’, shall we?”

Side Story: Shizuku's Wish

THE deafening rhythm of my heart filled my ears, darkness swallowed my vision, and a chilling numbness spread through me. In that moment, I couldn't even tell if I was standing or sitting.

This overwhelming sensation was the reaction I, Shizuku Sato, experienced upon learning I had less than three years to live. Until that point, I had been just your average manga-loving teenager. At the time, there was a certain manga I'd been particularly enamored with—a poignant love story between a boy and a girl, the latter afflicted with a grave illness. The heroine, acutely aware of her limited time, embraced life with vigor, living each day as if it were her last. After falling deeply in love with the boy, her sole wish was to extend her fleeting life. However, despite a valiant effort through an unsuccessful operation, she departed from this world with grace and dignity.

That tender, ephemeral love story had once been my favorite. But after receiving my own diagnosis of an incurable disease, it transformed into the narrative I most despised.

I didn't want to die. Nor did I want to live every day like it was my last. During the New Year, all I wanted was to lie around, rest, and do absolutely nothing. As summer approached, my only wish was to lounge in a nice, cool, air-conditioned room. But reality was rarely ever so kind. My health deteriorated day by day, and soon, I found myself in a hospital bed. Sure, now I could lie around and do nothing to my heart's content, but this idleness quickly became my sole option. I was perpetually exhausted, drained of energy, and it wasn't long before even the short journey to the nearest convenience store became an insurmountable task.

I was sad, frustrated, angry. An angry ball of negative emotions that cursed the world for my cruel existence.

My sister Mio, however, was all smiles, all the time. Every day she would come visit me after school, say like two things to me, then leave. I loved my

sister, but I was acutely aware of her popularity. She had friends to meet, other people eagerly awaiting her company. If not that, then she had to study, diligently preparing herself for her future.

A future without me.

Each moment was a precious commodity to me, yet it seemed insignificant to Mio. Her fleeting visits, the routine of appearing and disappearing, soon began to irk me. Over time, this annoyance morphed into bitterness whenever she entered the room.

One day, as our mother came for a visit, I couldn't contain my brewing resentment any longer. In a hushed, but fervent tone, I confessed, "I hate her."

But our mother, she only met my outburst with a gaze full of empathy and understanding. "Shizuku," she began gently, "your sister didn't want me to tell you, but I believe it's only right that you know the truth."

What she revealed next left me speechless: since my hospitalization, the comfort of a private room had been made possible because our family was covering the additional private room surcharge. I remembered the concept from the manga I had read—it was an extra fee not covered by our national health insurance to guarantee the privilege of a private room. But it wasn't always necessary. Sometimes, if you were lucky and there were vacant rooms available, you could get a private room without paying anything extra. I believed that was our situation, a result of sheer luck, just as Mio had told me.

"But Mio said we were just lucky..." I muttered, my voice full of confusion.

Mom shook her head. "We've been able to afford the surcharge because... Mio has been paying for it."

"Huh?"

What she said made no sense. How could a middle schooler come up with tens or even hundreds of thousands of yen each month for my hospital stay? But then, pieces of Mio's recent behavior started to click. "After she visits me—where does she go?"

"Do you remember Kaede?" Mom said.

“Yeah, the cousin who runs a café?” A sudden realization hit me. “You don’t mean...”

Mom nodded solemnly. “The school granted her special permission, and Mio has been working at the café. It was entirely her idea.”

“You’re kidding...”

Mio always came to see me directly after school. All this time, I’d assumed she spent her subsequent hours hanging out with friends, not working a part-time job. And a part-time job for my sake at that. And in that narrow window of time between school and work, she made it a point to see me. Here I was, resenting the brevity of her visits, all the while completely oblivious to the sacrifices she was making. In reality, I was the one who failed to appreciate the precious moments we shared.

“I’m not,” Mom said gently. “So, try not to be too hard on her, okay?”

Her words struck a chord, reminding me of my earlier, harsh outburst. “I...I’m sorry. I had no idea...”

“It’s all right, dear. You couldn’t have known.”

“I just... I thought she didn’t care about me...”

“I know, dear, I know. You just wanted more of her time, and there’s nothing wrong in wanting that.”

Each time I tried to justify my feelings, Mom countered with kindness, affirming that it was okay to feel as I did. But deep down, I knew she was being overly generous. I should have been the one to understand Mio’s affection more than anyone else. Yet, in my vulnerability, I let doubt cloud my judgment and questioned her love and intentions.

A meager, half-hearted apology was all that came out before the tears overwhelmed me.

“Shizuku. You have nothing to apologize for,” Mom whispered softly. “The fault lies with us, your father and I, for not being able to provide sufficiently for our daughters. This burden, this guilt, it isn’t yours to bear.”

Succumbing to the flood of emotions, I fell into her arms, wailing loudly and

shamefully, unbecoming for a girl of my age.

EVER since then, I cherished every second Mio spent with me. I think my love for her even deepened beyond what I had ever felt before. Yet at the same time, I was plagued with this ever-growing sense of guilt.

The catalyst had been when an old friend told me the truth about Mio. That day, I discovered that the girl who had once been the star of the entire grade had begun to fade into the background. Her grades, which used to be outstanding, were now falling by the wayside. That was why one day, on another one of her visits, I urged her to stop sacrificing her own prospects for my sake.

“What are you talking about?” Mio replied. “I’m only doing what I want to do—taking care of my precious baby sister. So don’t worry about it. I’m doing fine.”

She flashed this fleeting, radiant smile that I was sure would’ve charmed any boy in her class right there and then. It was just too bad she ever only smiled like that for me. I never did figure out whether to be happy or sad about the way she treated me. And that was why, in a messed-up way, when I found out I didn’t have long left, it felt like a weird kind of release.

I was sad, of course. Nobody wanted to die so young. But mixed in with this sorrow was an overwhelming sense of relief. Relief that Mio could finally be free from me, free from the immense responsibility she had shouldered at last. It was then that I thought about that manga for the first time in a long while. The girl who had embraced life with all her might, who ultimately succumbed to her mortality, who lived on in the heart of the boy she loved.

That ephemeral, heartrending story had been my favorite.

Then my most hated.

Then now, with the stark awareness of my limited time, it had reclaimed its place in my heart. I found myself wondering: would my memory live on in Mio’s heart just like the girl in the story? If so, then I had no regrets.

But then I learned about the hospital transfer. And not just to any hospital,

but one reserved for the rich and powerful. The surcharge for a private room there, easily found through an internet search, wasn't even in the same ballpark as the amount we'd been managing thus far. No matter how I looked at it, this was a place far removed from our world. Mio mentioned it was due to a favor from a lady associated with a powerful zaibatsu, but I saw through her explanation immediately. She must have been undertaking something absurd for my sake, once again.

Personally, I didn't want to die. I wanted to live a full, rewarding life. But not at my sister's expense. My resolve solidified when I saw Mio on the cover of a fashion magazine. "Mio. You've done so much for me—more than anyone should. Please, you don't have to keep forcing yourself."

She denied it to the very last, insisting she wasn't forcing herself. I was happy to hear that, knowing she cared so deeply, but clearly, she was stretching the truth. Clearly, she was forcing herself. Her intentions might've been rooted in love and selflessness, but that didn't negate the fact that she was sacrificing too much. This was a path I couldn't let her continue to tread.

"But you've heard, haven't you? That I only have three years left to live."

"Shizuku, please—"

"So that's it. Enough is enough, Mio. You don't have to pretend for me anymore."

The reality was that in three years, I would no longer be here. But Mio's life would continue. She couldn't keep this up for my sake, or else I would drag her future down along with mine. I wished to urge her to move forward without me, to live a life where she didn't have to worry about my health. Yet, before I could voice these thoughts, Mio interjected:

"Listen, Shizuku. There is hope for you."

The next thing she said was about a potential cure for my condition. I knew right away the trials she was referring to, but those were taking place overseas, and experimental at that. We didn't know when or even *if* a cure would materialize from that.

But then she told me none of that mattered. That she knew in three years, I

would be the first to receive the cure. And when I heard that, I just burst into tears.

“Is that why you’ve been acting so...strange? Is it all...because of me?”

“Mostly right, but let me correct you on one detail. It’s not because of you, Shizuku—it’s *thanks* to you. You’ve given me a purpose. I want to help you because I love you, so very much.”

I was split between two halves. The half of me that wanted to live, and the half of me that wanted to set my sister free. It was way too much to wrap my head around.

You can’t say that, Mio. You can’t say stuff like that, or else I’m going to want to cling on to life.

“Mio. Am I really, *really*, not a burden? I don’t want to give up. I want to live, so badly. But is that okay?”

“Of course, it’s okay. And I’ll be by your side every step of the way, making sure you reach that happy ending. You and me, together.”

In that moment, Mio gifted me something invaluable—I felt hopeful again, the courage to face the future, whatever it might hold. I was so thankful for her. Until now, she had been the one doing everything, but now, it was my turn to step up. We were a team, and we were going to tackle whatever life throws at us, together.

Because both of us... Both of us were going to reach our happily ever afters.

Afterword

THANK you immensely for choosing to delve into my latest journey: *Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner*. As the author, Hiironoame, I'm thrilled and humbled to share this milestone with you—the launch of my tenth series! Reaching this point in my seventh year as an author feels surreal, and it's a dream only made possible by your unwavering support. For those who are stepping into the realm of Hiironoame's stories for the first time, welcome! Glad to have you here.

On a personal note, this series marks a special moment as it's been published in the bunkobon paperback format—which I haven't had done since my very first series. It feels like a homecoming of sorts, and although I haven't yet held the advance copy in my hands, the anticipation is palpable.

Now, let's dive into the heart of this tenth series. For the readers who've already journeyed through the novel, this is a villainess story set in an alternate Japan where the *zaibatsus* were never dissolved, and the nation avoided economic crisis in the late 20th century. Our protagonist, Mio, is hard at work fomenting her downfall—and no, you read that correctly. But I'll refrain from further spoilers for those who've started with this afterword.

I sincerely hope this volume has brought you as much joy and excitement as I felt creating it. As a bit of self-promotion, please do explore my other works: the recently completed series, *Akuyaku Reijou no Okiniiri Ouji... Jama* (The Villainess's Favorite Prince: Hello?! You're In the Way!), and my newest adventure, *Taisho Roman ni Isekai Seijo Watashi wa Miko Jaarimasen!* (I'm an Otherworldly Saint Summoned to the Taisho Roman, Not a Shrine Maiden!) among others. Stay updated with my latest ventures by following me on Twitter (X), where I'm always active.

Last but certainly not least, acknowledgments. To Misumi, our illustrator. At the time of writing, I have only been able to peek at your initial character designs, but they have been a delight and I eagerly await the final illustrations. To my editors, Kuroda and Takayanagi, your patience and guidance through my

simultaneous ventures in three series have been invaluable. Your continued support means the world to me. And to everyone else who has played a role in bringing this book to life, I extend my deepest gratitude.

Until next volume, Hiironoame, on a serene April day.



Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illustration Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal... But then she would have died long ago.



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

By Kiri Komori Illustration Yamigo

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



1
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